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The Self and Learning: Toward a Phenomenological Method

Embarking on a research project in the social sciences invites considerable soul-searching from the investigators, especially if they consider themselves to be humanistically oriented. It becomes necessary to question one's own motives. Why are we conducting this research? Can this research be of any value, however minimal, to the persons who might become acquainted with it? Can we be certain that the findings of the research cannot be used by dominant groups in our society to manipulate the dominated? Perhaps the questions which raise the most gloom are: How relevant is the research to the real needs of members of our society? Will the persons who might profit most from the research actually ever read it?

Humanists have become attuned to asking these kinds of questions. The philosophy of science has been alive with debate for at least the last ten years over a variety of issues which these questions raise.

Increasingly we are being made familiar with critiques of science and the scientific study of phenomena. Criticisms fall into several categories and perhaps the most frequent, or at least those criticisms which have received the widest publicity are those which

(1) Demonstrate that it is virtually impossible to control human factors in the laboratory experiment, or to make accurate inferences from data drawn from human subjects.1* These critics tend to pose one of two solutions to the problem;

(a) Engineering more sophisticated methods for controlling the subject, particularly through the use of unobtrusive research techniques, that is, doing something to the subject of which he is not aware.2*

(b) Abandoning conventional methodology for one which is more suitable to the dynamic quality of persons.3*

(2) Another source of criticism has come predominantly from sociologists who have pointed out the close relationship existing between research findings, research support and the interests of dominant groups in society, especially those interests which demand control over the masses.4* Quite radical sociologists, have, however, refuted this criticism, emphasing that the social sciences have failed to collect data which might help rulers rule.5* It is argued that conventional methods of the social sciences are so insensitive to investigating the actions and motives of the 'ordinary' person, that any data thus gleaned will reflect this insensitivity.

(3) A third source of criticism, closely linked with the second (above), has come from sociologists of knowledge who have argued that what a society considers to be legitimate knowledge, reflects dominant class interests. Thus schools will consider the study of physics to be a more legitimate pursuit than the study and practice of metalwork. Similarly while it is considered appropriate to teach vocational skills, schools do not teach union politics.

Sociologists of knowledge have also exposed both the arbitrary and cultural basis of research methodology and the knowledge it creates. Thus among many it is taken as fact that IQ is culturally based and hence biased against members of different cultures other than the one upon which it is based.6*

How one reacts to the fruits of all these debates seems to depend very much upon the researchers' own value-orientations. Research is quite clearly not value free, and the vast array of psychological and sociological 'facts', are facts only in relation to the assumptions upon which they are based and created. Kuhn demonstrates that research is paradigm-dependent,7* and the consequences of the several paradigms in a social science is clearly stated by Bernstein when he informs us that the 'research of one will not be acceptable to the other, because of disputes over the methods of enquiry and/or our disparate ideological assumptions.'8*

The humanistic paradigm in the social sciences cannot use the research methods of the behaviouristic paradigm, because the assumptions underpinning behaviourism negate the kinds of assumptions underpinning the humanistic orientation. The search for a method of research compatible with the assumptions of a humanistic social science is not new; it has received considerable attention from phenomelogists and existentialists. However, while phenomenologists and existentialists have indicated a need to develop a social science which describes and explains how persons can liberate themselves or make themselves prisoners of their own freedom, or how persons can transform a dehumanised society into a humanistic society, it appears that little has been offered in the way of guidance to the would be researcher. Thus O'Neil writes that 'phenomenological social science has been running around the house of knowledge long enough now that its legitimacy is a far less urgent question than how it is we shall foster its growth.'9*

Ellenberger states that 'whatever the method used for a phenomenological analysis, the aim of the investigation is the reconstruction of the inner world of experience of the subject. Each individual has his own way of experiencing temporarily, spatiality, causality, materiality, but each of these co-ordinates must be understood in relation to others and to the total inner 'world'.'10*

If we take Ellenberger's position, it is evident that phenomenological studies abound, but we don't typically recognise these studies as investigations in the conventional sense. Almost every work published by an existential philosopher, and by persons with an existential orientation in the social sciences, relies heavily upon the author's own inquiry into his inner world. This is equally true of the Freud-Jung letters, of analytic rather than descriptive autobiographies, of analytic diaries, and of those plays, novels, poems and short stories in which the inner world, the world of experience is exposed.

Hints for conducting phenomenological research cannot be given in the same way that it is possible to devise handbooks for conventional methodology. The phenomenologist can discuss the value of introspection, of retrospection, of intentionality, of extrapolating theories from subjective meaning, but he cannot prescribe a set of rules for investigating the experience of others, because it is necessary to have access to the experience of others, and this usually occurs through 'invitation'. That is, the other, unless we drug him or torture him in some way, controls those aspects of his experience, and how much of his experience he will reveal to us. The phenomenologist can describe and explain his experience of himself in relation to his world, and he can report on interexperience and the experience of others only when he has access to others, and this will invariably involve *being in relationship* with these others. The term 'participant observation' is often used to describe the role of the phenomenological researcher. It might be more appropriate to use 'co-experiencer and co-analyst,' to emphasise the primacy of the relationship based on equality and perhaps arising out of common need, common interests or even reciprocal interests in each other, rather than pretending to be interested in the concerns of others, not out of an authentic concern for these others, but primarily to 'observe' these others.

The more intimate relationships in which we find ourselves are in a sense a laboratory for phenomenological research. Some of us are fortunate enough to always be in such a laboratory, and from time to time we may find ourselves in more than one laboratory, as when we develop a new friendship or when a bullshit session evolves into serious interpersonal encounters.

A few years back two of us found ourselves in a laboratory with eight other persons. The laboratory was a Rogerian type of encounter group (Self-Exploration Group). We were not aware that we were in a laboratory until we began to realise experientially that the participants in the group were increasingly verifying the theories expounded by Rogers, Maslow, May and others. As the group progressed, the self-disclosures of the participants sounded more and more like a scenario written by an eminent humanistic psychologist, and as far as we knew, the group members had not read a humanistic psychologist. In a later group we noticed the same phenomenon; initially group members described themselves in more or less mechanistic terms, and as the group progressed they described themselves more or less in humanistic terms. Obviously the language of the designated leader was in the main responsible, we thought. The influence of language on structuring thoughts is well known. Yet we observed the same phenomenon in leaderless groups, and while we could not be certain that this was due to the influence of the emergent leaders in the groups, we 'knew' that the language of the humanistic psychologist was more appropriate for describing persons who were experiencing themselves in the process of change, than the language of the behaviourist. We were also gaining more confidence in our long held belief, that all persons are capable of being social scientists. Participants in Self-Exploration Groups (SEG) were continuously engaged in a process of defining and redefining themselves and their construction of reality.

In addition, we noted that for some persons, the SEG was coincidental with a period in which they were experiencing 'conversion', in a manner described by Charles

Reich.11* The conversion phenomenon refers to a radical transformation of consciousness which involves a liberation of self and a consequent re-ordering of values which is expressed in a 'new' life-style.

Those who disclosed that they were changing radically were, we realised, revealing an 'inside story' of the process of self-liberation. They also tended to describe their experience of others, and of the group in ways different from those who were not experiencing the conversion.

We were already beginning to bypass a direct confrontation with what appeared to us to be perhaps the fundamental question: Why do some perceive a need to liberate themselves, and others do not? Perhaps we might get closer to answering this question after we had attempted to describe and explain the process of self-liberation, as revealed by those in the SEGs who were experiencing this process, and by doing some soul searching ourselves.

Thus we were engaged in an investigation of the kind we had always been engaged in, that is, one in which we try to make sense out of what we experience.

During this period we were acutely aware that we were experiencing together with others a transformation of consciousness in which we increasingly felt 'more powerful,' 'more responsible for ourselves', 'more honest', 'more in control of our destinies.'

The remarks of Foulkes and Anthony concerning the research potential of a therapy group are equally applicable to the SEG.

In the therapeutic group the uncovering process is not only permissible but pertinent and expected . . .

It should be emphasized that the spontaneous dynamisms observed in the treatment situation exist in *all* other life groups. Group-analysis does not create them, but it renders them manifest and susceptible to closer investigation . . . It is the group analyst's conviction that he can procure *field* data not otherwise available to the social scientist.12*

Eventually we were to draw upon hours of self-disclosures from several SEGs. We were engulfed with so much 'rich' data that we began to get really excited about the possibilities of finding 'threads', 'patterns' and 'generalizations' which might begin to shed light on the 'landmarks' in the process of self-liberation. Not only did we have data pertaining to self-liberation, but we also had data on the kinds of conditions which participants felt facilitated self-disclosure, thereby contributing to the phenomelogical method itself.

What we have been referring to as self-liberation, was viewed, by most who revealed 'going through radical changes,' as a process of learning about oneself and attempting to put this learning into action. It would be more accurate to refer to the early stages of self-liberation, as experienced by SEG participants, as a process of 'unlearning'.

Hence we have chosen to report on the relationship of the self to learning. Humanistic psychologists are very much aware that the self influences what is learned from experience, and that what one learns from experience can influence the development of the self and consequently future learning.

Self-disclosures are viewed, here, as the basic raw data of a theory of self and learning. This data has been 'treated' by categorizing it into some generalizations, and as far as possible, these generalizations will be presented using concepts already in use and well known, at least to the humanistic psychologist. In addition, these same concepts or constructs, have been verified by SEG participants as representing the 'generalized' meaning of how they have come to view the relationship of the self to learning.

The test of truth in phenomenology is to be found in experience. That is, the person tests the phenomenological analysis against his own experience. The reader will be able to judge for himself or herself the extent to which our phenomenological analysis is valid in terms of his or her own experience. (In subsequent issues of *Self and Society,* we will present reports on some aspects of the experience of a changing self).

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