Is There Metatheoretical Ambiguity in the Practice of Phenomenological Research Methodology in Contemporary Psychology?

John W. Osborne

Professor
Department of Educational Psychology
University of Alberta

After 10 years of teaching secondary school in Australia, Canada, and England, I entered the doctoral program in educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin (Madison) where I was trained primarily as an experimental psychologist. At that point in my life my need for some certitude with which to face existential questions drew me to the apparent ubiquity of behavioral and cognitive psychology. After several years of applying behavioral and other natural science remedies to existential problems I developed a growing awareness of the inadequacy of natural science type psychology in addressing the full spectrum of human concerns. The neglect of the human inner life, because of its inaccessibility to natural science methodology, troubled me. Developmental processes in my personal life led me to a point where I needed a more existentially relevant psychology which could at least recognize the importance of the subjective world of the individual rather than objectifying people in the interest of prevailing methodology. My search for new professional and personal sources of meaning led to humanistic psychology, human science psychology and the method of phenomenology. Over the last 10 years I have brought these orientations to the areas of learning, teaching, aesthetics, and research methodology in terms of research papers and courses that I teach. My present preoccupation is the relation between the practice of phenomenological research and the metatheory that is presented in support of this practice.

I have been doing phenomenological research for a number of years but have unresolved doubts about the relation between phenomenological metatheory, extrapolated from Husserl, and the actual practice of contemporary research. I have heard committee members in numerous thesis orals express dissatisfaction regarding the conclusions drawn from research using very small samples. For some time I have interpreted these concerns simply as manifestations of vestigial natural science conditioning. Most North American academic psychologists have been trained in natural science methodology and tend to approach issues of reliability and validity in terms of sampling procedures and replicability. I usually counter their concerns by invoking the notion, drawn from Husserlian theory, that phenomenological research uncovers essential structures of experience that transcend individuals and contexts. Conse-

quently, a phenomenological researcher need only investigate the phenomenon in question as experienced by a few people or even one person if the structure to be uncovered is truly essential (eidetic). I have also argued that ultimately the validity of the illumination of a phenomenon depends on the extent to which it resonates with the experience of others who have experienced the phenomenon in question. I have added the caveat, true of all methodology, that validity is also a function of interpretation and rhetoric (juridicial validity, Salner, 1986). Nonetheless, my natural science-oriented colleagues are not convinced by my explanations. They sometimes point to statements made by student researchers that seem to imply the kind of generalizability associated with probability theory. Some colleagues ask how the researcher can be sure that these structures are truly eidetic.

As a result of studying Pepper's (1942) theory of root metaphors, especially the root metaphor of formism, my doubts about the relation between research practice and phenomenological metatheory have resurfaced. This paper is an invitation to those who have views on this vital matter to share a dialogue. My major purpose here is to outline what I see as a problem rather than offer answers. The issue is vital because the validity of phenomenological research methodology in the human sciences is at stake. At this time when North American psychology is becoming more receptive to qualitative research methodology, it behooves practitioners of phenomenological methodology to have their metatheoretical house in as much order as possible.

First, I describe some typical applications of phenomenological research in the field of contemporary psychology. Next, I describe Pepper's theory of root metaphors and the way in which the root metaphor of formism appears to relate to contemporary phenomenological research practice in psychology. Finally, I discuss the question of whether contemporary phenomenological research either does or does not exemplify formism.

Contemporary Phenomenological Research in Psychology

Phenomenological philosophy was intended to be a science of consciousness (Husserl, 1913/1931). Phenomenological philosophy "concentrated its investigations on descriptions of those essential structures that are inherent in consciousness" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 42). These universal structures (reminiscent of Kantian categories rather than Platonic forms) pervade human experience. Conscious being is the sum of these structures rather than the structures being the contents of consciousness. These structures function intuitively rather than consciously. Husserlian phenomenology affirms several types of being such as mathematical, logical, animal, evaluational, divine, conscious, and natural (Jennings, 1986). An essence of mathematical being such as triangularity is expressed in conscious experience although it is not perceived through the senses. The apprehension of essences involves a kind of intuition rather than a supersensible faculty (Levinas, 1973).

Polkinghorne (1989) reiterates the same view: "Husserl (1913/1931) held that knowledge of the structures of consciousness was not a matter of induction or generalization from a sample but was the result of a "direct grasp" of "eidetic seeing" (p. 42).

Husserl's eidetic structures are reminiscent of Kant's categories in that they antedate the construction of reality. For example, Levinas (1973) in discussing Husserl's intuition of essences comments that: "It is not dialectical construction which makes a law of essences intelligible; it is from the intelligibility of essential relations that dialectical constructions derive their intelligibility" (p. 111).

Contemporary existential-phenomenological psychology is grounded in existential experience, in the Heideggerian sense, rather than in the tradition of idealist thought from which phenomenological philosophy sprung (Sprigge, 1984). Its emphasis is on descriptions of the meaning of lived experience.

Existential-phenomenological psychology does not claim the universality of eidetic structures described in phenomenological philosophy but focuses on "structures [of meanings] that are typical or general for groups of people" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 43). These structures are contents of consciousness rather than part of consciousness itself. The identification of the essential structures of experience is usually based on the explication of thematic meanings.

I now refer to only some of the several methods of doing phenomenological research that exemplify the problems raised in this paper. Other types of phenomenological research may be free of such difficulties.

The data for phenomenological research are usually spoken or written accounts of human experience. The researcher tries to reach the prereflective level of experience in an attempt to uncover deep structures of meaning. The descriptions are often subjected to a thematic structural analysis (e.g., Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1975; Osborne, 1989). The researcher identifies possible themes in the data of each participant, then sorts them into thematic clusters that are then sorted into higher order clusters. This stage of data analysis constitutes a within-persons analysis. When such an analysis has been conducted for all participants, an across-persons analysis abstracts the shared themes to form a pattern or structure of the phenomenon. Such thematic abstraction is a disjunctive rather than a conjunctive procedure in that every aspect of the common experience may not appear in the protocol of each participant, although it should fit with every participant's experience when the final thematic synthesis is presented to each participant for validation (goodness of fit). The final structure is usually synthesized into a description that captures the essence (meaning) of the phenomenon (Osborne, 1990).

The Formist Root Metaphor and Phenomenological Research

The philosopher Pepper (1942) had a special interest in epistemology. He concluded that knowledge is not secure because it is mediated by human cognition and therefore interpretive. He was interested in identifying the foundational structures that are the roots of human cognition. He called these cognitive structures "world hypotheses." Pepper described six world hypotheses based on respective "root metaphors" (animism, mysticism, formism, mechanism, organicism, and contextualism). World hypotheses are unrestricted to particular subject matter or in the scope of the evidence they encompass. He explains the sources of world hypotheses:

> World hypotheses get started like any man's everyday hypothesis framed to solve some puzzling practical problem. The man looks back over his past experience for some analogous situation which might be applicable to his present problem. Similarly, a philosopher, puzzled about the nature of the universe, looks about for some pregnant experience that appears to be a good sample of the nature of things. This is his root metaphor. He analyzes his sample, selects its structural elements, and generalizes them as guiding concepts for a world hypothesis of unlimited scope. This set of concepts becomes the set of categories of his world hypothesis. (Pepper, 1982, p. 199)

The most appropriate root metaphor for contemporary phenomenological research may be formism. The formistic hypothesis is based on the perception of similarity among things (e.g., an orange and a ball share the character of roundness). This kind of formism is called immanent formism and is common in physical sciences such as botany where plants are classified into taxonomies. Transcendent formism refers more to Platonic idealism where particulars are manifestations of idealized prototypes or norms. Most applications of formism are based on inductively arrived at physical similarities among things. The focus is on uniformities and patterns. Within the field of psychology formism has been applied to the observation of physical uniformities or structures in the human lifespan (e.g., Wohlwill, 1973).

Contemporary existential-phenomenological psychology looks for patterns and structures in meanings abstracted from representations of human experience. These data are physical in the sense that they are overt verbalizations or records of human experience. However, phenomenological analysis focuses on latent rather than manifest meaning and in this sense looks at the deep (transcontextual) rather than surface structure of meaning. Nonetheless, the researcher is still left to ponder whether inductively produced meaning is an example of immanent or transcendent formism or both.

Husserlian theory insists that eidetic structures are intuited or directly apprehended rather than produced inductively. But it appears that much contemporary existential-phenomenological research is based on inductive thematic analyses whose generalizability may be domain-specific

rather than universal. Such thematic analyses are contextualized by the persons and situations from which the data were collected. The validity of such meaning structures depends on their internal coherence and on the extent to which they are emphatically generalizable. Whether their validity is universal or domain-specific remains an empirical question.

Pepper's (1942) distinction between data and danda suggests a parallel to the process of hermeneutic validation. He sees knowledge as being corroborated in two ways: Multiple corroboration is somewhat similar to the practice of replication and involves the use of data. Structural corroboration is a broader process that is somewhat similar to the kind of nomological approach to validation—danda are the evidence that corroborates an integrative framework or theory. Pepper's notion of danda is compatible with the hermeneutic practice of arguing for an interpretation of the data on the basis of multiple convergent perspectives.

Metatheoretical Ambiguity

Polkinghorne (1989) notes that "the translation of the philosophical methods developed by phenomenology into functioning research practices for psychology is unfinished" (p. 43). Sometimes, in spite of the disclaimer regarding the more domain-specific nature of the populations investigated by phenomenological research (e.g., Polkinghorne, 1989), the distinction between universal and common structures of experience is ambiguous. Sometimes it is unclear whether the thematic analyses of the meanings of experience are offered as examples of immanent or transcendent formism (Kendler, 1986). Unless this ambiguity is clarified phenomenological research can be accused of claiming Husserlian universality for structures derived from phenomena, manifested by individuals, which may not be universal. There may be two sources of confusion operating: First, Husserlian eidetic structures are not beyond consciousness, like Platonic forms, but are immanent in consciousness. Second, the apparently inducted meaning structures of contemporary existential-phenomenological research seem to be examples of immanent formism. The invoking of Husserlian theory as a justification for the universality of such meaning structures overlooks the distinction between Husserl's eidetic structures and Platonic formism.

Polkinghorne (1989) explicitly recognizes that the generalizability of contemporary psychological research may be restricted to groups and subpopulations. However, narrowing the population does not avoid the metatheoretical ambiguity that results from the use of purposive sampling and the either explicit or implicit claim for transcendent experiential structures arrived at through inductive thematic analysis. If the phenomenological methodology employed by psychological researchers is basically the same as the type of inductive taxonomic formism used in the physical sciences, is there a legitimate basis for invoking Husserlian metatheory in order to claim a universality that transcends inductively based research methods? Does the use of inductively produced structures

of meaning preclude the possible presence of eidetic structures that Husserlians claim are apprehended noninductively? In other words, what is the relation between a priori eidetic structures and inductively produced structures of the meaning of human experience? These matters need clarification if phenomenological researchers are to continue to defensibly eschew probabilistic sampling procedures.

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