The distinction between the "Context of Justification" (or Verification; Confirmation) and the "Context of Discovery," first introduced by the philosopher Reichenbach (1952/1938) in 1938 has become an accepted truism in psychological science (Meehl, 1954; Rychlak, 1968; Marx, 1976; Smith, 1985). Basically, the distinction is used in order to clarify the difference between the reasons that a scientist holds a certain view, which may be multiple and obscure, and the viewpoint's truth value. The former belongs to the context of discovery and the latter to the context of justification, and the received wisdom is that the two should not be confused.

I shall use Melvin Marx (1976), the contemporary systematizer of psychological theorizing as an example of how this distinction is used in psychology. He accepts the received view and says that the context of discovery and the context of justification are two different types of scientific activity. While he allows that science needs both, he does not try to establish an intrinsic relationship between them. The context of discovery is for the discovery of relevant variables and potential solutions to problems, it is where creativity and innovations are allowed to emerge. The context of justification is for the testing of validity of such solutions and one does different things there. As it now stands, there is no relationship between these two contexts. A brilliant solution to a perennial problem is deemed to be as much due to chance as a wrong hypothesis. Moreover, what happens in the context of discovery can never be adequate. Adequacy can only be achieved in the context of justification, which Marx (1976, p. 279) defines as: "Emphases on testing of hypotheses, as by experimentation and statistical analyses."

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All psychologists, such as Marx and those referred to above, who appeal to this distinction seem not to be mindful of the relativity of the distinction in the totality of the scientific enterprise. Not all preparatory scientific work has as its aim the discovery of an hypothesis (e.g., one might try to reformulate a problem more precisely) nor is the empirical testing of the hypothesis the exclusive criterion against which science will rise or fall (e.g., internal harmony of theory could be equally important). However, for most psychologists, nothing seems trustworthy unless it has been put through the grid of the context of justification. Certainly the distinction and the related activities belong to science as possible desiderata, but it would be premature to assign the distinction the prevasive and dominating role it has assumed. Or at least one should relativize the distinction and place it within its proper context, which is explanatory science. But then one should not assume that explanatory science is the only type of science that is extant or fruitful. Even though the theory of descriptive science is not as advanced as that of explanatory science, it is a legitimate enterprise in its own right, and one whose possibility has clearly been seen by philosophers of science.

In any event, the purpose of this paper is to indicate some of the assumptions and interpretations that go with the “context of discovery/context of justification” distinction that make it less than universal and not particularly well suited for certain types of psychological research, namely, those that call for descriptive endeavors and analyses of psychological meaning. I will first present the original context in which Reichenbach made the distinction, then present a critique of it, and finally speak about the potentialities of a phenomenologically based descriptive science for psychology.

The Presentation of Reichenbach's Distinction Between "Context of Discovery" and "Context of Justification"

When Hans Reichenbach, a philosopher of science of logical-empirical persuasion, published his book Experience and Prediction in 1938, he introduced the distinction between the “context of discovery” and the “context of justification.” He introduced the distinction in the very first section of his book while he was trying to delineate the three major tasks of epistemology, which for him were: a descriptive task, a critical task and an advisory one. The descriptive task consists of giving a description of knowledge as it really is. While this prescription seems easy, Reichenbach cautions that we must distinguish epistemological description from both sociological and psychological description. Epistemological descrip-