PHENOMENOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT: RE-PRESENTATIONAL DESCRIPTION

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Phenomenologically oriented psychological reports are descriptive rather than primarily quantitative, categorical, or reductive. But descriptive in what sense? Descriptive of what? What modes of presence during an assessment are necessary for descriptive reports? What descriptions appear in a psychological report? These are the questions addressed by the major portion of this paper.

First, however, by way of context, the practices of a phenomenologically oriented assessment approach will be overviewed. Greater detail on theory as well as practice, including sample assessments, may be found in Fischer, 1973, 1976a-c, and 1979. The practices are grounded in recognition of situation intentionality, structure, dialectics, co-constitution, hermeneutics. These catchwords of phenomenology are not elaborated here, but their implications become apparent in the overview of practices below and in the explorations of assessment description.

OVERVIEW OF ASSESSMENT APPROACH AND PRACTICES

How might psychological assessment go beyond diagnostic categories, normative designation, psychodynamics, and external variables to become directly relevant to the particular client’s life? A basic step is to recognize the above assessment conceptions as such, as tools developed by people to aid in thinking about and understanding other people. They

1The major part of this paper is an adaptation of a chapter ("Description as Representation: A Hermeneutic Reading of Andrew Wyeth’s Art") to be published in the author's Individualized Assessment: An Introduction. That material is previewed here with the permission of Brooks-Cole Publishers.
are abstractions from comportment, which also can be addressed directly, with the assessor mindful that his or her impressions of the client are perspectival—that access to another person is always through particular interests, concerns, backgrounds, anticipations. The assessor tries to identify his or her accesses, both professional and personal, and holds them in abeyance from time to time, sometimes looking via alternative perspectives, and other times addressing the client more or less in terms of that person’s own life. That life, too, is acknowledged to be meaning-giving, as at-once creative/created, shaping/shaped. The assessor therefore addresses the client’s involvements in ‘what happens,’ whether habitual, purposive, or self-deceiving. Biological/biographical/environmental/etc. aspects of life are examined in terms of their participation in the person’s lived situation.

How might actual assessment practices proceed from this perspective? The following attitudes and practices are one way of individualizing psychological assessment.

1. The assessor’s first task is to contextualize the referral. Most often the referral is posed in abstract, categorical terms, such as “Is this person schizophrenic” (or retarded, emotionally disturbed, brain-damaged, etc.)? The assessor asks the referring person what decisions he or she is trying to make in regard to the client, what concrete events led to that dilemma, and what the referral categories mean to the colleague. They discuss the contexts in which the troublesome behaviors have and have not occurred. In that process they try to apprehend events as experienced by the client, the immediately involved others, and any human services professionals. In short, the assessor takes into account that diagnostic categories are organizing devices rather than underlying realities, and that the referral has been co-constituted by professionals and the client, inevitably in a context of personal, cultural and scientific values.

2. The client is an informed participant throughout the assessment. The client is told right away whatever has already been clarified about the referral as well as possible ramifications of the upcoming assessment activities. Later, the client reviews and commentaries the written report. In between, throughout the assessment he or she has assisted the assessor in finding other instances of the events they observe together in the session. The client similarly reflects on situations in which the events at issue have not occurred. This collaborative effort acknowledges and makes use both of intentionality—a person’s already meaningful relation to what is perceived, and of intentionality’s situatedness—its occurrence always in a concrete situation. How the person lives a situation amplifies its restraints and options.

3. Life events are the primary data of assessment. Test scores and