Considerations for Teaching a Phenomenological Approach to Psychological Research

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It is the hope of the human sciences to make a lasting contribution both to the development of scientific knowledge and to the understanding of methods that yield scientific knowledge. For this reason, it is of critical importance that we find ways not only, as researchers, of communicating the nature of our work to our colleagues, but, as educators, of training new generations of researchers in descriptive scientific methods. The question is, how can this be accomplished given the proliferation of research interests and methods within the human sciences that can often be confusing to the student? Indeed, the student is likely to be overwhelmed by the rather sophisticated level of articulation of some descriptive methodologies, such as one finds in the phenomenological literature. The challenge, then, is how to introduce the student to human science research.

THEORY VERSUS PRACTICE IN THE PRESENTATION OF METHOD

My goal in teaching psychological research is to present students with ways of seeing that open up the psychological realm for investigation. I have found that such "ways of seeing" cannot be taught directly. I cannot tell you how to look the way I am looking. I might suggest that you "imitate" me—that you attempt to take up my gaze, my way of standing in the world; but that still does not offer any clear guidance. I can at least share with you some of the "background" understanding that informs my perspective. That is, I can present you with the language of concepts that guides my thinking, and hope that you will be able to take up this language in a way that illuminates for you, as it does for me, the psychological dimensions of human experience. Four discernible approaches to the imparting of such a foreknowledge come to mind:

1. One can teach the student to adopt a critical perspective by present-
ing a critique of the foundations of psychology; one might present the alternatives of descriptive versus explanatory science by reading Dilthey, for instance. This, however, only accomplishes a preliminary (and perhaps not at all pedagogically necessary) justification for a descriptive approach; it does not yet attune the student concretely to the differences of scientific languages.

2. Students can read and compare descriptive and explanatory approaches in psychology. Freud’s writings provide an excellent basis for comparison of the two styles (i.e., his case studies in contrast to his metapsychological papers). Jasper’s *General Psychopathology* (1913/1963), with its major sections devoted to comprehensive \( \text{[Verstehende]} \) and explanatory psychologies, is also a good source for comparison. Through an acquaintance with such texts, the student can gain a more concrete sense of the difference between a descriptive language and a language of constructs that seeks to explain psychological phenomena in terms of cause and effect.

3. Apart from these more theoretical approaches, one can attempt to facilitate “discovery” of operational concepts by engaging the student in phenomenological exercises aimed at the genesis of descriptive categories of experience.

4. Finally, one can demonstrate to the student how to let oneself be guided by such descriptive categories (or “thematic horizons” or “existential characteristics”) of experience by taking them as *keys* to psychological phenomena. That is, if a complete suspension of preformed ideas is impossible in the effort to execute a faithful description of a psychological event, then we can try to learn how best to be guided by our foreknowledge of human phenomena. This too involves developing a critical attitude, namely, making sure that the language we use is adequate to the phenomena studied and not merely a self-fulfilling prophecy.\(^2\)

It may be helpful here to make a distinction between method and methodology. “Method” refers to the concrete steps or procedures one appropriates in an investigation. “Methodology” refers to the theoretical understanding and articulation of method. Methodological reflection (as suggested above in the first approach) involves a critical attitude directed toward one’s approach and toward the adequacy of one’s method in carrying out the research program suggested by one’s approach. This critical reflection can, in principle, be carried out either a posteriori (after the enactment of method) or a priori (prior to engaging oneself in a research effort). I have discovered through my own experience and through my observations of others that it is possible (although somewhat dubious) to articulate a methodology without genuinely knowing how to