



## Phenomenological Psychological Research as Science

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### Abstract

Part of teaching the descriptive phenomenological psychological method is to assist students in grasping their previously unrecognized assumptions regarding the meaning of “science.” This paper is intended to address a variety of assumptions that are encountered when introducing students to the descriptive phenomenological psychological method pioneered by Giorgi. These assumptions are: 1) That the meaning of “science” is exhausted by empirical science, and therefore qualitative research, even if termed “human science,” is more akin to literature or art than methodical, scientific inquiry; 2) That as a primarily aesthetic, poetic enterprise human scientific psychology need not attempt to achieve a degree of rigor and epistemological clarity analogous (while not equivalent) to that pursued by natural scientists; 3) That “objectivity” is a concept belonging to natural science, and therefore human science ought not to strive for objectivity because this would require “objectivizing” the human being; 4) That qualitative research must always adopt an “interpretive” approach, description being seen as merely a mode of interpretation. These assumptions are responded to from a perspective drawing primarily upon Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, but also upon Eagleton’s analysis of aestheticism.

### Keywords

phenomenology, Giorgi, method, science, research

For me, philosophy, as an idea, means universal, and in a radical sense, ‘rigorous’ science. As such, it is science built in on ultimate foundation, or, what comes down to the same thing, a science based on ultimate self-responsibility, in which, hence, nothing held to be obvious, either predicatively or pre-predicatively, can pass, unquestioned, as a basis for knowledge. It is, I emphasize, an *idea*, which, as the further meditative interpretation will show, is to be realized

only by way of relative and temporary validities and in an infinite historical process—but in this way it is, in fact, realizable. (Husserl, 1989, p. 406)

The preceding passage illustrates a number of interrelated themes that will be familiar to students of Husserl. He is dedicated to foundational science and places strong emphasis on the researcher's self-responsibility. He asserts that the knowledge yielded by scientific praxis is perspectival and contextual, an insight linked to his envisioning of science as an open-ended, infinite task. If a psychological research method is to be genuinely termed phenomenological and Husserlian, then each of these themes, which also represent *commitments* on the part of the practitioner, must be implicitly or explicitly present.

Husserl framed his phenomenological inquiries as a response to the historical moment in which he found himself—a period of civilizational crisis in which he argued, "Skepticism is spreading which generally threatens to discredit the great project of a rigorous science" (Husserl, 1989, p. 406). For Husserl (1970), this skepticism represented "a collapse of the belief in 'reason,' understood as the ancients opposed *epistēmē* to *doxa*," that is, what was at stake for Husserl was society's trust in human beings' capacity to discover meaning in individual and communal life through reasoning (p. 13). Phenomenology was intended to combat the pervasive view "that reason no longer has 'anything to say' with respect to the burning questions of who and what we are" (Dodd, 2004, p. 47). Husserl's was an attempt to revivify the originary meaning of science, which he argued had been largely forgotten or obscured by the natural sciences.

Nearly a century later, practitioners of the Husserlian approach to phenomenological psychological research pioneered by Amedeo Giorgi (1970) face a similar difficulty. In working with students an attitude of skepticism is often encountered, voiced in statements such as "all knowledge is interpretation," meaning that any truth claim regarding data is "just your interpretation," or the assertion that in qualitative research "there is no such thing as objective knowledge" because "we're studying human beings, not objects," or the assertion that "qualitative research is like creative writing—you need to be a good writer, almost a poet to convey human experience—not a scientist."

Such comments tend to arise in response to Giorgi's claim that qualitative psychological research must be rigorous and seek to achieve scientific

status. In teaching research, naïve attitudes regarding qualitative psychology are likely to be encountered. These attitudes often appear to derive from arguably superficial popularizations of hermeneutic or postmodern philosophy. My purpose in the following essay is not to offer a philosophical critique of Heidegger or Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, nor of the diverse philosophers considered "postmodern" such as Foucault, Derrida, or Lyotard. Instead I will examine the "lived consequences," in Sass's (1992) phrase, of infelicitous articulations of qualitative research that attempt to justify their research praxes through invocation of the aforementioned philosophers (p. 169). The relationship of art to science looms large in this discussion; therefore I will begin by considering the context within which aestheticizing thought enters qualitative research.<sup>1</sup>

### **Empirical, Hermeneutic, and Postmodern "Naïve Attitudes"**

Drawing upon Eagleton's argument in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990) I would like to argue that the rise of aestheticizing thought in human science discourse represents a flight from the "progressively abstract, technical nature of modern European thought" as such thought is embodied in the empirical psychological tradition (p. 2). Anti-scientific or anti-methodical presentations of qualitative psychological research can be usefully regarded as representing a stance taken by researchers in reaction to the alienating conception of science chronicled by Eagleton (1990). Some presentations of qualitative research evince an excessively subjectivizing emphasis on interpretation and aesthetics. These presentations mirror the historical situation Eagleton (1990) describes. In modernity, he writes, the aesthetic is regarded as "providing us with a kind of paradigm of what a non-alienated mode of cognition might look like" and "providing us with a welcome respite from the alienating rigours of other more specialized discourses" (p. 2).

Qualitative psychological researchers including phenomenologists critique empirical methods as a Procrustean bed that deforms subjectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> Megill (1985) argues that the modernist and postmodernist work of Heidegger, Gadamer, Foucault and Derrida are linked by the shared sensibilities of aestheticism and romanticism. Both are clearly important; however, this brief paper will focus primarily on the implications of aestheticism for qualitative psychological research.

Taking Eagleton's analysis as a guide, we would expect that some qualitative psychological researchers would turn away from science *qua* science altogether, seeking refuge in a Romantic-aesthetic approach to research in an attempt to preserve the full-fledged, felt meaning of subjectivity. Such researchers might concur with Gadamer's (1996) statement that science "is based not on the experience of life but on . . . making and producing . . . this science is essentially . . . a kind of mechanics: it is *mechane*, that is, the artificial production of effects which would not come about simply of themselves" (1996, p. 38).<sup>2</sup> If qualitative researchers adopt Gadamer's conception of science as *mechane*, then they would regard science as doing violence to rather than illuminating the lived-meaning of the psychical. Therefore qualitative researchers who seek to appropriate philosophical hermeneutics as the guide and justification for their research praxes are likely to invoke Heidegger or Gadamer in the course of claiming that science *per se* is an alienating activity that is incapable of yielding genuine insight into subjectivity. By definition, qualitative psychological research ought consequently to be non-scientific.

A parallel phenomenon is observable in appropriations of postmodern philosophy by qualitative psychological researchers. Researchers who seek to base their praxes upon the philosophical works of postmodernists such as Foucault might argue, like Gergen (1992) that "matters of description cannot be separated from issues of power" (p. 23). Foucault argued that forms of knowledge are "indissociable from regimes of power" (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 50). He therefore held that "there is no such thing as objective science [since] every 'science' is in fact an 'ideology' . . . [and therefore] caught up within relations of power" (Megill, 1985/1987, p. 249). Often when postmodern philosophy is invoked as a guide and justification for the conduct of research—particularly anti-methodical modes of research—the writer invalidates a well-established approach to inquiry (description,

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<sup>2</sup> Critics such as Bernstein (1983) have observed that Gadamer's critiques tend to confuse science with scientism, noting "Gadamer tends to rely on an image of science which the postempiricist philosophy and history of science have called into question," whereas "It is not science that is the main target of Gadamer's criticism, but scientism. But Gadamer often seems to suggest that Method (and science) is never sufficient to reveal truth . . . [and] there is something misleading about this contrast" (p. 168). Arguably Gadamer's account fails to do justice to the natural sciences as they are actually practiced, because from a Husserlian perspective he neglects the intuitive dimension of the discovery process in empirical research and mischaracterizes science as purely logical/mechanical.

in the case of Gergen above) by allusion to philosophical assertions which are often presented as statements of fact rather than arguments, and appear to be framed by their appropriator as strong truth claims! I am not the first to observe that, ironically, postmodern philosophers famous for their eschewal of truth claims are often invoked to buttress seemingly absolute truth claims. Sass (1992) has commented penetratingly on the ill effects of unreflective importations of postmodernist thought into clinical psychology, writing:

What is troubling about the postmodernists is, then, the wholesale endorsement of aestheticism, relativism or factionalism as *the* truth and *the* message of psychotherapy, and their nearly complete failure to consider the dark and troubling side of such views. (p. 171)

A careless transposition of philosophies like Foucault's into psychology exemplifies this "dark side" because the consequence is a subjectivism inimical to science as such. When subjectivism (a species of skepticism) obtains, then "instead of reality's providing a constraint on scientific belief, reality is now to be seen as a projection of such belief, itself an outcome of non-rational influences" (Scheffler, 1967, p. 74).<sup>3</sup> It is hard to imagine how a meaningful conception of science could be founded upon what amounts to irrationalism. Similarly Chaiklin (1992) argued in his critique of Gergen (1992), Polkinghorne (1992), and Kvale (1992) that these three exponents of postmodernist psychological research tend to present their cases negatively as attacks upon a "modern psychology" which is something of a straw man. They seem to be making a truth claim that ought to be determinative for the field although their postmodernist principles do not support such truth claims, do not appear to work out their guiding principles "in relation to substantive psychological problems that are being investigated," present their arguments as a radical break from the previous history of psychology rather than in dialogue with that history, and are unable to articulate a shared definition of "postmodern" or "postmodernity" since these concepts are polysemous (p. 201).

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<sup>3</sup> Scheffler (1967) argued that this subjectivism is in fact a species of idealism, in that "The central idealistic doctrine of the primacy of mind over external reality is thus resuscitated once again, this time in a scientific context" (p. 74).

In presenting Giorgi's phenomenological method it is often necessary to clear the ground by responding to misunderstandings and preconceptions regarding Husserl, on the one hand, and Giorgi's method on the other. In addition teachers of phenomenological psychological research will likely find themselves obliged to argue for the very possibility that psychology can be a human science in the full sense of both words: a praxis in which neither the human realm of meaning nor scientific rigor is sacrificed. On the one hand, empiricism's positivist premises are so firmly established in the cultural mainstream that empiricism is typically equated with science as such, exemplifying what Kuhn (1996) termed "normal science."<sup>4</sup> From an empiricist standpoint, phenomenological psychology is dismissed as unscientific because it is a qualitative approach.

Within the qualitative research community, on the other hand, one frequently encounters the assumption that there is an absolute disjuncture between "science"—equated with natural science—and human science, envisioned as an aesthetic endeavor (van Manen, 1990). Exponents of this perspective sometimes caricature the natural sciences as mechanical, technocratic, and hence inhuman and blameworthy, and extol the human sciences as infinitely malleable, individualistic, and therefore humanistic and praiseworthy.<sup>5</sup> Partisans of this approach are likely to reject Giorgi's phenomenological method because it aspires to disciplinary coherence and scientific rigor— notions that are dismissed as antiquated, irrelevant, or simply unnecessary for qualitative psychological research.

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<sup>4</sup> Stam (1992) reflects upon the naïve adoption of positivist principles by psychologists when he observes "The effects of positivism are insidious. Perhaps a more kindly description is that they serve as an unspoken grammar. We have taken in the residues of positivism (both logical and prelogical) with our education and we no longer acknowledge or recognize the roots of our methodologies" (p. 18).

<sup>5</sup> A strong case could be made that the implicit vision of empirical praxis is naïve. As Schefler (1967) observed, "the function of scientific controls is to channel critique and facilitate evaluation rather than to generate discoveries by routine. Control provides, in short, no mechanical substitute for ideas; there are no substitutes for ideas" (p. 2). Similarly Danziger (1988) noted, "In the last analysis scientific methods have the function of producing the conditions for a special kind of 'witnessing.' These conditions necessarily contain both social and logical components. As a result of long established and successful practice we may lose sight of the social component because it has come to be taken for granted. In that case we may be tempted to regard scientific witnessing as a purely logical process" (p. 93). Thus some critics of empiricism may have succumbed to the same naïveté that Husserl argued was present among practitioners of the natural sciences.

Thus as Husserlian phenomenological psychologists we find ourselves responding both to naively empiricist assumptions and to assumptions which I would characterize as “naively hermeneutic” or “postmodernist.” These assumptions are nearly ubiquitous, I would argue, because the empiricist and postmodern worldviews permeate contemporary culture to such an extent that within the academy their assumptive frameworks are often rendered invisible. Husserl’s concept of naïveté is useful in understanding this phenomenon.<sup>6</sup>

As is well known, Husserl articulated a penetrating critique of the sciences of his day, and a cornerstone of this critique was his observation that “practicing scientists uncritically assume that through their theories they know reality as it is in itself” (McCarthy, 1990, p. 69). Prior to Husserl, Dilthey observed that the objective world investigated by the natural sciences, though presented simply as the world in itself, is in fact a *constructed* world “abstracted from the fullness of lived experience” (Makkreel, 1999, p. 564). Husserl maintained that to the degree specialization is required for the advancement of natural science, scientists tend to become absorbed in their praxes and “forget” that their particular scientific attitudes are in fact *constituted* attitudes and the objects of their inquiries *constituted* objects. Therefore “the more technically advanced and specialized the natural sciences become, the more they overlook, the less they grasp the origin and meaning of their own techniques” (Buckley, 1992, p. 73). For Husserl, the blindness of the sciences is but one example of the way in which a constituted attitude can become habitual, unreflective, and thus naïve. This self-forgetfulness is a risk faced by any researcher, including phenomenologists.

Consequently the meaning of “science” for laypeople or even graduate students of psychology frequently reflects an attitude of unquestioned empiricism.<sup>7</sup> Such students equate “science” as such with measurement and experimentation. I am proposing that a similar dynamic is at work not

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<sup>6</sup> Natanson (1973) notes: “By ‘naïve’ Husserl means unreflectively accepting the world as real and as being what it appears to common sense to be. Rather than being a lack of philosophy, naïveté is a hidden philosophy, at least in elemental form. In other terms, the philosophy of common sense may be called ‘naïve realism.’ When psychology is grounded in philosophical naïveté, its placement of the psyche is ‘in’ the world or ‘in’ egos which are empirically present as incarnate fellow men” (p. 47).

<sup>7</sup> Indeed Feyerabend (1975/2002) argued that scientism had replaced religion as contemporary society’s ruling dogma.

only among natural sciences, as Husserl argued, but among the advocates of some qualitative research approaches. An ostensibly alternative view to empiricism—albeit one equally naïve—seeks to substitute empiricism’s aridly objectivizing attempt to measure psyche with a romanticized privileging and aestheticizing of individual subjectivity and of the research process itself.

Alternative psychological research approaches are challenged by the fact that praxes are often driven by the prevailing philosophical currents, the tenets of which, once adopted, are not critically reflected upon by practitioners. As Teo (1996) noted, psychologists “have tended to value meta-theoretical constructions from outside their discipline more than those from inside their disciplines” and the popularity of these constructions shifts as one or another current in philosophy achieves popularity within the scholarly community.<sup>8</sup> Teo and Febraro (2002) have observed more bluntly that “Psychology’s history can be studied as a history of fads” (p. 458). If this is the case, we would expect the importation of varied waves of popular philosophical theories into psychology as reflecting trends in academic philosophy more than thinking necessarily well-suited to guide the practice of psychological research. Trends as such spread more as a matter of convention than reflection.

Reflecting on this phenomenon in Husserlian terms, we can recognize not only what I will term a “naïve empiricist attitude,” but also a “naïvely postmodern” or “hermeneutic” attitude. These attitudes are accurately described as naïve when their bearers fail to reflect critically upon their guiding assumptions and instead take the givens of popularized versions of empiricism, postmodernism, or hermeneutics for granted as standing for “the world” rather than as potential understandings *of* world.<sup>9</sup> This paper is

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<sup>8</sup> Remarkably on the manner in which shifting philosophical trends impacted psychology, Teo (1996) notes that “psychologists oriented to the humanities, or critically oriented psychologists, assimilated postmodern ideas and changed their language game, by dropping alienation, oppression, class struggle, capitalism, and dialectics, and by adopting deconstruction, texts, narratives, discourse, plurality, construction, difference, and aesthetics” (p. 281).

<sup>9</sup> As Jagtenberg (1983) observed regarding empiricism, a “sociologically naïve view . . . is deeply entrenched in the standard scientific epistemology that is communicated to young scientists during their socialization” (p. 69). Stam (1992) similarly remarked, “The effects of positivism are insidious. Perhaps a more kindly description is that they serve as an unspoken grammar. We have taken in the residues of positivism (both logical and prelogical) with



not intended as a critique of the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger or Gadamer, nor of the philosophies of Foucault, Derrida, or Lyotard. In no way would I maintain that hermeneutics or postmodernism are either naïve or monolithic philosophies. On the contrary, my concern is that when these philosophies are appropriated by qualitative psychological researchers and represented for non-philosophers—typically in rather schematic form—as guides for the practice of psychological research, they often result in assumptions that can have unfortunate consequences for qualitative psychology.

This paper is intended to criticize four such assumptions often encountered in response to Giorgi's method. They are:

1. *"Science" means natural science.* The assumption that the meaning of "science" is exhausted by empirical science; therefore qualitative research, even if termed "human science," is more akin to literature or art than scientific inquiry. A corollary of this position is that "scientific method" and the expectation of rigorous, repeatable steps in research are similarly artifacts of the natural sciences and can be dispensed with by qualitative researchers.
2. *Qualitative research is an aesthetic activity.* Qualitative psychological research is, from this perspective, a primarily artistic, poetic enterprise and as such ought not to strive for a level of descriptive exactness analogous (while not equivalent) to that aimed at by natural scientists.
3. *Human science ought not to strive for objectivity.* Similarly, "objectivity" is regarded as a concept belonging to the natural sciences; human science does not seek objectivity because that would be equivalent to "objectivizing" the human being.
4. *Qualitative research is an exclusively interpretive activity.* A related assumption is that qualitative research is always "interpretive" in a narrow sense—"description" being regarded as merely a mode of interpretation. From this perspective, research is not meaning-discovery but rather meaning-making, a creative enterprise engaged in collaboratively with research participants.

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our education and we no longer acknowledge or recognize the roots of our methodologies" (p. 18). I am arguing the same sort of unexamined assumptions are often present for those on the other side of the philosophical spectrum, were predominantly influenced by hermeneutic or postmodern theory.

A common theme running through these attitudes is the rejection of rigorous procedures or epistemological assumptions perceived as outdated or unduly restrictive. In essence Giorgi's research method is founded on the assertion that psychology as a human science requires a praxis that offers an alternative to the empirical while equaling the empirical in its clarity of articulation, epistemology, and guidance for practitioners. His work argues that as qualitative psychological researchers we need to collectively discover the distinct sense of objectivity, methodical praxis, and intersubjective validation appropriate for the study of psychical phenomena. He therefore argues that a significant, formative demand is placed upon the proponents of qualitative research methods, if they aspire to equal and surpass empiricism in the study of psyche. From this perspective, evading formative demands in order to popularize qualitative praxes and embrace methodological diversity will in the long run disable the qualitative movement from arriving at a substantial alternative to positivistic psychology.

### Equating "Science" with Natural Science

What is at stake in this question is whether science *per se* is to be equated with natural science, or whether science is more authentically envisioned as a multiplicity of disciplinary inquiries, each discipline making use of the method or methods which are appropriate for its subject matter. Giorgi (2009) draws upon Husserl's philosophy and seeks to expand the meaning of science for psychology to include human scientific qualitative research. Giorgi's is a foundational project in that, like Koch (1999), Giorgi (1970) regards psychology as an inadequately founded science, lacking in coherence, which has historically sought to legitimate itself through ill-conceived efforts to mimic the natural sciences. As a consequence of this premature, imitative formation, psychologists have not achieved broad consensus on the meaning of their object or upon "the methods, procedures, rules of interpretation" appropriate to the study of the psychical and therefore psychology lacks disciplinary unity (1985, p. 45). Giorgi argues that in order to be properly established, psychology's epistemology and praxes ought to be articulated from within a qualitative perspective that is attentive to the unique characteristics of subjectivity. Giorgi's work is therefore an attempt to transcend the limits of empiricism while articulating a genuine sense of psychological science. He builds upon the work of Husserl and

Merleau-Ponty in his effort to articulate an alternative, humanistic epistemology to guide psychology as a human science.

Bracketing empiricism as merely one form of science, Giorgi (1997) explores the question, “what are the criteria for science as such?” The criteria he arrives at are the following: science as such must be a mode of inquiry that is systematic, methodical, general, and critical. The Greek term *systema* implies an organized whole, or a body comprised of parts. Systematic knowledge means that a research approach is capable of producing interrelated findings that contribute to a picture of a whole. In psychology, this means that the knowledge produced would be interrelated and “regulated by laws, concepts, or meanings” (Giorgi, 1997, p. 249). This understanding of “systematic” can encompass both natural scientific and human scientific research: whereas a framework of laws can perhaps accurately describe chemical phenomena, a network of interrelated meanings would more adequately describe psychical phenomena. Systematic psychological research communicates an anticipatory sense of psychology as an organized, holistic body of knowledge without having to prematurely *theorize* that body of knowledge.

The Greek term *methodos* implies a reliable path of inquiry that has been confirmed over time and can be shared with fellow researchers. Science aims at enriching the research community’s shared understanding, not simply in yielding personal insight. Scientific discovery is never a private achievement, but always an implicitly communal one.<sup>10</sup> To be scientific, knowledge must be arrived at through a praxis in which others can be instructed. If a research approach cannot be imparted to others and implemented independently by them, the accumulation of a body of knowledge would be impossible; discoveries would be limited to isolated insights lacking any necessary interrelationship. In contrast research methods achieve their results through the application of a focused, well-grounded, explicit,

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<sup>10</sup> As Kisiel (1970) observed, “Each individual scientist is a scientist in the essential sense of this word only as a member of the open community which provides the tradition of knowledge upon which he bases his own research, and where his contributions are verified and take their proper place. The fulfillment of his own work is his particular goal, which in turn serves as the means for further scientific projects on the parts of others. The current ‘body’ of science is a unity of meaning which is the specific raw material for further developments. The life of science is precisely this interdependent progression of research and researchers extending across the generations and moving toward its infinite *telos*” (p. 70).

shared, and repeatable means of data gathering and analysis. An adequately precise and limited focus is a precondition of research, because, as Giorgi (2006) has noted, “the data will always be richer than the perspective brought to it but it is the latter that makes the analysis feasible” (p. 354). Repeatability in the context of human science does not imply a literal recapitulation of the lived experience of inquiry and discovery, which would be impossible. Instead repeatability refers to the straightforward fact that research steps are explicit and sequential and can therefore be performed again by multiple researchers in varied contexts.

A methodical research approach provides a collectively understood means of access to the phenomenon under investigation, and must be appropriate to the phenomenon being investigated, avoiding the use of a *a priori* technique that reifies or decontextualizes that phenomenon (Giorgi, personal communication, January 18, 2010). Method, *qua* method, lends itself to being taught to a community of fellow researchers. Consequently, as Giorgi (2010) has written, “To state that a method is not a ‘prescriptive method’ is an oxymoron since within science (including human science), all methods are meant to be intersubjective” (p. 5).<sup>11</sup> By this standard, a research approach which is incapable of methodical articulation, or whose advocates substitute an overly idiosyncratic, excessively variable, or predominantly artistic conception of their praxis for a methodical one cannot claim scientific status.

A research approach yields *general* knowledge if the findings have broad application rather than being limited to shedding light on the research participants themselves, or guiding interventions focused to specific individuals. If research is motivated by a scientific interest, its aims are disciplinary or multidisciplinary. Accordingly, a research approach that produces knowledge only of an individual or group of individuals, could yield insight without rising to the level of science. This guiding disciplinary interest does not imply a denial of the uniqueness of an individual case or diminish the meaningfulness of a participant’s experience. However, if the researcher hopes to contribute to scientific community’s understanding of the phenomena under investigation, he or she will seek to understand that experience upon a horizon inclusive of but more expansive than the life of any

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<sup>11</sup> A similar case is van Manen (2006) who invokes Heidegger to argue that a genuinely phenomenological approach is a dynamic, creative endeavor that cannot be contained within a “preconceived method” (p. 720).

particular participant. Regarding validity in qualitative research, it ought to be noted that generalizability of research findings is not argued by means of statistics, but in terms of meaning.

Finally, a research approach is *critical* if practitioners invite and respond to critique by publishing procedures and findings for review by qualified members of the scientific community. This criterion could fail to be met if findings are expressed in either of two extreme forms: assertions of unquestionable truth, or assertions which intrinsically refuse interrogation, either due to an implicit relativism or because they are framed aesthetically as artistic or poetic work rather than reasoned arguments which invite interrogation as such.

How do the preceding criteria guide and inform phenomenological psychological research? First it is important to state what these criteria *do not* mean. That science must be *systematic* does not mean that a “system” is preconceived, known or theorized in advance. Phenomenological research operates, as Giorgi (1985) has written, in the mode of discovery, not a mode of verification (p. 14). It is an attempt to clarify what is given to consciousness within a given research attitude, not an effort to verify a theory-laden hypothesis about what is given. So in phenomenological psychological research, we presume that the phenomenon under investigation belongs to the interrelated web of meanings characteristic of the lived world. In researching learning, for example, we bear in mind that the psychological structures we discover in our data may contribute to our understanding of a variety of learning situations beyond our data. We do not attempt to preconceive or predict what the interrelationships may be, nor do we construct hypotheses to be verified. Instead we openly inquire into the data at hand and attend to the meanings and relationships that stand out in the data. Only the implicit unity and meaningfulness of the phenomenon described by the research participant is presumed: wholeness is presumed because phenomena are in general lived as meaningful-in-a-context, except possibly in pathological or extraordinary cases. So as psychological researchers we are systematic when investigate our data with sensitivity to the larger meaningful horizon within which the phenomena themselves are lived by our research participants.

Second, asserting that psychological research must be methodical is not equivalent to asserting, for example, that implementing the steps delineated in Giorgi’s research method in a lock-step manner guarantees the validity of a given researcher’s results. The latter assertion, a straw man

sometimes proposed by critics of methodical science, is nonsensical upon examination. A mechanical reading of Giorgi's method is nonsensical first and foremost because it is premised upon the assumption that there are steps in a research method which do not require the conscious, engaged presence of the researcher, a consciousness that enables the researcher to recognize when a given step in the method has been adequately satisfied.<sup>12</sup> Explicating a meaning unit in psychologically-revelatory language is just such a step in Giorgi's method. The completion of a given transformation is an intuitive accomplishment (in the Husserlian sense of intuition), and is verified through the researcher's perception of a meaningful whole. So the fact that methods are articulated as sequences of steps by no means renders them mechanical—something that writers such as van Manen (1990) apparently fail to appreciate.

Cheek (2008) correctly observes that if researchers reify a method in order to achieve supposed certainty, the results of research are nullified. Reification occurs according to Cheek (2008) when qualitative research is "reduced to a series of steps that *must* be undertaken in order to produce a predetermined form of research report or finding," and Cheek argues this conception of research is neo-positivistic (p. 205). One might contend even more strongly that if qualitative psychological research is envisioned as a process of discovery rather than one of verification, as Giorgi (1985) has argued, then the reification of method is antithetical to the meaning of *research* as such. Adopting an attitude of disposability to discovery, the "‘circumscribed indeterminateness’ or ‘empty determiniteness’" Giorgi (1985, p. 13) advocates as the researcher's attitude toward data, is in harmony with Kvale's (1996) assertion that the researcher must be as concerned with what it means to use a method as he or she is concerned with *how* to implement the procedures of that method.

Thus from a phenomenological perspective Cheek (2008) is fully justified in cautioning that students' rush to achieve perceived competency in a given research method can lead them to reduce methods to mechanical procedures. There is no doubt that such naïveté vitiates qualitative research, and Cheek is correct to point to the implicit positivism. At the same time,

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<sup>12)</sup> Another way to express this is that Husserl's method of inquiry relies upon intuition, the perception of holistic meanings. This is less a theoretical claim on Husserl's part than an experiential one; however, a discussion of the Husserlian conception of intuition is beyond the scope of this paper.

there is perhaps some ambiguity in Cheek's (2008) argument that a qualitative research method ought not to be "reduced to a series of steps to be undertaken" (p. 205). The author's assertion is unproblematic if what is meant is that the steps comprising a research method cannot be rendered mechanical without undermining the meaning of the research itself. It is problematic if it is meant to rule out the articulation of qualitative research in terms of clear steps.

Similar difficulties are created when researchers like van Manen (1990) or Smith and Osborn (2008) offer procedures for conducting research while disclaiming that they are to be used in a procedural way. Such presentations are self-undermining because "science demands that the degree of latitude allowed should be spoken to, otherwise, it is imaginable that without any direction the modification could be so large that it becomes a deviation and an entirely different method is being created;" in other words, "to be completely prescriptionless is as problematic as being excessively rigid" (Giorgi, 2010, p. 6). A human scientific research approach, according to Giorgi's argument, needs to be both methodical and flexible; flexibility, however, does not imply that the steps in a method can be dispensed with or significantly altered at will, but rather that the steps are implemented in a manner sensitive to the research situation and data.

Thus for example in Giorgi's phenomenological method the research transforms each meaning unit in the data to render psychological meanings explicit; multiple such transformations are possible depending on the data itself, until the implicit meaning has been rendered explicit to the researcher's satisfaction. In other words, the step ("*transformation of participant's natural attitude expressions into phenomenologically psychologically sensitive expressions*") remains, but the number of transformations necessary cannot be predetermined (Giorgi, 2009, p. 130). A balance between form and formlessness is required. To constitute a viable research method, a given approach must have adequate procedural form while being executed in a self-conscious manner that avoids reification, and on the other hand, it cannot be so flexible as to lack coherence, clarity, and repeatability. Hence the application of method in phenomenological research is neither mechanical nor unthinking—the researcher is not an automaton. On the contrary, a high level of sensitivity and attention is required. Method is perhaps best envisioned as a shared framework within which discovery can occur.

## Aestheticizing Qualitative Research

The relationship between art and science has traditionally been regarded as a creative tension, because the aims of the arts and the aims of science have typically been regarded as manifesting fundamental differences. Muddying these distinctions has been viewed as problematic; As Tillich (1923/1981) wrote:

*Art and science* proceed from the same material of reality. This is the reality that confronts the fulfillment of meaning but is directed toward this fulfillment. Thus we have the peculiar relationship between artistic and scientific forms: on the one hand, the material is identical, on the other hand, there is an absolute difference between the principles of meaning through which objects in both areas are constituted. And thus we have the continual violation of the boundary from both sides: the logicizing tendencies of art, especially in its realistic movements, and the aestheticizing tendencies of science, especially in the romantic view. In our own position, the boundary is clear: science seeks to grasp things from the perspective of thought, of pure form, without losing being, or import; art seeks to grasp things from the perspective of being, of pure import, without relinquishing thought, or form . . . the truth of science is correctness; the truth of art is power of expression. (p. 179)

As it will be addressed below, a number of contemporary qualitative researchers actively seek to efface the distinction between science and art. It is challenging to clarify the positions in this arena because few if any of the central terms of the debate are univocal.

I propose that the central question comes to this: if it is the case that multiple psychological phenomena have an aesthetic dimension, broadly defined, does it therefore follow that qualitative psychological research ought to be conceived of as an aesthetic activity?<sup>13</sup> If so, the implication is that qualitative researchers ought to regard themselves as artists. It is not uncommon in the literature to find qualitative research described in aesthetic terms. Van Manen (1990), for example, represents the writing of

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<sup>13</sup>) The distinction I am making is between qualitative research envisioned as an artistic activity, that is an activity that aims at producing artwork, versus qualitative research envisioned as a scientific activity that aims at contributing knowledge to the broader scientific community. These are critically different aims, and my argument is that blurring them serves neither students nor the discipline of psychology.



qualitative research a form of literary production “not unlike an artistic endeavor,” rather than as a potentially *artful* articulation of scientific findings (p. 39). My focus in the following discussion is the claim made by researchers such as van Manen (1990, 2002) and Luce-Kapler (2008) that qualitative research is properly regarded as a form of “literature” and that since “literature is an art form”, by implication qualitative researchers ought to regard themselves as artists (p. 485). The debate regarding the aesthetic status of qualitative research extends beyond psychology and in some instances it has been better articulated by researchers in other disciplines; therefore extra-psychological sources are also cited.

A difficulty in evaluating the meaning of claims by van Manen (1990) and others that qualitative research is “literary,” “aesthetic,” or “poetic” is that such terms are rich and polyvalent. Within the field of qualitative research it is recognized that there is a “complex, traditionally antagonistic relationship between the two constructs of aesthetics and research” (Bresler & Latta, 2008, p. 12). This antagonism has its roots in the traditional dichotomy and opposition between the self-understandings of experimental natural science and the arts; the most simplistic rendering of this dichotomy would be to say that empirical science is concerned with objectivity whereas the arts are concerned with subjectivity. Of course the implied conceptions of objectivity, subjectivity, and science have been rejected as inadequate by central figures in the phenomenological tradition such as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Gurwitsch (Giorgi, 2009). For phenomenology, subjectivity can and indeed must be investigated scientifically, but the *sense* of science must be one appropriate for the phenomenon of subjectivity. Aesthetic phenomena are not alien to phenomenology as demonstrated by Merleau-Ponty’s (1993) sophisticated reflections on Cézanne. Nevertheless, studies like Merleau-Ponty’s *Cézanne’s Doubt* are phenomenological philosophical or psychological explorations—they are not framed as literary or fictional works.

I propose that some qualitative researchers have excessively blurred the differences between science and the arts in a way that serves neither and creates conceptual confusion for students. Bresler and Latta (2008) observe that some qualitative researchers consider any human phenomenon involving “appreciation” and “enjoyment,” or alternatively “encounters with the arts, including artifacts and phenomena (e.g., nature)” as falling within the domain of the aesthetic. Given the breadth of this definition, it is difficult to imagine any human phenomena that could not be construed

as aesthetic. This construal, combined with researchers' appropriation of some postmodern philosophers' claim that all writing is equivalent to the production of literature and indeed of fiction is obviously problematic for psychology, because the implication is that psychological research is fictional.<sup>14</sup> Hence van Manen (2002) asserts that because qualitative research data and its findings are articulated primarily through writing, qualitative research is a mode of literary production, and as "creative writing" it is an aesthetic activity. Van Manen (1990) asserts that "just as the poet or the novelist attempts to grasp the essence of some experience in literary form, so the phenomenologist attempts to grasp the essence of some experience in a phenomenological description . . . the artist recreates experiences by transcending them" (pp. 96–97). Van Manen (2002) conveys his aesthetic framing of qualitative research when he remarks that the researcher "in a moment of transcendental bliss . . . may experience the privilege of the gaze of Orpheus," the archetype of the artist as inspired poet (2002, p. 244).

More than acknowledging the aesthetic dimension (broadly understood) of qualitative research, these writers imply that the qualitative researcher ought to envision him or herself as a kind of artist. If aestheticized qualitative research is regarded by its exponents as a free exercise in artistic creativity, one would not expect to find any accompanying epistemological or methodological criteria that would constrain the researcher's freedom of expression. The entry on "Literature in Qualitative Research" in the *Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research* (Luce-Kapler, 2008) defines literature as "an art form that requires readers to attend to its details and imaginatively engage with characters and situations for emotional and intellectual impact" (p. 485). This entry will be explored further, because it suggests some consequences of framing scientific research as artwork. One would expect, for example, that research findings, viewed as aesthetic creations, would be judged as effective or ineffective based not on their adequate grasp of psychical phenomena but rather based solely upon their felt impact upon their audience.

Tellingly, the only criteria explicit in Luce-Kapler's (2008) definition above is that the *impact* of research, as a literary work of art, must be emotionally or intellectually moving. The author observes that over the past

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<sup>14</sup> Foucault (1972/1980) the author of a number of ostensibly historical studies, famously commented "I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions" (p. 193). As Megill (1985) notes, Derrida characterized his work as "theoretical fiction" (p. 336).

decade researchers have increasingly used artistic expression to articulate research findings: “some researchers report on their study through a short story or drama. Others have used a series of poems . . . some studies have been represented as a novella or as a collection of poetry” (Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 487). No specific criteria are proposed for discriminating between adequate and inadequately rigorous means of aestheticizing research findings. The sole cautionary remark the author offers for practitioners is that “literary forms, particularly poetry, demand skillful writing. A badly executed poem, such as one that does not attend to word choice or rhythm, can diminish the quality of the research report,” and it is reported that some researchers “join writing groups” in order to hone these skills. Epistemological criteria are seemingly irrelevant because research has been reframed as artwork; hence researchers are adjured to write good poetry in order to maximize their impact upon the audience!

In contrast Atkinson and Delamont (2005), qualitative ethnography researchers, acknowledge that despite the centrality of writing in qualitative research, “exaggerated and extravagant moves” have been made in abandoning the traditional forms of scientific writing (p. 824). They observe that when researchers seek to “assimilate sociological representation to literary forms such as poetry and fiction” they are acting upon assumptions that are “rarely explicated” (p. 824). Atkinson and Delamont (2005) argue that shifting the presentation of research findings from a scientific to a predominantly aesthetic mode alters research from a focus on the research question to a focus on the researchers themselves, who are positioned “firmly” or even “exclusively” in the “center stage” (p. 824). Moreover, in this move “the social world is aestheticized” and therefore the merit of research findings are “in danger of resting primarily on aesthetic criteria” (p. 824). Eagleton’s (1990) critique holds that the result of the view that “everything should now become aesthetic” is a “swallowing up” of the cognitive realm such that “truth, the cognitive, becomes that which satisfies the mind” (p. 368). In a comment particularly resonant for phenomenologists, Atkinson and Delamont (2005) state “we do not think we are in any possible sense of the term *faithful* to the phenomena if we recast them into forms that derive from quite other cultural domains” (p. 824). The relevance of this ethnographic critique for psychological researchers ought to be immediately evident: recasting psychological research as an aesthetic performance rather than a cognitive one seems to transform research into an attempt to produce experiences that are enjoyable or moving rather than

experiences which are knowledge-yielding. Of course, the disclosure of new meanings or deeper understanding may be intensely moving—but this is a byproduct of deepening understanding, not the goal of scientific inquiry itself.

That being said, the desire to include the aesthetic dimensions of human experience within psychological research is unquestionably important. Merleau-Ponty's work on Cézanne exemplifies the fact that phenomenology can explore the aesthetic realm without claiming for itself the status of poetry. Similarly, multiple qualitative research approaches share the recognition that the researcher's presence is a critical feature of and constitutive of the research situation. However seeking to remedy the perceived errors of empirical research by not only acknowledging the researcher and his or her experience, but by placing the researcher at "center stage," as Atkinson and Delamont (2005) note, is an excessive and unfortunate move: research risks taking on a solipsistic quality if it becomes more a reflection upon the meanings of the researcher's experience of discovery than an effort to arrive at or clarify the discoveries themselves. Reframing human science research as artistic creation leads to a range of claims that, to my mind, do justice neither to science nor to the arts.<sup>15</sup>

### **Rejecting Objectivity as a Goal of Human Science**

Qualitative researchers, whether influenced by the philosophy of phenomenology, hermeneutics, or postmodernism, are in agreement that empirical psychology's conception of objectivity is inadequate for the study of psyche, because the three philosophies share common roots in turn of the century critiques of modernity and positivism. Twentieth century philosophy saw significant and well-known challenges to absolutist claims made in the name of objective knowledge (Habermas, 1996). Phenomenology introduced an important perspectivalism and the intentionality of consciousness; philosophical hermeneutics emphasized the important roles of

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<sup>15</sup> As a psychological researcher I am not qualified to comment on the arts as such. However, arguably an important distinction can be made between qualitative researchers who seek to frame their work as artistic, on the one hand, and practicing artists who conceive of their artistic work as a mode of inquiry that yields knowledge and could even inform the sciences (see McNiff, 2008). The foregoing critique is focused on the former, not the latter case.

context, tradition, and history in understanding; postmodern philosophies questioned the categories of knowledge and pointed to the complicity of purportedly objective taxonomies in systems of social control and the exercise of power. Some postmodernists went so far as to categorize all systems of knowledge as fictive or indistinguishable from the exercise of power (Megill, 1985).

Unfortunately, attempts by qualitative psychological researchers to appropriate these philosophies as guides to shape research praxis, including some attempts to appropriate phenomenology (see Giorgi, 2010), are driven by an almost exclusive practitioner (individualist and clinical) interest rather than a scientific, disciplinary interest. The result is a neglect of epistemological issues with the result that such articulations tend to manifest philosophical naïveté and methodological incoherence. When a researcher's interest is solely the exploration of an individual research participant's experience, and this is motivated by an exclusively therapeutic rather than a disciplinary perspective, it is relatively easy for researchers to argue that "objectivity" (in an empirical sense) is irrelevant to their inquiry, which is concerned solely with the "subjectivity" of their individual research participants. Indeed some researchers maintain that the participants themselves ought to be considered the final authority concerning the meaning of research data—a stance that is not even sustainable within the context of clinical work.<sup>16</sup>

In a similar fashion, exponents of postmodern approaches often appear to represent themselves as rebels against a reified, antiquated and overly institutionalized modes of academic knowledge (see Chaiklin, 1992). This stance perhaps retains the avant-garde flavor of the milieu within which postmodernism initially gained a wide audience. Representing themselves as militating for a radical, even exuberant break with the supposedly fixed forms of knowledge of the past, Eagleton (1990) notes that such authors emphasize "ambiguity, indeterminacy, [and] undecidability," and frame their contributions to the scholarly literature as "subversive strikes against

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<sup>16</sup> Of course clinical psychology is premised upon the assumption that a trained other is capable of contributing insight regarding an experience that has not been already-grasped by the experiencer him or herself. Though working with the client's self-understanding is at the heart of therapeutic praxis, therapeutic work is based upon the observation that the client is naïve to important meanings of his or her experience, and is seeking greater insight through the encounter with the trained other.

an arrogantly monological certitude” (pp. 379–380). Left unexamined in this exuberance is the extent to which postmodern theorists’ own praxes either depend on the verities of the approaches they claim to have transcended, or if not, whether they believe their praxes ought to be arguable and sustainable on reasonable grounds at all.

Such presentations in the qualitative psychological literature tend to display philosophical naiveté because their underlying epistemological premises are lifted from another discipline and superimposed upon psychological research praxis without a careful thinking through and development of their meaning in relation to the psychical. Such presentations are also naïve when they rely upon a dichotomized conception of “objectivity” and “subjectivity” that has been a subject of critique and discussion in philosophy for more than a century. In short, the philosophical achievements of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and postmodernism often appear to be seized upon by qualitative researchers as a means of unburdening themselves of the demands that science might place upon their research praxes. Once those demands have been dismissed as outmoded, the whole notion of scientific rigor in qualitative research is easily dispensed with.

As a result it is not uncommon to find qualitative research texts rejecting both “objectivity” and “objectivism” in the same breath, as if they are equivalent (e.g. Flick, 2006). The implication is that the very notion of objectivity is passé and is not a goal of qualitative research. But is this extreme position warranted from the perspective of qualitative psychology? Does it not instead represent a conflation of objectivity with objectivism, just as “science” has sometimes been conflated with scientism? In practical terms, when introducing students to phenomenological research one often finds that “objectivity” is understood only in its positivistic sense—or else, one may find that students reject the notion of objectivity per se as a pure construction (that is, a fiction). The former attitude displays a naïve form of positivism, the latter a naïve postmodernism.

In contrast, Giorgi (2008) argues that psychology has to clarify its own sense of objectivity in dialogue with psychical phenomena rather than natural phenomena. For him (2008), psychology as a discipline has thus far failed to do so: “Psychology has not yet resolved the meaning of objectivity for subjective phenomena. With subjective phenomena, being objective cannot mean to reify. It means to comprehend the phenomenon as it is. Consequently, grasping the subjective as subjective would be objective”

(p. 165). As a phenomenologist Giorgi takes intentionality of consciousness for granted, and therefore when he writes “as it is” in the preceding citation he does not mean “as it is in itself,” because the latter formulation would ignore intentionality. Phenomenological researchers strive to acknowledge the scientific attitude as a constituted one, remain awake to the context of research and the presence of the researcher, and seek a mode of objectivity—fidelity to the given—that is appropriate for qualitative psychological data.

Giorgi’s thinking about objectivity is in continuity with the continental phenomenological tradition. Husserl was keenly aware of the importance of the social context within which knowledge is achieved.<sup>17</sup> In line with Husserl’s critique of scientism and objectivism, Merleau-Ponty (1968) called for “a psychology that has learned to situate the psychologist in the socio-historical world” having “lost the illusion of the absolute view from above: they do not only tolerate, they enjoy a radical examination of our belongingness to the world before all science” (p. 27). Hence objectivity, for phenomenology, is quite different from the empiricist conception. Despite the errors of critics like Ratner (1993) who mistakenly claim that phenomenological research seeks to produce “universal, timeless and ahistorical” findings—Giorgi’s approach is sensitive to context and history (p. 5).

For Husserl, the objective world is constituted by subjectivity but the constituting acts are forgotten within the natural attitude—we reawaken to our constitutive relationship to objectivity through the phenomenological reduction (Russell, 2006). The fact that objectivity (like science itself) is constituted by consciousness does not undermine the meaning of objectivity. On the contrary, this recognition illuminates the meaning of objectivity by clarifying its relationship to the intentionality of consciousness. In other words, objectivity is only *for us* and *within* consciousness—objectivity has

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<sup>17</sup> As Gray (2004) notes, “Husserl claims that each person, as person, is defined by a particular environmental context integral to his or her personality... this environmental context helps shape the way the person thinks, feels, and acts, and these thoughts, feelings and actions obtain their specific meanings only within this context. Moreover... a shared life world, is the prerequisite for mutual comprehension and community” (p. 316). Gurwitsch (1974) observed that in the context of phenomenological psychology, “Given a certain cultural world as the life-world of a sociohistorical group, the task is to find and to lay bare the acts of consciousness which in their systematic concatenation and intertexture make this specific world possible as their correlate. Answering this question for a particular cultural world amounts to understanding that world from within by referring it to the mental life in which it originates.” (p. 24)

no meaning without a consciousness for which something is present as objective. Phenomenology understands objectivity as something which appears *within* intentional consciousness, which is to say, objectivity is discovered within the lived world, not as an abstraction *of* the lived world. As Merleau-Ponty (1968) 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).<sup>18</sup>

For Husserl objectivity “has at its heart the idea of intersubjective validity,” in that the objective world for Husserl is “that world which we collectively recognize as having being not just for me but also for you” (Russell, 2006, p. 163). Moreover, “the weight of reality that we experience in connection with the world” is only experienced “once we have some awareness of others who also experience the world” (Russell, p. 163). Merleau-Ponty like Husserl expresses this observation in the context of perception, “perceptual faith” (in Merleau-Ponty’s phrase) being a constituent of mundane experience and of science.

While phenomenology rejects objectivism, the alternative is not relativism. Reason and objectivity, correctly understood, do not need to be rejected. Merleau-Ponty (1968) wrote that there are “No grounds for postulating at the start that objective thought is only an effect or a product of certain social structures, and has no rights over the other: that would be to posit that the human world rests on an incomprehensible foundation, and this irrationalism also would be arbitrary” (p. 24). What is the basis of the meaning of objectivity for qualitative phenomenological researchers? What is the *sense*, in other words, of Giorgi’s (2008) claim that the subjective can be grasped as it presents itself, a grasping he claims would be “objective”? Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) discussion of perceptual faith in *The Visible and the Invisible* offers a phenomenological account of the lived-ground of objectivity in perception. Following Merleau-Ponty’s argument, we can get a sense of the kind of objectivity to which Giorgi is convinced psychology ought to aspire.

With the phrase “perceptual faith” Merleau-Ponty (1968) indicates the way in which consciousness is always extended toward World, and World

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<sup>18</sup> Phenomenology has a nonrepresentational theory of consciousness: for Husserl (1982) and Merleau-Ponty (1968), we are present to the things themselves, not to a representation of the things. Simultaneously, both acknowledge that perception open-ended, never absolute, and engaged in ongoing self-correcting in relation to world.



is grasped in an anticipatory way as a potential unity *for us*, that is, a world that is present to a “we” and which is intrinsically intersubjective.<sup>19</sup> Perception is by nature fallible and engaged in ongoing self-corrections in relation to the world, upon the horizon of an anticipated, more complete grasping of what is present. Thus, “Each perception envelops the possibility of its own replacement by another, and thus of a sort of disavowal from the things. But this also means that each perception is the term of an approach, of a series of ‘illusions’ that were not merely simple ‘thoughts’ . . . but possibilities that could have been, radiations of this unique world that ‘there is.’” (p. 41). The “approach” Merleau-Ponty refers to is predicated upon the perceptual faith whereby consciousness is continually extending out toward World, trusting, in a certain sense, that unities of meaning are to be discovered therein.

For both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, perception is perspectival—but the fact that it is so implies that moment-to-moment perceptions are perspectives on anticipated perceptual unities. Merleau-Ponty (1968) notes, “Each perception is mutable and only probable—it is, if one likes, only an *opinion*; but what is not opinion, what each perception, even if false, verifies, is the belongingness of each experience to the same world, their equal power to manifest it, as *possibilities of the same world*. . . perspectives upon the same familiar Being” (p. 41).<sup>20</sup> Phenomenological psychology seeks to clarify the invariant structures for consciousness of these possibilities. Phenomenological research questions like “describe a situation in which you learned something” invite rich data that frequently demonstrate common psychological constituents. Thus the intersubjective realm is where phenomenology locates objectivity.

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<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1968) characterizes perceptual faith in the following way: “It is the prepossession of a totality which is there before one knows how and why, whose realizations are never what we would have imagined them to be, and which nonetheless fulfills a secret expectation within us, since we believe in it tirelessly” (p. 42). This is not to deny the presence of “different surrounding worlds of culture” acknowledged by Husserl (1973, p. 133), nor to argue dogmatically that the same object cannot be understood in multiple different ways.

<sup>20</sup> As Lawlor (2003) observes, Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of perceptual faith can be read as a commentary on Husserl’s Principle of all Principles in Ideas I (p. 105). Lawlor (2003) points out that one of the titles Merleau-Ponty considered for *The Visible and the Invisible* was “The Origin of Truth” (p. 104).

A phenomenological sense of objectivity is implicit in the explication of lived experiences which, unless they are abnormal or pathological, demonstrate conviction in the perception of objects which as Husserl (1982) put it are present “in person” to the perceiver (p. 83). For Merleau-Ponty (1968), perceptual faith presupposes a kind of objectivity:

It is the perceptual life of my body that here sustains and guarantees the perceptual explication and far from it itself being a cognition of intra-mundane or inter-objective relations between my body and the exterior things, it is presupposed in every notion of an object, and it is this life that accomplishes the primary openness to the world. My conviction that I see the thing itself does not *result* from the perceptual exploration, it is not a world to designate the proximal vision; on the contrary it is what gives me the notion of the “proximal,” of the “best” point of observation, and of the “thing itself.” (p. 37)

Thus Giorgi’s research method is a means to explicate the psychological meanings already present in research participants’ lived experiences of the world. The explication brings to light psychological meanings that are claimed to be present but implicitly so. Phenomenological research is an activity in which as Merleau-Ponty (1968) noted, “to understand is to translate into disposable significations a meaning first held captive in the thing and in the world itself” (p. 36). This claim is nonsensical if we neglect the strong sense of intentionality underlying Husserl and Merleau-Ponty’s work. A particularly concrete way to convey this to students would be to add the phrase “for our consciousness” whenever understanding or perception is referenced: hence, Merleau-Ponty’s claim, which Giorgi’s (2009) research method relies upon, could be paraphrased in the following way: to understand is “to translate *by means of consciousness* into disposable significations a meaning *that stands out to our consciousness, which was first held captive from our consciousness* in the thing *as it was held within our consciousness* and in the world itself *as it was present to our consciousness*.”

### **Exclusively Privileging Interpretation over Description**

In their introduction to *Hermeneutics and Psychology* Packer and Addison (1989) identify a schism between natural scientists who claim their data is

“objective,” meaning free of interpretation, on the one hand, and the exponents of hermeneutics on the other who argue that all knowing is interpretive. In a very broad sense, phenomenology shares hermeneutics’ critique of objectivism. Students of Husserl will recognize in Gadamer’s and Ricoeur’s hermeneutics a reliance upon the presence of a shared, meaningful world.<sup>21</sup> Husserl’s account of intentionality and framing of the sciences as intentional accomplishments laid the groundwork for the hermeneutic critique of the natural sciences’ objectivism.

But when Gadamer’s (1986) assertion in *Truth and Method* that “understanding is always an interpretation” is appropriated by qualitative researchers and deployed in an overly absolute way to justify interpretive research praxes, the result is unnecessary confusion and an overly simplistic conception of consciousness (p. 274). The claim that all knowing is interpretive must be carefully interrogated, because “interpretation” is not a univocal concept. Husserlian phenomenology claims that a meaningful distinction, one that is not merely abstract but is experientially observable and verifiable, can be made between description and interpretation (Giorgi, 1992, 2000). Consequently these two activities ought not and need not be collapsed together in overly simplistic claims that “all description is interpretation.” The difference of opinion concerns disagreement regarding what is “given” to the researcher’s consciousness in qualitative data.

In essence the descriptive phenomenological argument made by Giorgi is the following: “interpretation” can be regarded as having a very broad and a narrow meaning, and the two are not equivalent, particularly in the context of research activity. In a broad sense saying that psychological research as such is “interpretive” means acknowledging that all knowing is perspectival and therefore implies that researchers make choices and adopt particular points of view. Interpretation in a narrow sense, from a descriptive Husserlian perspective, means *going beyond* what is given in the data in order to assist in explaining the meaning of what is already present in the data. A phenomenological sense of the “given” and its relationship to interpretation, narrowly defined, corresponds to Scheffler’s (1967) remark that:

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<sup>21</sup> In reference to Husserl’s famous call for a return to the things themselves (*die Sache selbst*), Dostal (1987) characterizes Gadamer and Ricoeur’s hermeneutic position as follows: “We dispose of the Kantian *Ding an sich* on behalf of the Husserlian *Sache selbst*” (p. 421). Dostal continues, “the *Sache selbst* taken in its largest sense is our common world” (p. 422).

Conceptions, thought, and interest may produce varying interpretations of the given, but they cannot create or change it. . . . interpretation must, in short, be interpretation of something, and that something must itself be independent of interpretation if the interpretive process is not to collapse into arbitrariness. (p. 13)

Giorgi (2009) notes that from a phenomenological perspective “interpretation” means “bringing in a non-given factor (such as hypothesis, theory, assumption) to help account for the essential presence” (p. 78). So for example when we elect to engage in scientific research, we are engaging in an activity that *transforms* the lived-world. As Husserl argued, scientific discoveries are not already present in the life-world; rather, they reflect *transformations* of the life world.<sup>22</sup> Doing science means adopting a specialized attitude *different* from and more reflective than what Husserl (1970) terms the *naïve* or *natural* attitude of everyday life.

Furthermore, when we elect to engage in scientific *psychological* research, we are again making a choice to adopt, within a scientific attitude, a further refinement in that we are assuming a *psychological perspective* through which to examine the given, in contrast for example to a sociological, economic, historical, or biological perspective. This is true in an anticipatory sense, even if a fully articulated and shared sense of the psychological for the discipline of psychology is not yet an historical achievement (Giorgi, 1970). So for Giorgi a scientific psychological perspective is justifiably recognized as an *interpretive* perspective in a large sense, because these choices are made and a specialized attitude is adopted, which of course implies the choice of a particular research perspective among many potential perspectives on a given phenomenon.

At this high level, Giorgi’s phenomenology is self-avowedly interpretive, and the same could be said of Husserl’s philosophy. The researcher constitutes the research situation; science is a constitutive process, it is not merely the discovery of pre-existing “facts” regarded as already-present in the lived world. This much is completely in harmony with Husserl and will be immediately recognizable as such to students of Husserl’s phenomenology. Similarly, those acquainted with Husserl’s phenomenology will recognize that when Husserl speaks of consciousness as *constitutive* or science as

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<sup>22</sup> Mohanty (1976) noted “the sciences (or *Epistēmē* in general) are regarded by Husserl as a sort of transformation (in the sense of idealization) of this *Lebenswelt*” (p. 138).

*transformative*, he does not mean that consciousness “constructs” its objects out of thin air, nor that science alters its objects in grasping them scientifically: Husserl is not a constructivist.<sup>23</sup>

Once the research situation is constituted by a high-level interpretive choice—for example, to view a given phenomenon psychologically—a descriptive research approach can be utilized. At this stage we can take Husserl’s (1982) Principle of all Principles as a guide and seek to describe as faithfully as possible what is present to us as researchers from within a given research perspective. We seek to make explicit what is present in the data without overlaying a theoretical explanation upon the data, without extrapolating beyond the data itself, without adding more to the data than is given. We do not self-consciously interpret in the sense that we do not seek to add to the given in order to understand the given. For practitioners, this regulatory concept of interpretation is extraordinarily important because it places a demand on the researcher: he or she must work in an exceedingly careful way with the data and refrain from consciously or unconsciously adding to that data. Such rigor would be absent if the researcher were encouraged to “interpret.”

Similarly, if the researcher is instructed to dialogue in an interpretive fashion with the research participant, or to ask leading questions during the interview, the approach is no longer descriptive. In the latter cases what is developed is a self-consciously interpretive account regarding an experience or experiences. One is encouraging the participant to add to their experience, to elaborate, to theorize (in a more or less naïve fashion) about what they’ve lived. So in essence the researcher is not asking the participant “what was it like?” but rather, “what do you think it meant?” These are distinctly different questions. If as in Giorgi’s (2009) approach the researcher’s aim is to understand the participant’s lived experience of a given phenomenon like learning to ride a bicycle, then one wants to make explicit the meanings *already present for the experiencer* in their everyday attitude. One’s goal is not to aid the participant in becoming more reflective about

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<sup>23</sup> So for example to grasp a rock within a scientific attitude is not to literally construct or alter the rock; it is rather to view the object within a chosen frame of reference which implies a specific interest. But this grasping is not exclusive of other possible ways of grasping the object: if I encounter a hungry bear in the woods, I may instantly grasp the same rock in quite another sense, as a tool to defend myself.

their daily life (this would be an intervention, a therapeutic goal), but to elucidate the psychological lived meanings of the experience as they are for the participant. The goal is therefore to gain insight about the psychological meanings of lived phenomena, not to alter or change or theorize about those meanings, which phenomenologists trust are already psychologically rich and revelatory without such elaborations. For Giorgi (January 18, 2010, personal communication), we are interested in clarifying the psychological meaning of the phenomenon, and we interview the individual participant in order to learn about that, not in order to intervene with or learn about the person in isolation.

“Adding to the given” is precisely the meaning of “interpretation” in a narrower sense as opposed to the broader sense noted above. We are not seeking to “explain” or “expound upon” the data—meanings that are close to the lexical sense of the Latin *interpretari*. Instead we are seeking to pay careful attention to the meanings already present in the data and make them explicit, from within a psychologically sensitive attitude. Needless to say, from a Husserlian perspective “present in the data” always means “present, for us, within a specific adopted research attitude.” That is, we never neglect the context of research and the intentionality of consciousness—there is no question of a psychological meaning “in itself,” because all meanings are “for us.” A possible objection is that no meanings are “present” in the data except those we add to the data, but I would counter that this form of skepticism is nonsensical if followed to its logical conclusion—that there is in fact no data at all, but merely our projections upon an empty cipher called “data.”

A related observation is in order, although it points beyond the scope of this article. From a phenomenological perspective the assertion that “all knowing is interpretive”—if “interpretation” is meant in *both* the wide and the narrow sense discussed above—cannot be experientially validated, that is, it cannot be phenomenologically validated. Instead the assertion that “all knowing is interpretive,” which constitutes a strong truth claim, relies upon its exponent’s conviction in a theoretical abstraction, the concept that “even if I don’t recognize that I am interpreting, I am doing so all the time.” This is as much as to say: “even if I don’t have the experience that I am interpreting, I am interpreting anyway.” Consequently, it is not an experiential claim, it is a theoretical one which is upheld over and against the evidence of experience.

In theoretical terms the claim about perpetual interpretation may result from a fundamental misunderstanding or neglect of consciousness's intentionality. If I assume I can have access to an object outside of consciousness, then I could perhaps conclude that my encountering of the object *within* consciousness is always partial *in relation to an idealized complete encounter* and so the way I encounter an object within consciousness is always interpretive because I am "adding" something to the object "itself". But this reflects a misunderstanding of intentionality.

### **Conclusion: Science or Non-Science?**

Qualitative psychology criticizes positivism as reducing the richness of lived-subjectivity in a Procrustean manner. In a similar manner, qualitative praxes based upon ill-considered assumptions can result in a subjectivistic, aestheticized mode of inquiry that may yield writing that is more akin to private poetic reflections than research. According to Giorgi (2009) psychology has not reached consensus regarding its subject matter. Within psychology, qualitative researchers have not reached consensus regarding criteria for science.

In this historical context, the interplay between form and formlessness in research methods must be carefully attended to. If qualitative research is presented within a predominantly reactive mode, posed over and against an overly simplistic rendering of empirical psychology, then it will remain inadequate as a full-fledged research approach. The reason for this is simple: adopting only the "outside" or "rebel" stance allows researchers to rely upon the empiricists to carry the full weight of science's epistemological and methodological demands. Rejecting empiricism thus becomes a facile way for qualitative researchers to evade legitimately difficult and perhaps even temporarily insoluble questions regarding the rigor of our thought and praxes. Evidence for this is the apparent ease with which some qualitative researchers dispense with formative concepts such as "science," "method," and "discipline."

For students, the assumptions I noted above pose a genuine risk. Equating science as such with natural science and regarding qualitative research as a mode of creative writing encourages students to abandon any consideration of binding intersubjective criteria for their work. That is to say, as artists, they need not consider whether any objective criteria obtain in their

practice of research—instead their driving concern would presumably be whether they are adequately rendering their personal insights. The only practical concern they ought to have is whether their work, as literature, yields a moving experience for their intended audience. Institutional criteria for research would therefore be thoroughly relativized—regarded as merely bureaucratic requirements that have no intrinsic relationship to the conduct of research as a process of individualistic “disclosure.”

Similarly, dismissing objectivity as a guiding aim for psychology and asserting in absolute fashion that all knowing is interpretation has extraordinarily problematic implications for the mindset of qualitative researchers. If my aim as a researcher is to draw upon my creativity as an author to produce a novel account, perhaps in dialogue with research participants, rather than to elucidate a phenomenon that in some fundamental way is already intersubjectively present, can such an activity properly be regarded as “research”? Is it not more accurately framed as a mode of creative writing that aims at producing impactful literature?

But such attitudes only present a risk if qualitative research is envisioned as a distinctive but nevertheless strong representation of science. Giorgi (2010) observed that when qualitative psychological studies fail to meet basic scientific criteria they invite critique and dismissal from empirical psychologists. When the assumptions I have identified are reviewed by empirical critics, that is, by an unsympathetic audience, such qualitative research is likely to be dismissed as conceptually inadequate or even as a form of Sophism. Empirical psychologists Proctor and Capaldi (2006), for example, address the relativistic and constructivist arguments made by qualitative researchers. The authors note that some qualitative researchers attack truth claims in “postmodern” fashion, claiming that qualitative research privileges the uniqueness of individual psyches, the ambiguities and indeterminacies of psychical phenomena, and practical instead of abstract theoretical issues. Proctor and Capaldi (2006) argue that “the adherence of qualitative researchers to relativism seems to stem from their desire to differentiate themselves from their non-relativistic counterparts in academic psychology,” meaning empirical psychologists (p. 172). The authors suspect that this relativism “stems not so much from the use of qualitative methods as from a desire to avoid quantitative methods” (p. 172). The authors quickly move to a critique of “postmodern” qualitative psychologists as merely recapitulating arguments made in the 5th century by the Greek Sophists (p. 176)!



To sustain qualitative research we must be more effective critics of our work than are the empiricists. It ought not to be sustainable for students to adopt qualitative research methods because such methods are perceived as fundamentally “easier” than quantitative ones. Qualitative psychology’s strong suit is that its concerns are so clearly related to the lived world. However, as Giorgi (2010) has noted, “Because qualitative analyses are relatively intelligible there is the mistaken conviction that they can be easily learned” (p. 21). If qualitative methods are seized upon as means to achieving preconceived ends, or to validating preconceived hypotheses, then researchers are guilty of two practices for which empiricists are sometimes criticized: engaging in verificatory rather than discovery-oriented science, and utilizing research methods in a mechanical fashion. I recently received a student email asking why computer software would not be capable of conducting a phenomenological analysis of interview transcripts. The student’s naïveté was not entirely his fault in the sense that the hegemonic empirical model encourages this sort of unreflective attitude regarding qualitative data, and unfortunately even students in ostensibly qualitative research degree programs often seem to be educated in a manner Cheek (2008) would describe as neo-positivistic.

In summary, science in Giorgi’s view (personal communication, January 21, 2009) requires that a research approach be methodical, systematic, general, and critical. It is problematic if qualitative psychological research methods are presented to students as being so open to improvisation that they are practically incapable of producing an interrelated, coherent body of knowledge. In order for qualitative researchers to arrive at intersubjective knowledge, shared and adequately transparent research procedures are an obvious requirement. For some qualitative researchers the arts seem to represent a realm of infinite, inspired spontaneity and variation. No doubt the Romantic conception of genius or *Geist* underlies this conception. Romanticism envisions the “genius” as an individual who is “distinguished not by school learning and acquired skill but by his own experience and inspiration” (Auerbach, 1958/1984, p. 145). Setting aside the question of whether the romantic conception of artistic genius is a phenomenologically adequate conception of the arts as they are lived, there remains the fact that phenomenological psychology cannot abide by the dichotomy implicit in Auerbach’s able definition of romantic genius. Husserlian phenomenology understands research to be both the fruit of disciplined, sustained and careful study in dialogue with others and

simultaneously an intuitive discovery process drawing upon the researcher's moment-to-moment insights, questions, confusions, and exchanges with his or her fellow-researchers.<sup>24</sup> Phenomenological research is envisioned neither as the outcome of mechanical learning nor of solitary inspiration, but of reflective engagement within a scientific discipline supporting a discovery process which, while it may at times appear solitary, is in fact always implicitly intersubjective. The “other-directedness” of research, its reaching out toward the scientific community of fellow-researchers, cannot be sacrificed without falsifying the phenomenon of scientific research. As Merleau-Ponty (1962/1996) argued, “Truth does not ‘inhabit’ only ‘the inner man’, or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” (p. xi).

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<sup>24</sup> In the *Crisis* Husserl (1970) noted, “Our aim is to turn all romanticism into responsible work” (p. 197).

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