

# Amedeo Giorgi and Psychology as a Human Science

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## Abstract

Over the course of the last fifty years Amedeo Giorgi has played a leading role in the movement to redirect psychological research from an imitation of the natural sciences toward a human science paradigm. He founded the first phenomenological psychological research program in the United States at Duquesne University, and continued his development of phenomenological psychology at Saybrook Graduate School. Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method is a rigorous approach to qualitative research that is founded in the philosophical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The descriptive phenomenological method makes use of the phenomenological epoché, reduction, imaginative variation, and search for essential psychological structures. Giorgi's approach to conveying phenomenology embodies a wide-ranging and incisive critique of empirical psychology's limitations, and seeks to establish scientific criteria appropriate for the study of lived, human subjectivity.

**Key Words:** Giorgi, phenomenology, human science, research, qualitative

NeuroQuantology 2011; 3: 518-525

“When I articulated the idea that psychology should be a human science, it was because, for me, the discipline of psychology was essentially missing its target. It was not truly capturing psyche (and one could just as well place the terms experience, consciousness, or behavior in psyche's place and the critique would remain just as strong), and one reason was because its methods were not accessing it properly, and that, in turn, was due in part because its fundamental assumptions about its phenomena were at best only partially fruitful. In other words, I realized that it wasn't a patch-up job that psychology required so much as radical reform” (Giorgi, 2000, p. 62-63).

## Introduction

I first met Amedeo Giorgi in 1997 in Saybrook's former offices on Pacific Street in San Francisco. At that time Giorgi was serving as Acting Dean, a position he took up twice amid critical transitions faced by

Saybrook during the twenty-five years that he has taught there. At that time I was exploring whether to pursue an advanced degree in psychology. My friend Yannis Toussulis, a clinician whose dissertation Amedeo had chaired, recommended that I read Giorgi's (1970) *Psychology as a Human Science*, and then contact Amedeo if the book spoke to me. My first conversation with Giorgi in 1997 was the beginning of a dialogue that continues to this day, and which has immensely enriched my life. Rather than adopting a more distant, historical standpoint in the attempt to offer a chronological account of his significant contributions to the field of psychology, I will instead reflect on some central lessons I learned in working with Giorgi over the last fourteen years.



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Received June 30, 2011. Revised June 30, 2011. Accepted Sept 3, 2011.

### **The need to redirect psychology from natural to human science**

Giorgi's aim over fifty years of scholarship has been to contribute to the founding of psychology as a human science. In 2010, eighteen of Giorgi's former students and long-time colleagues contributed chapters for a festschrift volume in his honor published CIRP (Le Circle Interdisciplinaire de Recherches Phénoménologiques), *The Redirection of Psychology*. The book celebrates the role he has played as a leading figure in the movement to redirect psychology away from its imitation of the natural sciences and toward a human science paradigm. In his contribution to the collection, Aanstoos (2010) wrote "for a generation Giorgi has been an inspiration for an entire wing of psychology;" he "has heroically led this reform movement for almost half a century, yet has done so with profound humility and respect" (p. 17). In the same volume Smith (2010) has traced the history of Giorgi's pivotal role in establishing the first phenomenological psychology program in the United States at Duquesne University, a project spanning twenty-five years. Smith (2010) contextualizes Giorgi's achievement at Duquesne by noting that he "appeared on the American psychological scene at a moment in history when the science of psychology had lost its soul to Freudian instinct theory and its mind to the tyranny of Skinnerian S-R behaviorism" (p. 245). Since 1986 Giorgi has taught phenomenology and the history of psychology at Saybrook, where we now jointly teach the introductory seminar in phenomenological research. In my festschrift chapter (Applebaum, 2010) I focus on Giorgi's dedication to science, writing that:

Giorgi's commitment to the scientific status of psychological research is arguably the defining difference between his work and that of other qualitative researchers who invoke phenomenological and/or hermeneutic philosophy. Giorgi argues that the meaning of "science" as such must be articulated in such a manner as to embrace both empiricist and alternative approaches. He contends that whether quantitative or qualitative, a research approach must be methodical, critical, general, and systematic if it is to constitute science. (p. 39)

Giorgi (2000) argues that more than a century of empirical psychological research has failed to properly address its subject matter, psyche, because "a hidden assumption has blocked the possibility of easy success: the notion that humans, because embodied, could be comprehended as things" (p. 63). The sciences of nature, which adopted strategies of objectification and quantification in the service of prediction and control, offer a model ill suited for the advanced study of human subjectivity and intersubjectivity. At the core of Giorgi's critique of empirical psychology is his strong argument that the mainstream psychology's natural scientific paradigm is a Procrustean bed that reduces and deforms its object.

Therefore, Giorgi follows in the tradition of continental European thinkers such as Dilthey (1833-1911), arguing that psychology is most authentically realized not as a natural science but as a human science. Importantly, the term "human science" (*Geisteswissenschaften*) is not univocal—the human sciences themselves are multiple, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, and the humanities—thus multiple interpretations of the human science tradition are possible and necessary. Importantly, the meaning of human science for psychology has not yet been agreed upon, and the varied interpretations of psychological human science praxis are not necessarily compatible.

For this reason Giorgi (2000) stakes a strong claim for a specific reading of human scientific psychology, writing: "When I speak of human science, I mean a project of knowledge whereby the human qua human is always consciously present to the psychologist regardless of the task. It is an overtly anti-reductionist stance in every sense of the term" (p. 64). Giorgi defines psychology as "the study of subjectivity;" envisioned as a human science, psychology seeks to understand subjectivity "precisely as subjectivity expresses itself in the world" (unpublished lecture at University of Alberta, p. 1).

Thus for Giorgi, psychology as a human science privileges the researcher's fidelity to the meanings of lived, phenomenal human subjectivity and intersubjectivity. But

more than that—for Giorgi the *scientific* meaning of human science is simultaneously and equally privileged. Thus in order to fulfill the meaning of science, human subjectivity is to be investigated by means of a firmly grounded, methodical, general, and disciplinary attitude capable of making substantial contributions to the scientific community's growing body of knowledge. Thus for Giorgi both the "human" and the "scientific" dimensions of *human science* are essential constituents if qualitative psychology is to represent a genuine alternative to the dominant, empirical paradigm.

Consequently for Giorgi, the praxes to be developed among human science approaches to psychological research must be guided by scientific criteria in order to yield reliable knowledge of human subjectivity. He argues (1997; 2009b) that science per se requires a praxis that is methodical, systematic, general, and critical. Each of these criteria, *which are criteria for science in general*, must be realized in a way appropriate to the study of human beings. Readers familiar with the phenomenological tradition will immediately recognize the integral way in which Giorgi's body of work represents that tradition. The absolute priority of the lived, human realm is the bedrock upon which Giorgi's phenomenological project is founded. One can recognize in Merleau-Ponty's (1968) words the guiding intention of Giorgi's work; as Merleau-Ponty wrote, it is "the order of the lived or of the phenomenal world which is precisely to be justified and rehabilitated as the foundation of the objective order" (p. 209).

In consistently voicing a human science vision for psychology over nearly fifty years, Giorgi has faced an immense professional and personal challenge, one he reflects on in the autobiographical essay, "Professional Marginalization in Psychology: Choice or Destiny?" (2009a). In this essay he discusses the fundamental questions underlying his work, including "What is the meaning of psychology? What...is the 'psyche'? What are its boundaries? How does one delimit the field?" (p. 136). Fifty years ago these questions were by and large neglected by American empirical psychology.

Arguably, they still are absent from mainstream psychological discourse; perhaps more disappointingly, they are similarly neglected by much of the qualitative psychological literature. The scientific status of psychology does not appear to be a compelling issue for many within our community, particularly to the extent that popularized versions of philosophical hermeneutics or postmodernism have been appropriated as the guiding philosophical rationales for research approaches (Applebaum, 2010).

For Giorgi, if psychological research jettisons its scientific commitment in the effort to free itself from empiricism, it invites dismissal and marginalization. From his perspective what is at stake is not whether or not we do science as qualitative researchers, but *precisely what sort of science we do*, and how we legitimate our work in a way that reaches out to the larger scientific community, present and future. In this context the neglect of epistemology and methodology apparent in much of the contemporary qualitative literature, and the tendency of some qualitative researchers to frame their work in aesthetic or literary terms while disparaging a disciplinary or scientific commitment, are troubling symptoms (Applebaum, 2010). Giorgi (personal communication, 8, 2011) anticipates that the coming years will see increasing critiques of qualitative psychology from mainstream psychologists.

Proctor and Capaldi's (2006) *Why Science Matters: Understanding the Methods of Psychological Research*—a text that in many respects is a blanket dismissal of qualitative approaches as sophistic—exemplifies the challenges that qualitative psychologists will face. When the logic of qualitative psychological research approaches is poorly articulated, or even unjustified, findings based on such approaches are easily dismissed as inadequate (Proctor and Capaldi, 2006). Giorgi, like Husserl, maintains that the meaning of science exceeds the empirical interpretation of science. Even in an inhospitable climate, he has persisted in upholding this counter-tradition in psychology, with its hope for a future human-scientific psychology.

### **Studying phenomenology means participating in a tradition**

In the many presentations of phenomenological psychology I have seen Giorgi deliver to students and peers, he invariably begins with a discussion of its underlying philosophical principles. This can be a disorienting experience for students who don't expect to encounter philosophy in a psychology course. It is precisely at this moment that some students realize they are being introduced to much more than a technique for working with qualitative interview data.

Giorgi never fails to convey that descriptive phenomenological psychology is rooted in the European continental philosophical tradition—specifically, in the phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). In so doing, he is simultaneously prompting students to consider that any approach to psychology—whether it is survey-based and statistical, Jungian, or psychodynamic—is founded upon identifiable underlying epistemological assumptions, and these assumptions must be thought through critically.

Similarly, from the moment that I opened *Psychology as a Human Science* I recognized that Giorgi was in dialogue with a tradition of thought that extended back more than a century to Dilthey, Brentano, Husserl, James, and Wundt—and also including figures like Stumpf, Kohler, Freud, Merleau-Ponty, Titchener, Skinner, and others. Reading Husserl, it's quickly clear that he believed phenomenology to be in essential continuity with the classical Greek roots of continental philosophy—the Greek terminology used in phenomenology is not accidental. Husserl saw phenomenology as embodying a present-day struggle against skepticism and nihilism paralleling Plato's struggle against sophism (Moran, 2005). So when we engage with phenomenology, we are entering into a philosophical conversation that is millennia-old, extending back to the very birth of philosophy in the West and Near East.

The implication of Giorgi's foundational work for phenomenological psychologists is that we must become *acquainted enough* with philosophy to be

able to recognize and engage critically with the underlying epistemological assumptions of not only phenomenology, but also empiricism, hermeneutics, and postmodernism. I would argue that Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology is not just one option among multiple, equally strong "phenomenologies": its intrinsic demand is that one gain an understanding of what constitutes a genuinely Husserlian phenomenological method in order to be able to evaluate *any* method that describes itself as "phenomenological". Similarly it is not merely one qualitative method among multiple qualitative methods available for psychological research: its intrinsic demand is that one understands what a research method per se entails, in order to be able to evaluate *any* research approach's underlying method. Furthermore, it is not merely a qualitative alternative to empirical psychological methods: its intrinsic demand is that one grasps the qualitative critique of psychology's natural science paradigm, so that, if one takes up qualitative research, one is able to dialogue with empirical researchers and justify the alternative path one has taken. So the demand placed on a student is a high one, because one is really seeking to participate in a pioneering, foundational scientific project.

Learning Giorgi's method is not a solitary affair. Engaging with a tradition like phenomenology is a dialogical process. As a student, one is in dialogue with the figures in that tradition, like Husserl or Merleau-Ponty, through reading their work. One is simultaneously in dialogue with one's teachers, like Giorgi, both face to face and through the writing and feedback process. And additionally, if one is fortunate one is also in dialogue with one's fellow students—even if they are only a small group—with whom one can discuss and puzzle through the materials one is encountering. At several Saybrook residential conferences I spent days reading through Merleau-Ponty's *Structure of Behavior* (1963) line-by-line with Giorgi and two other students. On other occasions I met with Giorgi and two others to read sections of Husserl's (1982) *Ideas I*. We would read a few lines of the text, pause, and Giorgi would add commentary or we would raise clarifying questions to better grasp the text. The aim of engaging with a text this way

is not to read the whole book, but to work through some portion of it together.

At its best, phenomenology simultaneously fosters and is supported by this sort of community. Not incidentally, Husserl envisioned the development of phenomenology as an unfolding process of initiating of “ever new co-subjects to performance of the phenomenological reduction and to transcendently wakeful communalization as co-researching and living life as a whole accordingly” (in Fink, 1998, p. 191). So for Husserl the phenomenological project was intrinsically communal, and at its deepest level, the same is true today for Giorgi’s approach.

### **Phenomenology is an exploratory, verificatory activity**

Giorgi’s adaptation of Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy for psychological research is a skilled craft that takes time and repeated practice to absorb. Phenomenological psychology is a radical alternative to the mainstream psychology’s empirical worldview. Even if students are strongly sympathetic to a qualitative stance, they will have internalized the ruling assumptions of empirical science, because these unexamined assumptions are part of the dominant, “natural attitude” of our times. Americans are all raised, for example, with the assumption that “science” is equivalent to “measurement.” Students’ first encounter with descriptive phenomenology is almost invariably accompanied by disorientation and cognitive dissonance—because it is a lived-encounter with a profoundly different worldview. In addition, students—and I was one of them—initially will grasp phenomenology only partially due to its nuances. Students may, therefore, find themselves struggling and feeling at sea, their critical reasoning skills and capacity to reimagine the meaning of the psychical simultaneously challenged.

Such genuine confusion is useful—it can occur when one breaks with one’s previously unrecognized assumptions and begins to open to a new, not-yet-grasped understanding. For a student of phenomenology, dedication to grasping Husserl’s fundamental, methodical practices—the epoché, the reduction,

imaginative variation, and the search for essential psychological structures—is required to gain an increasingly good grasp of the approach. This takes time. Students must begin with an attitude of trust that there is an intrinsic logic of inquiry to descriptive phenomenology, and then seek to validate or invalidate that logic for themselves, once they have adequately understood it.

These intrinsic demands—analogs of which are arguably preconditions for learning any skilled craft, be it stone-carving, boat-building, or violin-making—sometimes results in the misunderstanding that phenomenology is a purist approach which requires unquestioning acceptance from students (Giorgi, personal communication, August 8, 2011). In reality, the opposite is the case—both phenomenological philosophy and phenomenological psychology, due to their intrinsic structure and guiding motivations as discovery processes, require students to question and weigh the assertions of writers like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, or Giorgi, against the evidence of both the student’s own perceptions and their logical reasoning. This is something Giorgi consistently encourages in his students. The rigor and difficulty is that this means learning to distinguish between our actual perceptions and our ingrained opinions or habitual interpretive perspectives. For a descriptive approach, perception and interpretation is not the same thing.

In order to accomplish this discrimination, a high level of self-awareness and uncovering of one’s own unexamined assumptions is required. In other words, we must self-reflectively and self-critically uncover our own naïve assumptions—assumptions, for example, about the meanings of seemingly straightforward words like “science”, “psychology”, and “objectivity”. Giorgi challenges all of these constructs every time he delivers an introduction to phenomenology. Ongoing, careful reflection upon our everyday way of seeing ourselves and the world—the habitual stance Husserl termed “the natural attitude”—brings its implicit assumptions to light. I believe Giorgi would agree that this effort requires intellectual humility and a high degree of self-responsibility. In fact,

Husserl scholars like Siles i Borrás (2010) have argued that the principle of committing oneself to *ultimate self-responsibility*—an ethical demand—is the very cornerstone of Husserl’s phenomenology.

This ethical commitment and discipline of questioning is preparatory for genuine psychological exploration and discovery. We clear the ground for the discovery process in order to face an adequately open horizon, one not obstructed by our preconceptions. For this reason the eminent phenomenological philosopher J. N. Mohanty (1976) observed that “Husserlian phenomenology, in its search for meanings, is guided by respect for the given” (p. xxix). Becoming phenomenological researchers is not a matter of bringing our habitual assumptions to bear upon the psychological phenomena that are given to us. Nor is it a matter of appropriating theories (our own or those of others) to validate hypotheses about psychological phenomena. Rather, Husserlian phenomenological research means setting aside our theorizing or the theorizing of others—including eminent others like Freud, Jung, or James—in order to freshly investigate the phenomena themselves, as they are lived. Critically, the fresh perspective on psychical phenomena aimed at by phenomenological psychology is the *opposite* of a naïve attitude: the phenomenological attitude is an achievement, not a given.

Unfortunately, if students are inadequately exposed to epistemological thinking (logic of inquiry) they are likely to believe that qualitative research methods are largely arbitrary guidelines for how to conduct psychological research. This attitude is something Giorgi has repeatedly encountered through the years (personal communication, August 8, 2011). Students, when ill-served by their training, sometimes imagine that they should be able to combine methods at will or even create novel steps in a research method with which they have only recently become acquainted. Upon reflection it is quickly clear that such expectations are inconsistent with the practice of good science, qualitative or quantitative. As qualitative researchers we need to safeguard against an overly casual rejection of the rigors embodied, for example, in the best empirical research.

Phenomenological praxis challenges us to openly investigate. It is a thoroughly experiential path—but one which does not end with one’s own subjective experience, or even with the experience of one’s research participants. Instead phenomenology persistently reaches out toward the intersubjective grounds of meaning—the larger community of meaning. This aim is constitutive of all science, but it is at the forefront in phenomenology. As a student, the experiential quality of phenomenology starts from the moment one begins reading its great texts or working with data. As I began to acquaint myself with the phenomenological tradition, Amedeo suggested I pick up two books: Husserl’s (1970) *Crisis of the European Sciences* and Merleau-Ponty’s (1996) *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Perhaps sensing my tendency to view this recommendation as a formal, cover-to-cover reading assignment, he invited me to engage with the texts in a more free way, reading them with a sensitivity to what spoke to me in the texts, what questions they raised for me, and not seeking to read straight through either book, but picking them up and putting them down as their relevance prompted me. His guidance sensitized me in a new way to the texts. Having attended a Great Books school as an undergraduate, I was trained to read classic texts with the working assumption that the author’s thought possessed its own, internal coherence—even if I didn’t agree with the author’s ideas. My task was to gradually grasp the internal integrity, the *sense* of the author’s thought, regardless of whether I agree with them. What I realize now was that this approach was already implicitly phenomenological in a general way, an example of implementing a kind of epoché—setting aside the question of the truth of the text in order to first grasp its meaning in its own terms. Giorgi’s approach to reading texts or engaging with interview data exemplifies exactly such fidelity to the given as it is given—we don’t seek to develop a novel interpretation of the given, we trust that its meaning is already present and we seek to attend to *that*, to let that meaning speak to us. For this reason Giorgi’s approach exemplifies what Ricoeur (1970) famously termed a *hermeneutic of trust* in

relation to the given, rather than a hermeneutic of suspicion.

### **A phenomenological attitude is one of “open expectancy”**

The principle of fidelity to the given leads me to some final reflections on the “phenomenological attitude” within which we conduct research. Giorgi describes this attitude and its constituents in many places, and at the same time, it must be lived through and achieved over time by the individual researcher as he/she gains a capacity to phenomenologize. In another article (Applebaum, in press) I describe this standpoint as one in which the researcher adopts:

An attitude of disposability to discovery, an attitude of attentiveness that Giorgi (1985) refers to as “circumscribed indeterminateness’ or ‘empty determiniteness” (p. 13). He bases this presentation on Merleau-Ponty’s (1996) account in the *Phenomenology of Perception* of “that circumscribed ignorance, that still ‘empty’ but already determinate intention which is attention itself” (p. 28). Hence the phenomenological researcher’s attitude is characterized both by “form” and “formlessness” or openness in order to be disposable to the discovery process itself within the context of a disciplinary inquiry (psychology, in this case).

Years ago Giorgi told me that phenomenology was more than just a philosophy—it is a way of seeing. It is also, implicitly, a way of relating to the other, because, in the context of research, it is a very specific way of relating to the content of the other’s description of his or her lived experience.

The attitude relies upon the epoché, reduction, and imaginative variation, from a psychologically sensitive standpoint. We are deeply interested in the lived, psychological meanings that are implicit in the other’s description of their experience, and we strive to make these meanings explicit, without either affirming or negating the facticity of the other’s account.

This is initially a difficult achievement for a student-practitioner. Every motivation other than the psychological-scientific motivation *to*

*discover and to know* must be set to one side. Approaching the other’s experience we are neither advocates nor adversaries, we don’t come bearing a pet theory, a hypothesis, or a preconceived interpretation. We are not seeking to validate or invalidate the implicit truth-claims in the other’s account of the *facts* of what they have lived—that is not our purpose. We are the empathic witnesses of the other’s account of their experience, seeking to unfold its essential, intersubjective *meanings* for the field of psychology as a human science. Giorgi has been a tireless pioneer in this endeavor, bridging Europe and America, philosophy and psychology, theory and praxis in the effort to found a new research approach. For his insights, creative contributions, and commitment, we in the field are deeply indebted to him.

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