ON THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL MODE OF RESEARCHING "BEING ANXIOUS"

William F. Fischer

A few years ago, David Dustin wrote a brief text for an introductory course in experimental psychology. He entitled his work, *How psychologists do research: The example of anxiety* (1969). Unfortunately, I came across the book only six months ago, but after I read it, I thought that I would like to offer the following alternative: *How a phenomenological psychologist does research: The example of being anxious*. While an articulation of what such a project might entail is beyond the scope of the present paper, a sketch, as well as a reflection upon some of the results of my efforts at researching the phenomena of being anxious in a systematically phenomenological way seems quite feasible. Thus, the content of this article is motivated by two interrelated goals: an inquiry into the meaning of doing phenomenological research in psychology, especially as this has revealed itself to me in my work with the phenomena of being anxious, and a discussion of the different senses of these phenomena as they have been illuminated thus far.

In adopting a phenomenological mode of doing research, a psychologist seeks to reawaken, to thematize and to eidetically understand the phenomena of everyday life as they are actually lived and experienced. As one of my teachers, Dr. Erwin Straus, often said, the task that confronts a phenomenological psychology is the work of revealing and making explicit the unwritten
constitution of everyday life. Hence, a phenomenological psychologist tries to situate himself vis a vis phenomena so that they can show themselves in their own language, that is, in the very ways in which they typically show themselves. Obviously, this means that the phenomenological psychologist can no longer demand in advance that his final descriptions and understandings conform to some particular theory of reality, nor that they be consistent with the metaphysical presuppositions and/or constructs of other disciplines, e.g., physics or biology, nor that they support some already existing conception of man's alleged place in the universe.

Still, this is not to claim that the psychologist who adopts a phenomenological mode of doing research has no presuppositions about, nor preconceptions of that which he is seeking to understand. Clearly, when anyone of any orientation sets out to systematically interrogate some phenomenon, he is guided in advance by that which he already understands, or thinks that he understands, as pertinent to the phenomenon. For example, there are some psychologists who preconceive being anxious to be a kind of mental or experiential event that is said to have physiological correlates; these people study and try to relate their subjects' reports of feeling states as well as perceptions of situations to assorted quantitative measures of physiological processes. Others presuppose that man is really a physico-chemical reality and therefore, they preconceive being anxious to be a purely physiological phenomenon that somehow happens to have experiential effects. For these scientists, research is primarily devoted to an ever more detailed analysis of the chemistry of bodily functioning. For still others, being anxious is understood as the product of an interaction that is said to occur between originally distinct experiential and physiological processes. Psychologists who utilize this preconception study the ways in which subjects speak of their different states of physiological arousal.

In my more recent work, I have tried to steer a more neutral course with regard to this particular issue. That is to say, I have refused to assume in advance the manner in which being anxious constitutes a psychophysical reality. Instead, I have preferred to encourage my student-subjects to describe in their own language how they experientially and bodily lived situations in which they found themselves being anxious. But this too has