



Interpretive Human Studies, An Introduction to Phenomenological Research*

Reviewed by

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*Edited by V. Darroch and Ronald J. Silvers, University Press of America, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Washington, 1982.

This book addresses a significant and provocative set of fundamental themes in the doing and understanding of phenomenological research. "What this book attempts to do is allow readers to explore what interpretive studies are about by sharing the experience of some people who are themselves in the process of exploration" (p. vii). The editors see "interpretive inquiry" as a "composite of ideas from existentialism, hermeneutics (interpretive thought), and phenomenology. Existentialism is central because the knowledge sought is dependent on the place of the researcher within inquiry and, thus, moves the inquiry towards ontology (the nature of being). Hermeneutics is central, because the inquiry seeks not only to interpret and recover the ground of meaning but to produce further meaning in the very act of doing the research. Phenomenology is central because the practice of the inquiry is grounded in reflective thought" (p. vii).

In Part I, "Introducing the Inquiry," the editors explain why it has become necessary to select and formulate the principles which guide their research and how they arrived at certain research practices "not as a programmatic position but as a reflective conceptualization of an inquiry" (p. 1). This is an important methodological statement. We could not agree more strongly with Silvers as he later explains "to prescriptively offer a set of rules or methods of inquiry would violate the imagination itself in which there is the consistent attempt to recover one's own theoretical grounds."

In the following chapter, "Biography and discourse," Darroch and Silvers state that their mode of inquiry is a form "in which the researcher's biography is recognized as a vital part of what is studied" and "that in the communicating of these understandings the researcher's biography must be available to others in a visible commitment to discourse" (p. 3): a clear existential position. They correctly point out the difference between their approach and other qualitative methods like ethnomethodology. But as the editors proceed to explain what the consequences of this existential autobiographical commitment are—the "interpretive presence of ourselves as researchers within our studies," they sometimes seem to forget their work is "an introduction."

An introduction should be written in a language that respects the non-initiated. In the pages that follow we find a lot of convoluted language. Strange deformed neologisms such as "interpretive locability," "the meta-of meta language," "inter-interpretations," "heurism," "consensuality," "consensibility," "preteritive exhibition," etc. There are sentences that are very unclear even after reading them three times:

Our commitment to proximate knowledge in the realization of its departure from dualistic thought is a commitment to the source of our knowledge in experience; only in looking to that source can we rigorously examine the understandings that we of necessity bring from within our biographies to any meaning of social life. (p. 16)

Or an even more obtuse example:

For in naming our research interpretive inquiry we pursue the understanding of what is personal and what is social by an uncovering and recovering of the other's understanding of experience. But interpretive inquiry which is existential also begins with the premise that we cannot share the same experience. We cannot enter the subjectivity of others, nor can they know our consciousness in its interiority. Thus the mental construction of an experiment in imagination is ruled out. What can be shared are the *moments* of experiencing. But the sharing of these moments is *not in the experience but in our existence*. (p. 16)

Hard to read, harder to understand. If I play with little children in a circle-dance, singing a folk-song, we might really enjoy ourselves together. Do we then share only moments of experience, not in the experience, but in our existence? I really don't know what that means. Readers who need an introduction to phenomenological research might have stopped reading earlier and, if they are tenacious, might now be bewildered. Will they become wiser if they go on?

Though the temporal and essential source for understanding another's experience (that is, our ontological domain of existence) must be within our own biography, we must clarify that the reference to the "biography" of the researcher is not to the researcher's "autobiography." That is, it is not in the ordinary and unordinary personal and professional life of the researcher that the experience of the other is understood. Rather it is the researcher's biography as a cultural memory (cultural memory as the selection and signification of the structures of experience) that understanding as the meaning of another's experience (even where the other is the researcher herself or himself as a part "other") is made possible. (pp. 16-17)

Such passages leave us with a lot of questions. If the researcher himself can become the other, does he no longer have access into his past interiority? And does part of the researcher disappear or is he separated in two if he understands the meaning of other's experience, his own past experience? Is this kind of language not far away from real, ordinary life, from the life-world?

We could produce many more such passages, but Vivian Darroch surpasses all this in "Biographical narrative as the expression of existence":

So these pages are a narration of this vision's movement. The writing of these pages is never direct. Never does it provide an explanation of a life. Never does it show something true about other's lives. But the writing shows how, as I wrote and listened to what I said, a vision from which I began to write became visible to me and then moved through it telling from life as seen to become life as it is. (p. 216)

The reader does not yet know about what vision she speaks. But the text goes on and on and the vision seems to be about a "tea party in the wheat field" although at the same time there never was a wheat field. Need one quote further to illustrate the "introductory" nature of this text or its deeply reified language?

Part II, "Dialogue on the Conduct of Inquiry," is the transcript of a colloquium of colleagues and graduate students in a natural setting to meet the questions and criticisms of fellow researchers. In so far as it deals with practical problems, the text is very useful, discussing issues such as the composition of a doctoral committee, the planning and the impossibility of planning, etc. Again the question of the researcher's place within the

analysis comes up. Darroch stresses that "the communicating of the analysis is not treated as a separate activity from the analysis itself" (p. 29). The researcher's place within the inquiry makes the inquiry a dialogue with subjects, and we thus necessarily depart from "the idea of correspondence between what we describe (come to understand) and the 'objects' within the world we are describing" (p. 45). In the discussion Sullivan mentions that in this kind of context, this subculture, the possibility exists of getting in such sectarian kinds of postures that it becomes invidious intimacy (p. 47). I think that is precisely what has happened! In the pretentious abuse of language and the disclosure of trivial, irrelevant intimacies, such thoughts are taken for profound high experiences. One impatiently asks what is the interest or meaning of this for the reader? The elevation of trivia to "essences" makes of phenomenology a narcissistic science!

This trend assumes the air of the ridiculous in Part III, "Research in Inquiry": Terrence Trussler, in his "Mapping a region of social experience," writes:

I was standing knee-deep in water when the notion arrived. Rob and I were locked together in conversation, having averted the impulse to dive into the lake. The sun was hiding periodically behind cloud masses that moved in the high winds of the upper atmosphere. ~~Although it was late July, the air that day was~~ chilling. We craved the penetration of the sun before the splash. (p. 83)

He never gets really into the lake, but before we reach page 90, he tells us five more times how, as he stays there, "the tension between Rob and I standing in the knee-deep water reached a new peak" (p. 89). He concludes:

I could see the edge of the broken clouds across the sun opening up a clear sky. I began to wade slowly back toward the shore watching the ripple of water form around my ankles; my thoughts ran out to a blank tension. Then I turned on my step and glanced at Rob, feeling a grin on my face, seeing it returned on his. And we started running out across the shallows of the beach, screaming "ya h h h h h h h h h h h h h h." (p. 90)

After these 12 "h's," I myself felt like screaming!

In the last piece of the book, "Behind the Movement of Theorizing," Vivian Darroch grandly states that "her theorizing" is conceived "to be part of her narrative, her biography." As much as I agree, I wonder why she imagines the following disclosure to be deeply meaningful to her readers: "I began writing my notes for this paper in the third week of August at a salt water farm in Maine" (p. 252). That is as irrelevant a disclosure as it is for me to tell my readers that this review was written in the second week (not the third week!) of September close to a sweet-water canal in an old storehouse in Amsterdam. And so? She tells us three times that it is in Maine on a farm! Maybe because she means by "consciousness" something that "departs from our usual understanding of it as a three-dimensional, intentional structure and becomes a moving, 'verb-ing' phenomenon" (p. 253)? Let us stop with this negative critique of the text for in many fundamental issues I agree with the spirit of the book. However, I sincerely hope that our phenomenological tradition gets rid of this kind of pretentiousness and mystification.

Several examples of research-reflections are well done and valuable. Eleoussa Polyzoi's "Approaching a new inquiry" articulates what the comments of the immigrants meant to her. We gain a good insight into her own evolution of understanding from within: How she begins with theories, moves away from them, and generates two "concepts."

Ann Dean, in a "Proposal for an interpretive analysis," gives an admirable description of her way of looking at an autistic child. She demonstrates that it can be equally important to pay attention to "what might be standing in the way of understanding" as to the "possibility of meaning which an event has in its natural setting" (p. 112). Jack Vanden Born's "The proposal as process" shows that a real dialogue is both possible and a condition for understanding. Once again that which elsewhere in the book is stated in deformed language becomes clear in the context of studies about real people, and then it become possible to say clearly, "phenomenology does not eschew presuppositions: it only asks that they be examined" (p. 132). This review is not the place to discuss his analysis of play, but it deserves careful attention. Karen Holtsblatt may not have the wit of Vanden Born, and may even be a little bit dull, but in her "Finding the forms of study" she describes accurately "the process by which she arrives at recognizing what is at the center of her inquiry" of women's friendships. Margret Hovanec's "A transformation of understanding" offers an example of how she has been able to go beyond what is known by herself and beyond what is said to her by the patient. Through her mediation we see a real woman with rheumatoid arthritis and understand her seemingly irrational fear of treatment.

Ronald Silvers closes the sequence of research examples. His "discussion depends upon self-conscious attention to three voices in his discourse; one voice which uncovers a movement of understanding; a second voice which speaks to 'discover' what was said by the first; and a third voice which seeks a dialogical meaning of the text." He is "at once the receiver of a message and an author of the same message in pursuit of a communicative relationship with a text." "The topic," he says, "of my study is the understanding of children's discourse" (p. 173). He uses for that purpose video texts of Piagetian clinical interviews. After laboriously listening to his own "three voices," he comes to the right conclusion. "These [Piagetian] questions do not open up their talk, but either separate the children's talk from the adult's, or separate the children from the organization of meaning, questions becoming discursive problems in themselves" (p. 197). I wondered, reading his essay, why he needed so much time to reach the obvious. Margaret Donaldson, addressing similar problems in Piagetian theory, wrote a remarkably clear book *Children's Minds* (New York: Fontana Books, 1978). She writes that the problem with Piaget's questions is that they center on "a task [which] is abstract in a psychologically very important sense: in the sense that it is abstracted from all basic human purposes and feelings and endeavors. It is totally cold-blooded. In the veins of three-year-olds, the blood still runs warm" (p. 24). Why does it take Donaldson so short a time to reach a conclusion that makes perfect sense, and why does Silvers need three voices and a lot of difficult reflecting? Part of the answer perhaps lies in the quality of the relationship with children. Silvers looked at *tapes* of children *he did not know*; Donaldson had evidently close contact with children, loved them,

and respected them (see p. 126 of her text). And Donaldson had probably never heard about phenomenology!

There is a lesson in all this for phenomenology in social science. Whenever self-consciousness is raised to a high meta-level of almost Bhuddist naval-staring proportions, reflection becomes *not* critical but empty or sectarian. This book does not escape that danger. The colloquium section and the research examples are very useful, but the book as an “introduction to phenomenological research” has sadly taken a human science about people very far indeed from the pulse of the lifeworld.