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SOME GUIDELINES FOR THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW DATA

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Summary

This article explicates, in a concrete, step-by-step manner, some procedures that can be followed in phenomenologically analyzing interview data. It also addresses a number of issues that are raised in relation to phenomenological research.

Part I

Introduction

This article is an attempt to spell out in a step-by-step manner, a series of procedures which can be utilized in phenomenologically "analyzing"[1] interview data. Despite the pioneering and extremely valuable works of Colaizzi (1973, 1978), Giorgi (1975), Keen (1975) and Tesch (1980), I have found that for many students and even colleagues, who have not had much background in philosophical psychology, they still have many questions about specific steps in carrying out a phenomenological analysis of interview data. This is an attempt to respond to this need.

There is an appropriate reluctance on the part of phenomenologists to focus too much on specific steps in research methods for fear that they will become reified as they have in the natural sciences. This concern is well expressed by Keen (1975, p. 41).

> ...unlike other methodologies, phenomenology cannot be reduced to a 'cookbook' set of instructions It is more an approach, an attitude, an investigative posture with a certain set of goals.

Keen is completely right. What is being presented here is but one possible manner of phenomenologically analyzing data. It is presented more as an attempt to sensitize the researcher to a number of issues that need to be addressed in analyzing interview data rather than as a "cookbook" procedure. Giorgi (1971) strongly emphasizes that any research method must arise out of trying to be responsive to the phenomenon. No method (including this one) can be arbitrarily imposed on a phenomenon since that would do a great injustice to the integrity of that phenomenon. On the other hand, there are many researchers who simply have not had enough philosophical background to begin to even know what "being true to the phenomenon" means in relation to concrete research methods The following guidelines have arisen out of a number of years of teaching phenomenological research classes to graduate psychology students and trying to be true to the phenomenon of interview data while also providing concrete guidelines.

1. *Transcription.* An obvious but important step in phenomenologically analyzing interview data is to have the interview tapes transcribed. This includes the literal statements and as much as possible noting significant non-verbal and para-linguistic communications. Usually it is helpful to leave a large margin to the right of the transcription so that the researcher will later be able to note what s/he believes are the units of general meaning.

2. *Bracketing and the phenomenological reduction.*[2] Now we come to the procedure which to be followed in listening to the recordings of the interviews and in reading the transcripts The research data, that is, the recordings and the transcriptions, are approached with an openness to whatever meanings emerged. This is an essential step in following the phenomenological reduction necessary to elicit the units of general meaning. Keen (1975, p. 38) states that:

> The phenomenological reduction is a conscious, effortful, opening of ourselves to the phenomenon *as a phenomenon*. ...We want not to see this event as an example of this or that theory that we have we want to see it as a phenomenon in its own right, with its own meaning and structure. Anybody can hear words that were spoken; to listen for the meaning as they eventually emerged from the event as a whole is to have adopted an attitude of openness to the phenomenon in its inherent meaningfulness. It is to have 'bracketed' our response to separate parts of the conversation and to have let the event emerge as a meaningful whole.

It means suspending (bracketing) as much as possible the researcher's meanings and interpretations and entering into the world of the unique individual who was interviewed. It means using the matrices of that person's world-view in order to understand the meaning of what that person is saying, rather than what the researcher expects that person to say.

This in no way means that the phenomenologist is standing in some absolute and totally presuppsitionless space. To say this would be to fall into the fallacy of "pure objectivity" that natural science has often been prone to. In fact, the phenomenological reduction teaches us the impossibility of a complete and absolute phenomenological reduction. In the words of Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. xiv):

> The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction. ...that radical reflection amounts to: a consciousness of its own dependence on an unreflective life which is its initial situation, unchanging, given once and for all.

A good check on whether the researcher has been able to bracket his/her presuppositions is for the researcher to list these presuppositions that s/he is consciously aware of as well as to dialogue with his/her research (dissertation) committee about these presuppositions. Such dialogue may very well bring out presuppositions that the researcher was not consciously aware of.

3. *Listening to the interview for a sense of the whole.* Once the researcher has "bracketed" his/her interpretations and meanings as much as is possible, s/he will want to get a sense of the whole interview, a gestalt (Giorgi, 1975, p. 87). This will involve listening to the entire tape several times as well as reading the transcription a number of times. This will provide a context for the emergence of specific units of meaning and themes later on. When doing this the researcher especially wants to listen to the non-verbal and para-linguistic levels of communication, that is, the intonations, the emphases, the pauses, etc.

It is also often important to have available a journal so that the researcher can note specific issues that might arise or to record general impressions. In this manner, these perceptions do not interfere with the attempt to bracket interpretations and biases while trying to stay as true to the interviewee's meaning as much as possible.

4. *Delineating units of general meaning.* At this point the interview has been transcribed, the researcher has bracketed his/her presuppositions as much as possible and has tried to stay as true to the data as possible, as well as gotten a sense of the whole of the interview as a context. The researcher is then ready to begin the very rigorous process of going over every word, phrase, sentence, paragraph and noted significant non-verbal communication in the transcript in order to elicit the participant's meanings. This is done with as much openness as possible and at this point does not yet address the research question to the data. This is a process of getting at the essence of the meaning expressed in a word, phrase, sentence, paragraph or significant non-verbal communication. It is a crystallization and condensation of what the participant has said, still using as much as possible the literal words of the participant. This is a step whereby the researcher still tries to stay very close to the literal data. The result is called a unit of general meaning. I define a unit of general meaning as those words, phrases, non-verbal or para-linguistic communications which express a unique and coherent meaning (irrespective of the research question) clearly differentiated from that which precedes and follows. (These might most easily be recorded in the special margin alongside the transcription). If there is ambiguity or uncertainty as to whether a statement constitutes a discrete unit of general meaning, it is best to include it. Also at this point all general meanings are included, even redundant ones.

A brief example of the above process follows below (Table 1). As a caution it should be mentioned that it is obviously impossible to convey the overall context in such a brief example which influences the determination of the units of general meaning.

The context for the following example is that it is the second page of transcription describing an experience of wonderment or awe. In the previous page, the participant discussed the background where he and his girlfriend were up in the mountains on vacation. The scene being described is the beginning of an experience of wonder.

Note that there are some slight changes of wording, additions or omissions, for the sake of clarification, but for the most part the literal words were retained in determining the discrete units of general meaning. At this stage these meanings are those experienced and described by the participant irrespective of whether they later are determined to be essential, contextual, or tangential to the structure of the experience of wonder.

It should also be noted that at times it is difficult to clearly and unambiguously determine what constitutes the gestalt of a unit of general

Table 1. Units of general meaning.

[1]I was looking at Mary and [2]all of a sudden I knew [3]I was looking at her like I never looked at anybody in my whole life – and [4]my eyes were sort of just kind of staring at her and the reason that [5]I realized that it was tremendous was that she said to me – what are you doing – [6]and I just said I'm looking at you – [7]and so we just sat there and [8]she sort of watched me look at her – and [9]she was getting kind of uncomfortable [10]and yet also kept saying – what's going on [11]but not really wanting to hear – [12]just letting me – having enough sensitivity to let me experience it – [13]a lot was going on – [14]I didn't realize what – what it was – [15]I was just'sort of sitting there – [16]*I couldn't move* – [17]I didn't want to move – [18]I just want to continue looking at her.	[1] Was looking at Mary [2] Suddenly he knew [3] He was looking at her like he never looked at anybody in his whole life [4] His eyes were just staring at her [5] Realized it was tremendous when she said "What are you doing?" [6] He just said, "I'm looking at you." [7] Both just sat there [8] She sort of watched him look at her [9] She was getting kind of uncomfortable [10] She kept saying "What's going on?" [11] She didn't seem to want a response [12] She had enough sensitivity to let him experience it [13] A lot was going on [14] He didn't realize what was going on [15] He continued to just sit there [16] He *couldn't move* (emphasized) [17] Didn't want to move [18] Just wanted to continue looking at her

meaning. For example, in looking at the statement "...all of a sudden I knew I was looking at her like I never looked at anybody in my whole life...', it could be argued that actually this constitutes one whole unit of general meaning rather than two as I have delineated it. Te context is ambiguous and I would agree that this is a completely acceptable alternative decision. Given different perspectives among phenomenological researchers there are bound to be minor differences even when utilizing the same general method. The perspective I have used in this case is to avoid the danger of potentially subsuming and therefore obscuring apparently separate meanings by deciding in all significantly ambiguous instances to decide in the favor of separate meanings. This can always be changed later on as the context becomes clearer.

5. *Delineating units of meaning relevant to the research question.* This is the beginning of a very critical phase in the explication of data. Once the units of general meaning have been noted, the researcher is ready to address the research question to them. In other words, the researcher addresses the research question to the units of general meaning to determine whether what the participant has said responds to and illuminates the research question. If it appears to do so, then it is noted as a unit of relevant meaning in a manner similar to the process in step number four. It should also be noted that therefore statements which are clearly irrelevant to the phenomenon being studied are not recorded. Again, if there is ambiguity or uncertainty at this time as to whether a general unit of meaning is relevant to the research question, it is always much better to "err" on the safe side and include it. Greater clarity should emerge as more time is spent with the data and its overall content as well as in dialogue with the impartial "judges" or the research committee.

This obviously requires some kind of "judgment call" on the part of the researcher, though if the researcher has done a good job of bracketing presuppositions, is very open to the data, and yet utilizes a rigorous approach, it would seem that the danger of inappropriate subjective judgments creeping in would be minimal. However, to play safe, it will be recommended in the next step that the researcher train an impartial panel of judges to carry out the above process and validate, or modify, or invalidate, the units of relevant meaning elicited by the researcher.

A brief example of delineating units of relevant meaning follows (Table 2). The research question addressed to the units of general

Table 2. Units of relevant meaning.

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[1] Was looking at Mary.
[2] Suddenly he knew.
[3] He was looking at her like he never looked at anybody in his whole life.
[4] His eyes were just staring at her.
[5] Realized it was tremendous when she said "What are you doing?"
[6] He just said, "I.m looking at you."
?[7] Both just sat there.
?[12] She had enough sensitivity to let him experience it.
[13] A lot was going on.
[14] He didn't realize what was going on.
[15] He continued to just sit there.
[16] He *couldn't move* – [17] Didn't want to move.
[18] Just wanted to continue looking at her.

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meaning (Table 1) was: "Is this an essential constituent of the experience of wonder as experienced by this participant?" The control or context used for determining the units of relevant meaning (for example purposes) was only the segment cited in Table 1.

As was mentioned previously, whereas ordinarily each unit of general meaning would be evaluated against the entire context of the interview to determine the units of relevant meaning, a serious methodological problem arises when looking at a segment (as done here only for demonstration purposes) *as if* it were the entire context for each unit of general meaning. The units of relevant meaning of a segment end up being somewhat different than those which would emerge if the entire context of the interview could be used as a control. Consequently, I have erred on the side of inclusion in determining the units of relevant meaning, using only this segment as the context and control.

At this point, the original eighteen units of general meaning have been reduced to thirteen units of meaning relevant to the research question (the original numeration of the units of general meaning have been retained as much as possible so that the reader can follow the sequence of decisions that is made throughout). Numbers eight through eleven of Table 1 have been determined to be non-essential to the structure of the experience of wonder. (This becomes even clearer further in the interview). They have, therefore, been eliminated from Table 2. There are question marks in front of numbers seven and

twelve because it is highly ambiguous within only the context of this segment as to whether they are essential to the structure of the experience. At this early stage and working with only a segment of only one interview it is much better to be overly inclusive than to exclude something which might later prove important in a wider context. After the researcher has had an opportunity to delineate the relevant meanings from the entire interview as well as several other interviews, it will become much clearer as to whether initially ambiguous units of general meaning are essential to the research question. It should also be noted that numbers sixteen and seventeen of Table 1 have been combined in Table 2. In asking the research question (as well as in listening to the tape) it appeared that what was essential was not the separate statements, but that both occurred almost simultaneously in relation to each other.

6. *Training independent judges to verify the units of relevant meaning.*[4] A good reliability check is to train other researchers to independently carry out the above procedures in order to verify the present findings. Such independent verification is a helpful check in further establishing the rigor of the study. If there is significant agreement between the researcher and the judges, then this indicates that the researcher has bracketed his/her presuppositions and has been rigorous in his/her approach in explicating the data.

My experience in working with graduate students well-trained in phenomenological research is that there are rarely significant differences in the findings. However, since there is no illusion of pure objectivity in this kind of research and since each person does bring in his/her own different perspective, even when trained in these procedures, there are bound to be some minor differences. Such minor differences can usually be quite easily worked out in dialogue between the researcher and the judges. If there are significant enduring differences in the findings, I would suggest that a research (dissertation) committee be consulted to evaluate where the problem lies and how it can be resolved.

7. *Eliminating redundancies.* When the above steps have been completed, the researcher is now ready to look over the list of units of relevant meaning and eliminate those which are clearly redundant to others previously listed. However, the researcher cannot just rely on the literal content but must also rely on the number of times a meaning was mentioned and *how* it was mentioned. In other words, in following

this procedure, it is important to note the actual number of times a unit of relevant meaning was listed since that in itself might indicate some significance; for example, it might indicate just how important that particular issue was to the participant.

Non-verbal and para-linguistic cues which significantly seem to emphasize or alter the literal meaning of the words should also be taken into account here. In the former case, two units of relevant meaning have the same literal content might be different because one was given greater emphasis. This could very well change the context. Also in later comparing the non-redundant units of relevant meaning, the "weight" given to one might be greater than the others because that one was given greater emphasis.

In the latter case, two units of relevant meaning which might have the same literal words, might because of different emphasis or other non-verbal or paralinguistic cues actually say the opposite of each other. In other words, someone might say "What nice weather" as a straightforward statement of fact whereas later on the same person might use the same words but with different emphasis to sarcastically describe a sudden rainstorm.

Also, though two units of relevant meaning might use the same words, the actual meaning might be very different because of the chronology of events. In other words, someone saying "I thought it was all over" when, in fact it turns out that an event was just beginning means something very different from saying the same words when in fact the event has actually ended for that person.

8. *Clustering units of relevant meaning.* Once the researcher has the list of non-redundant units of relevant meaning, s/he renews the effort to bracket his/her presuppositions and tries once again to stay as true to the phenomenon as possible. The researcher then tries to determine if any of the units of relevant meaning naturally cluster together. In other words, whether there seems to be some common theme or essence that unites several discrete units of relevant meaning. Such an essence emerges through rigorously examining each individual unit of relevant meaning and trying to elicit what is the essence of that unit of meaning given the context.[5] For example, if there were a number of units of relevant meaning whose essence pointed to the importance of bodily reactions which occurred during the experience being investigated, those units of meaning could then be placed together under the cluster of "bodily reactions."

The context is of course critical because, for example, if one were

investigating bodily felt experiences during a sporting event, then there actually might be several different clusters addressing bodily experiences and giving further specificity. In fact, it is theoretically possible that in any given interview, and given a certain context, that most units of relevant meaning might actually be separate clusters. In practice though this rarely happens.

It should be pointed out that even more so than in any of the previous procedures that the judgment and skill of the researcher is involved here. There is more room for "artistic" judgment here than ever before. Colaizzi, in discussing a similar procedure states: Particularly in this step is the phenomenological researcher engaged in something which cannot be precisely delineated, for here he is involved in that ineffable thing known as creative insight." (1978, p. 59).

The major danger in this procedure is of course that since more of the researcher's judgment comes into play here that the researcher's presuppositions might interfere. The best check on this is to have either the researcher's (dissertation) committee check on the process or even better to train other independent judges to repeat the process to see if they come up with the same clusters. In the latter case, as before, any discrepancies should be resolved by the (dissertation) committee or an outside impartial panel.

Table 3 is an example of clustering units of relevant meaning. The example is a continuation of that given in Tables 1 and 2. The focus is whether the units of relevant meaning in Table 2 express discrete clusters of the experience of wonder as experienced by the participant, within the context of the interview segment. (Again, it should be mentioned that ordinarly at this stage the entire interview would be used as a context. Limitation of space prohibits that here.)

To make it easier for the reader to follow the transition of relevant meanings into clusters of meanings, Table 3 lists both the clusters and the "subsumed" relevant meanings and their original numeration as general meanings. I have also listed some separate comments in brackets because they seemed to be strongly implied in the context of the transcription and interview, and these implications may be helpful later on in contextualizing the themes and discussing them.

At this stage the clusters are still quite situation-specific. (Some of this in this example has to do with the very brief segment being explicated). Also, some of the units of relevant meaning have been listed twice under separate clusters (e.g. # 1, 3, 5, 7 and 18). This was done because it appears that they were essential to a number of separate themes.

Table 3. Clusters of relevant meanings.

I. *The tremendousness of the looking at Mary*
   A. Looking at Mary in a way totally different than he had ever looked at anyone in his life (#1, 3).
   B. His eyes were just staring (#4).
   C. Realized it was tremendous when she said "Wat are you ding?" (#5).
   D. Was (just) looking at her (#6).
   E. A lot was going on (#13).
   F. Just wanted to continue looking at her (#18).

II. *Realization*
   A. A sudden realization (#2) [Almost like it breaks in].
   B. Realized how tremendous it was (through her question). (#5)
   C. A lot was going on and he didn't realize what was going on (#13, 14). [rhythm of awareness].

III. *Continuation of what was happening*
   A. Both just (continued) to sit there (#7).
   B. He continued to sit (#15).

IV. *Inability to move*
   A. *Couldn't move* (#16) [issue of volition].
   B. Didn't want to move (#17) [didn't desire to move].

V. *Interpersonal dimension*
   A. Was looking at Mary in a way he had never looked at anyone in his whole life (#1, 3).
   B. Her question elicited the realization of how tremendous it was (#5).
   C. He just said "I'm looking at you." (#6).
   D. Both just sat there (#7).

In Table 3, all the units of relevant meaning have been clustered together. The procedure utilized was that the researcher went back to Table 2 (as well as having a sense of the entire interview segment) and interrogated each individual meaning to determine its "essence". For example, the "essence" of the unit of relevant meaning #1 (Table 2) was the "looking at Mary." In interrogating unit #2, there was some question as to whether it was an essential part of the "looking at Mary" cluster. In reviewing the context, it appeared to be a separate cluster discrete from the "looking." At this stage, the essence seemed to have more to do with the "knowing" or realization that occurred. In examining unit #3, the essence seemed to be the unusualness of the looking. This unit begins to connect with unit #1 around the cluster of "looking

at Mary." With units #4 and #5, the "unusualness" or "tremendousness" of the looking is re-emphasized. The above process is carried out till it is seen that units #1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 13, 18 all seem to cluster together around the issue of the "tremendousness of the looking at Mary." The same procedure is then followed with the other units of relevant meaning till they all come together as clusters. Table 3 lists all the clusters of meaning.

In this procedure, there is a constant process of going back and forth from the transcript to the units of relevant meaning to the clusters of meaning. It should also be mentioned that sometimes it is quite difficult to decide which relevant meanings cluster together; for example with #18, there was some difficulty deciding whether it clustered with the "tremendousness" of the looking, or whether it would be better clustered with a separate interpersonal dimension. It was finally decided to include it under both. There was even some questions as to whether to make an interpersonal dimension as a separate cluster. It was finally decided to do so to err on the cautious side at this stage.

After the entire procedure was followed, there was a total of five clusters of meaning. It should be noted that there is some ambiguity as to where certain relevant meanings cluster and that there is some overlap to the clusters. This is to be expected given that it is impossible with human phenomena to totally delineate them. By their nature, they are already an integral part of a whole and naturally co-penetrate each other.

It should also be mentioned that another researcher might come up with slightly different clusters. Given that there is more room for different perspectives here and differing levels of skill and experience, there are bound to be some differences of opinion.

9. *Determining themes from clusters of meaning.* Finally at this stage, the researcher interrogates all the clusters of meaning to determine if there is one or more central themes which expresses the essence of these clusters (and that portion of the transcript). In the example being used, the researcher listed all the five clusters and tried to determine if there was a central theme which expressed the essence of the clusters. In going back and forth among the various clusters, it was determined that the central theme was "The Tremendousness of the Looking and its Effect" (Table 4). Obviously, more so than the previous ones, this procedure addresses more of the gestalt of the relevant segment and the clusters of meaning.[6]

Table 4. Determining themes from clusters of meaning.

Clusters of meaning	Central theme
I. The tremendousness of the looking	
II. Realization	
III. Continuation of what was happening	The tremendousness of the looking and its effect
IV. Inability to move	
V. Interpersonal dimension	

10. *Writing a summary for each individual interview.* When the above steps have been completed, it is then very helpful to go back to the interview transcription and write up a summary of the interview incorporating the themes that have been elicited from the data. This summary once again gives a sense of the whole as well as providing the context for the emergence of the themes. As Ellenberger (1958, p. 116) puts it:

> Whatever the method used for a phenomenological analysis the aim of the investigator is the reconstruction of the inner world of experience of the subject. Each individual has his own way of experiencing temporality, spatiality, materiality, but each of these coordinates must be understood in relation to the others and to the total inner 'world'.

11. *Return to the participant with the summary and themes: Conducting a second interview.* An excellent experiential "validity check" is to return to the research participant with the written summary and themes and engage in a dialogue with this person concerning what the researcher has found so far. There are really two main issues here to be checked on. First of all, whether the research participant agrees that the essence of the first interview has been accurately and fully "captured". If not, obviously some corrections will need to be made. If the participant is in essential agreement with the summary and themes and s/he would like to add further information to that already gathered, it would be extremely fruitful to conduct a second interview,

focusing perhaps especially on those issues that were not covered in the first one.

There is an issue of a judgment call in this procedure too. In some rare and unusual circumstances, and perhaps dealing especially with certain populations, for example, with an individual diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic or as a borderline personality, the individual might "deny" what appears to be manifestly in the content of the interview (Cahalan, 1978; Quatrano, 1980). In such extreme cases the interviewer must utilize his/her "clinical" judgment to decide whether to ultimately agree with the participant. On the other hand the very fact of the "denial" becomes important information since that is the way the participant presently perceives the situation. Such new information would need to be included in the research. In these unusual cases, a dissertation committee or an outside panel should be the final judge of whether to include the initial data which the participant later disowns. (It should always be remembered that according to standard guidelines for the protection of human subjects in psychology, that a participant always has the right to withdraw at any stage from a research project.)

12. *Modifying themes and summary.* With the new data from the second interview, procedures one through ten would again be utilized. When this is done, the researcher would need to look at all the data as a whole and modify or add themes as necessary. Also, if significant new information has been elicited, the individual summary would need to be modified or rewritten accordingly.

13. *Identifying general and unique themes for all the interviews.* Once all the above steps have been repeated with each individual interview, the researcher can then begin to look for the themes common to most or all of the interviews as well as the individual variations. This procedure requires the phenomenological viewpoint of eliciting essences as well as the acknowledgment of existential individual differences.

The first step is to note if there are themes common to all or most of the interviews. If there are, then these themes from the individual interviews can be clustered together as indicating a general theme that emerged in most or all of the interviews. At this point the researcher must be careful that s/he does not arbitrarily cluster themes together when in fact there are significant differences.

The second step is to note when there are themes that are unique to a single interview or a minority of the interviews. These individual

variations are important counterpoints to the general theme.

Another point to note is that when the themes from individual interviews are clustered into a general theme, this should not obscure significant variations *within* that theme manifested in the individual interviews. The variations may indicate the significance of the theme.

A final point is that once again the research committee should be consulted to provide another check on the rigor and judgment of the researcher.

14. *Contextualization of themes.*[7] After the general and unique themes have been noted, it is often helpful to place these themes back within the overall contexts or horizons from which these themes emerged. As Giorgi (1971, pp. 21–22) states it: "...the horizon is essential for the understanding of the phenomenon because the role that the phenomenon plays within the context, even if it is only implicitly recognized, is one of the determiners of the meaning of the phenomenon (Gurwitsch, 1964)."

For example, in discussing the theme of "being taken" which was elicited from several experiences of wonderment, Hycner (1976) contextualized the theme in the following examples (Table 5). (Note that the data base for this differs somewhat from the previous examples since a number of full interviews provided the context not just a small segment of one interview.)

Table 5. Contextualization of themes.

"*Being taken*". One of the most striking findings is that all of the participants in this study spoke of how the experience *happened to them*. They are reported that while engaged in ordinary activities, they were somehow "*taken*" out of their everyday world and thrust into a different world. The contrast between their ordinary experience the person feels in control of what s/he perceives and does. In the experience of wonder, the respondents consistently mentioned that they were *taken out of* their ordinary experience. It was not something that they chose to do. *It was something that happened to them*. It is as if the object of wonder seemed to have a power of its own over the person. It is not absolutely clear in the descriptions whether the person could have resisted this "call." As one person described it: "My own experience was so compelling." At least with the persons spoken to, there was no thought of resistance. Rather than a thoughtful response, there seems to have been an entire bodily response to the "call." The person is more "passive" and receptive. S/he allows the experience to take its own course aside from any intention or control on his/her part. One respondent summarized this feeling as follows:
And I'm not as much in control as I thought I was. There are other things happening that I can't say that I did it but rather that it happened to me. That's scary in some ways but its kind of neat in others.

15. *Composite summary*. Finally, it is helpful and instructive to write up a composite summary of all the interviews which would accurately capture the essence of the phenomenon being investigated. Such a composite summary describes the "world" in general, as experienced by the participants. At the end of such a summary the researcher might want to note significant individual differences.

Part II

Issues in phenomenological research

I will list a number of issues which are particularly relevant to this type of phenomenological research which utilizes an interview format. I am addressing them here along with an explication of method because these issues questions, or criticisms, inevitably arise in the implementation of a phenomenological research method. Every phenomenological researcher must be able to address these issues for him/herself as well as respond to these questions from the research community.

1. *Randomness*. A frequent criticism from experimentally-oriented researchers is that unlike experimental research, the "sample" is often not random (though with certain phenomena it could be random.) Even worse, from the natural science perspective, the researcher may in fact seek a particular type of person for this study. Very often it is necessary for a phenomenological researcher utilizing the interview method discussed here, to seek out participants who not only have had the particular experience being investigated but also are able to articulate their experience. It should be remembered that the phenomenological researcher is seeking to illuminate human phenomena and not, in the strictest sense to generalize the findings. Therefore randomness, or participants unable to articulate the experience, *might*, in fact, keep the researcher from fully investigating the phenomenon in the depthful manner necessary. The critical issue here is that the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the selection and type of participants. In fact, part of the "control" and rigor emerges from the type of participants chosen and their ability to fully describe the experience being researched.

2. *Limited number of participants*. Doing this kind of phenomenological research for the most part requires that only a limited number of people be interviewed given the vast amount of data that emerges from even one interview. The focus is of course on qualitative issues, not quantitative ones.

3. *Generalizability*. Another common criticism from experimentally-oriented researchers is that as a consequence of the absence of randomness, and the limited number of participants the results of the research cannot be generalized and therefore are useless. In the strictest empirical sense, the first part of the criticism is accurate in that the "results" only apply strictly to the participants interviewed. I would suggest that if they illuminate to some significant degree, the "worlds" of the participants, then that in itself is valuable. However, in the process of even investigating the experience of one unique individual we can learn much about the phenomenology of human being in general. Even within experimental research there is a long and respectable history of studies done with a sample of one. Therefore, even with a limited number of participants, though the results in a strict sense may not be generalizable, they can be phenomenaologically informative about human being in general.

4. *"Accuracy" of descriptions.* A number of issues can be raised as criticisms of the "accuracy" of the descriptions given by the participants.[8]

(a) *Retrospective viewpoint, and the difficulty of verbalizing essentially non-verbal experiences*. One of the first criticisms that is often raised is that interviewing a participant about a phenomenon elicits a retrospective viewpoint. The criticism is that a retrospective viewpoint is not the same as getting a description from someone while an experience is actually occurring. It is argued that a retrospective viewpoint is altered by time and therefore different from the experience itself.

I would argue that *any* description of an experience is already different from the experience itself. Language, by its nature can enhance or distill an experience. In any case a description is not the experience itself. The best we can do through the medium of language is to be one step removed from the original experience. Perhaps through non-verbal mediums, such as painting, music, dance or visualization, we can come closer to an original non-verbal experience. Even here, that is not the experience itself. Consequently, a retrospective viewpoint has some of the same shortcomings as even a concurrent description, given the nature of language.

On top of that, a retrospective viewpoint especially has to be cognizant of the passage of time. That is, the participant is describing an experience after some time has elapsed. The disadvantage might be that the verbal description is not "accurate" because of distortions arising from the passage of time (more will be said below about this and the issue of confabulation). The advantage is that a retrospective viewpoint may actually allow a much fuller verbal description because the participant has had an opportunity to reflect back on the experience and to integrate it consciously and verbally.

Finally, it should be obvious that for research purposes, if we want relatively verbal descriptions of experience, that we will primarily have to rely on a retrospective viewpoint.

(b) *Confabulation and psychological defensiveness.* Another issue that is often raised, and is related to the above issue of the retrospective viewpoint is that of confabulation. By confabulation is meant that a participant fills in gaps in memory according to his/her later subjective viewpoint, or in a manner that s/he believes would please the interviewer. It is usually assumed that this is done unconsciously (this phenomenon supposedly arises especially in hypnosis). It is true that this is always a danger. On the other hand, it can be argued that such confabulation in itself might be valuable in investigating a phenomenon since what the researcher wants is the way the participant experienced the situation, and thought s/he experienced the situation.

Another unconscious process that might interfere with an "accurate" description is that of the participant unconsciously becoming defensive about certain threatening aspects of the experience. At times it might be quite informative about the participant's "world" to include any defensive reactions. When this is not the purpose of the study, the researcher will need to rely on his/her skill in discriminating defensive from non-defensive material. Also, in those cases where the researcher is more concerned about reaching the "essence" of the experience itself, aside from any confabulation of psychological defensiveness, the very fact of interviewing a number of participants will help differentiate confabulation or defensiveness from the experience itself.

5. *"Subjective" influence of researcher.* Perhaps the most common criticism is that the subjective influence of the researcher, in both the interviewing and analysis phases negates any possibility of the researcher coming up with objective and therefore usable data. The entire scientific orientation of the phenomenological researcher is very different from that of the natural scientific viewpoint. The phenome-

nologist would like to even think s/he is being more inclusive and therefore even *more* objective than just experimental research. The whole meaning of "being objective" is quite different here. Objectivity in this approach means trying to be as comprehensive as possible in responding to the whole phenomenon (Sardello, 1971) and utilizing a method or methods which will be as "faithful" (Giorgi, 1971) to the phenomenon as possible.

Another way of responding to such criticism is to utilize some of the orientation of natural science "objectivity" by building in some forms of traditional "objectivity"; that is, to train and utilize independent interviewers, and independent evaluators of the explication of data. This, in a traditional sense, controls for some of the "subjectivity" of the individual researcher. However, given the approach of phenomenological research, there is no way to eliminate the "subjectivity" of research. In fact, the phenomenologist believes that it is the very nature of such "subjectivity" which allows for greater "objectivity," that is, an approach that is most comprehensive and faithful to the phenomenon.

It seems to me that the phenomenological orientation does not exclude using experimental techniques (Price and Barrel, 1980). However, these would always have to be grounded in a more comprehensive phenomenological, and therefore a more comprehensive and "objective" viewpoint.

6. *Validity*. An important question that is raised in any scientific research is whether the research data is valid, that is, whether it does accurately represent or "capture" the phenomenon being studied. This is an extremely important question but also one which is extremely difficult at times to answer. (In psychology, this is especially true in trying to validate assessment instruments). In the natural scientific orientation, some of the difficulty arises because the researcher has to utilize another medium or instrument in order to validate the data and that instrument's validity is itself questionable and validated by some other instrument. Ultimately, the question comes down to a sort of consensual validation among researchers; that is, a number of researchers agree that this is a valid instrument or approach. Phenomenological research is no different. There are a number of levels of validation which will be mentioned in order of increasing sophistication. I would suggest that the first validity check is the participants themselves. They are able, at an experiential level to validate the findings of the research, that is, whether the findings are valid for them.

The next level is the researcher him/herself. The researcher needs to evaluate whether the findings "ring true" as Coles (1974) says. The findings should also be evaluated by the research committee. This brings in a certain "objective" or trans-subjective agreement. The findings should also be checked against the current literature; to what degree do the findings fit in or not fit in with the tradition of literature in the area. Finally, the researcher needs to submit the findings to the scientific community and the lay community. This is the initiation of a larger dialogue whereby the findings can be discussed and evaluated from a larger number of perspectives and either be accepted, modified, or rejected as necessary.

7. *Replicability*. An essential feature of natural scientific research is that a study can be replicated by other researchers and get essentially the same results. The underlying philosophy here is that the method is "objective" and therefore consistent irrespective of who the researcher is. In other words, the results are not due to some accident or the subjective influence of the researcher.

Clearly, replicability is an important aspect of any research. However, given the nature of phenomenological research, there are abound to be some differences among researchers. Giorgi (1975, p. 96) states it this way:

> It is even conceivable that another investigator could write a different structure of style, byt mu experience has shown that it is never *wholly* different; rather, it is divergent because another investigator is looking at the same data slightly differently. Consequently, the control comes from the researcher's context or perspective of the data. Once the context and intention becomes known, the divergence is usually intelligible to all even if not universally agreeable. Thus, the chief point to be remembered with this type of research is not so much whether another position with respect to the data could be adopted, (this point is granted beforehand), but whether a reader, adopting the same viewpoint as articulated by the researcher, can also see what the researcher saw, whether or not he agrees with it. This is the key criterion for qualitative research.

Given the fundamental nature of existential-phenomenological research at this stage of development, it is understandable that there have been few studies undertaken to replicate the results of previous studies. The main thrust is the pioneering work of applying phenomenological principles to research.

Clearly much needs to be done in terms of "replicating" studies. However, the phenomenological researcher is not willing to fall into the natural scientific error of trying to have such a meticulously "objective" and therefore replicable method that there ends up an inverse relationship between the replicability of results and the meaningfulness of the findings. A balance must be struck between the two.

8. *Absence of control groups.* Some natural scientific researchers have suggested that if there are no control groups then a study can't be scientific. The very narrow understanding of science is obvious here and has been addressed elsewhere. Also, it seems patently absurd to suggest that there could be some way of controlling for a person's experience when what the phenomenological researcher is primarily concerned about is the investigation of the very uniqueness of human experience.

9. *Absence of hypotheses.* Another stalwart feature of experimental research is the testing of hypotheses. What experimental researchers fail to make explicit enough is where these hypotheses come from. For the most part they come from such "unscientific" experiences as hunches, intuitions, insights, suspicions, etc. (Maslow, 1969). There is a certain "dishonesty" built into the whole "face objectivity" of stating hypotheses. Also, the phenomenological researcher has the opposite orientation. That is, s/he wants to be as open to the phenomenon as possible without constricting his/her perspective by placing the phenomenon on the promethian bed of hypothesis testing. In a sense, the phenomenologist is working with a "null-null hypothesis". Maslow (1969) suggests that often such foundational work is done, it might be appropriate to later test certain aspects of the findings bu generating hypotheses which can later be experimentally verified.

10. *Absence of prediction.* It should be obvious that the phenomenologist does not believe that the most meaningful aspects of human beings can be predicted. That which can be "predicted" is often very trival or in such a broad range as to be meaningless. The phenomenologist is more concerned with a comprehensive and depthful understanding of a phenomenon. S/he believes that this will advance science and human good will to a far greater extent than will the dimension of "predictability" per se.

11. *Absence of "interpretation" and comprehensive theory.* Obvious too, is the fact that the phenomenological researcher's primary thrust is to understand, and as much as possible not to interpret according to some laready developed theory. The latter is the kind of reductionism that the phenomenologist is most concerned about avoiding since it has been such a serious error in much traditional research.

Phenomenology is still relatively new and still at a foundational stage and there is not enough of a body of knowledge to attempt a more comprehensive integration of theory. Also, at the core of phenomenology is the very deep respect for the uniqueness of human experience and that this ever present uniqueness will always make the attempt to develop a totally comprehensiveness theory of human experience an ultimately futile one. It is the uniqueness of the human being which constantly instills novelty and unpredictability into any attempt to totally and comprehensively "capture" the phenomenon of human experience.

NOTES

1. I have initially used the term "analysis" here though it has some dangerous implications. The term usually means a "breaking into parts" and therefore often means a loss of the whole phenomenon. Giorgi avoids this danger by using the term "explicitation", which means an investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon while always keeping the context of the whole. I have decided not to use this term initially because of the lack of familiarity of most readers with it. Also, there is a tradition of using the phrase "phenomenological analysis" in such writers as Binswanger, Boss and May, where an analysis of the constituents of the phenomenon does not detract from the whole phenomenon. Later in the article I will use the terms interchangeably.
2. A word of caution is needed here to note that perhaps the terminology "phenomenological reduction" coined by Husserl is unfortunate. The term and approach has nothing to do with reductionistic tendencies in some natural science methods, that is, a tendency to do a great injustice to human phenomena by over-analyzing them, removing them from their lived context, and reducing them to simple cause and effect components. The utilization of the phenomenological reduction is to bring about quite the opposite result, to be as true to the phenomenon as possible, without any premature imposition of theoretical constraints.
3. It should be noted that this section and the following one, in particular, are heavily dependent on the pioneering work of Giorgi (1975, pp. 74, 87–91) and Colaizzi (1978, pp. 59–61). However, it should also be mentioned that there are some significant differences in terminology and specificity of method which could cause confusion.

Giorgi's first step is to delineate what he calls "natural units" (1975, p. 87) or constitutients (1975, p. 74), that is "...differentiating a part in such a way that it is mindful of the whole...". Such a natural unit seems to usually include a whole series of sentences or statements. Colaizzi on the other hand, refers to "extracting significant statements" (1978, p. 54). This specific approach seems to move much more wuickly beyond the literal meaning given by the participant. The approach utilized in this presentation of method is one which tries at first to stay quite true to the literal statements and meanings given by the participant. Only later does it move in a more thematic direction. For a more general thematic approach cf. Rogers (1961, pp. 128–129).

4. This is especially an attempt to respond to experimentally-oriented researchers who are concerned about the "subjective influence" of the researcher in this type of research. I am under no illusion that this will satisfy these concerns, but it seems to be a movement in the right direction in order to have a fruitful dialogue.
5. For the general procedure of eliciting essences, see Spiegelberg (1976, pp. 658–701).
6. It is possible that with a great deal of training and experience, the researcher might be able to bypass procedures #8 and #9, and proceed directly to the gestalt of the interview segment in order to determine the central themes which communicates the essence of that segment of the interview. This would more closely correspond to the work of Colaizzi (1978), Giorgi (1975), and Stevick (1971). However, for the initiate, it is recommended that all the steps be followed for the sake of vigor.
7. This section has been very heavily influenced by Maslow's work (1968, pp. 74–96), and Giorgi's concept of explicitation (1971, pp. 21–22).
8. Several of these issues have been raised by Polkinghorne (1978).

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