

EXPERIENTIAL METHOD: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN THE HUMANITIES

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INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research in the humanities is guided by these questions:

- 1) How can one approach and investigate a specific phenomenon in a way which preserves the vital qualities with which it comes into expression?
- 2) How can one open up findings in ways which allow a natural flow of understanding to emerge from the work?

Research grounded in phenomenology opens up qualitative dimensions of human experience. Since written or verbal descriptions automatically situate the phenomenon of interest, the structures and meaning of experience emerge, often times in story form. The phenomenon is contextualized. This means that as it is described it is related to projects, self-understanding and demonstrates an identifiable style of self-world relation. Bringing these meanings, which are often implicit, to the forefront is central to experiential research. Spontaneously described experience carries into expression tonal qualities of experience, mooded feelings not always apparent. These qualities of experience are the first lost to existing methods for qualitative research, including the current phenomenological methods in psychology. Often we find that meaning appears in literary form as a theme which permeates the description but cannot be identified in a particular sentence. These are meanings which are interwoven into the ongoing meaning and unfolding of personal life. The indescribable structures and meaning reflect the richness of experience in dynamic terms. This Experiential Method here proposed is designed to look at acts of meaning constitution. It is designed to discover the dynamic qualities of self-consciousness in action.

A THEMATIC APPROACH

The first movement in using this Experiential Method is identifying Experiential Expressions. These expressions are found in each description of an experience. Experiential Expressions stand out in qualitative ways which, when put together, represent the person who provided them along with a sense of the phenomenal meaning of the experience. Experiential Expressions provide a contextual matrix within which to see concretely a person's own meaning in the described situation. This method reveals

specific meaning while allowing for clarity and depth in relation to one another. The advantage of this Experiential Method is that it provides access to the dynamics of meaning constitution as well as one's grasp of consciousness of self in expression. It shows how things work. In this method the immediate experience is displayed in personal expression and shines through in the findings. Experiential Expressions provide the first overall glimpse of meaning. Each is a nexus of meaning which opens to thematic amplification.

Experiential Expressions provide the most accessible route to understanding nebulous qualities of experience which are quite important to its meaning but which are often unavailable for investigation due to limits in the method. Experiential research requires a method which preserves the vitality of experience as it happens as well as provide the insights and meaning which are included. One and at the same time this Experiential Method expands our horizons of understanding about the meaning of a given phenomenon and what it means in our experience. What is learned must teach us something about the phenomenon which has been yet unknown, to correct or verify what is already known or to provide orientation for deeper research. We see this Experiential Method as a way to simultaneously expand our potential to learn the height/depth dimension and to expand our forward/backward comprehension (past/future).

We learn more deeply and at the same time our collected knowledge about human nature grows and expands. This appears also to be a balance achieved through opposition. Doing research such as this looks at both personal and structural aspects of experience. This requires the use of intensified attention by the researcher. This is a relatively new method for doing qualitative research. It has only up to now been proposed as a philosophical suggestion offered by Pierre Thévenaz.¹

Simultaneous expansion of height/depth dimensions of experience and a balance of opposites means that horizons of consciousness are stretched and expanded. New understanding is achieved. This happens not through a reduction of experience but through intensification of consciousness, through intensification of attention. Thévenaz suggests rather than one coming to know oneself only through one's relation to others and objects (intentionality), one is also able to be self-aware of oneself directly. It is the reflexive consciousness which Thévenaz argues is the ground for intentionality. This philosophical shift used as a research principle brings with it an impact upon research results. Rather than finding the bones, the structures alone, we are now able to see the dynamics, the act of meaning constitution, self-consciousness in expression.

Often while using existing phenomenological research methods one finds that further elaboration as suggested disturbs and misconstrues the

original sense of the experience. The method is not so constructed as to allow the dynamic qualities of meaning constitution to emerge as an aspect of the findings. The meaning of the experience as it was originally experienced by the self in action and how it moves through the reflective consciousness cannot be reached. Phenomenological methods thus far rely exclusively upon reflection alone to describe the structure. This Experiential Method begins with the dynamics.

Descriptions of spontaneously re-lived understanding contains guiding, supportive leitmotifs of meaning in Experiential Expressions. These motifs of meaning may not be explicitly stated but become visible through repetition in thematic aspects of a guiding meaning throughout the description. They may be the ongoing story of an experience as it unfolds in expression. Motifs are emerging themes of meaning found in spontaneous forms of expression. They may appear, disappear and reappear, strengthening particular facets of meaning. They are revealed in a spontaneous expression of the self as personally grasped. We find that people describe experience from which they have undergone it and describe it in terms of its impact and effects.² First identifying Experiential Expressions offers an opening onto primordial, personal meaning referents. Here the researcher gets a glimpse of the person's ongoing experience of self and awareness of self in action. Acts of meaning constitution are in human experience. Acts which constitute particular meanings are creative acts. Each act establishes the person in a style of becoming which is recognizable and identifiable yet shares common characteristics with other people who undergo similar experience.

These thoughts and insights relate to the development of this Experiential Method. Use of Experiential Expressions provides a ground for further expansion and reveals points of entry, where to begin a deeper exploration. What is proposed by this Experiential Method is a way to stay close to the meaning of the experience as it is given but at the same time to intensify, dilate and expand that which is expressed through a focused use of attention by the researcher. Expansion of the experienced meaning allows the researcher the freedom to open up freely to possible meanings, to not guide or direct the findings and to not reduce meaning in any way.

Thematic Amplification, the second movement, is an expansion of the nexus of meaning found in each Experiential Expression. Amplifying themes means that in this movement the researcher brings to awareness details in expression which contribute to the essential features of the experience. Amplifying is a way of uncovering that which rests underneath, meanings which are the referents to experience as the ground for its possibility. It works somewhat like time-lapsed photography where slowing down time reveals processes which we cannot see in a single grasp by the human eye. In microphotography a whole new world is found to exist inside

another. These methods are like the increased intensity of attention assumed by the researcher who sees not only what an experience is but also sees it in relation to the self in action, in terms of projects, in terms of tonal qualities expressed and in terms of insightful moments. These are all included in the experience. Doing this attention expansion calls for an effort on the part of the researcher to focus attention upon what is the immediate given in the description and to place this in an ever-widening horizon of meaning and possibilities. This shift in research attention provides depth and clarity to understanding as one begins to see the workings, the dynamics, in personal action. In the movement of Thematic Amplification one finds a natural gathering in relational possibilities of meaning. It is the exploration and inclusion of as many aspects of meaning in a phenomenon as it has been experienced. Expansion of meaning also has the advantage of ensuring a smooth movement from what is explicitly given to what is implicitly expressed, an old problem in phenomenological research. To see meaning in its constitution through personal expression is available with use of this Experiential Method as we can see how meaning unfolds one from the other. Spontaneously expressed descriptions of an experience preserve the context within which to see the immediate grasp of self-consciousness as the foundation for emergence of this meaning.

THREE MOVEMENTS IN THIS EXPERIENTIAL METHOD

Experiential Expressions (centripetal)

Thematic Amplification (centripetal)

Reflective Synthesis (centrifugal)

1) Experiential Expressions

Experiential Expressions are phrases which illustrate how someone experiences and what that experience means in personal terms. They are short expressions or single sentences which convey qualitative dimensions of how one experiences a given situation. They may include attitudinal statements, statements about beliefs, value preferences and orientations or other personal impressions of self and others as they stand related from one's own perspective. This means that Experiential Expressions may also reveal patterns of meaning which emerge throughout the description as ongoing thematic aspects. They can be identified by the researcher by the way they display a personal style of experience. Experiential Expressions speak of the way a person has taken up a particular meaning.

By beginning research with Experiential Expressions we begin with what is given and how it is given. Expression of a person contains within it a fundamental meaning matrix which is specific to that person. It also

contains generalized, social, cultural characteristics. Meaning is embedded in this meaning matrix. By staying with the expression as it is given, it is possible to stay close to the meaning of the experience as it comes into expression through personal action, speech or written expression. Experiential Expressions are personalized statements. They put into personal words experiential patterns and boundaries of meaning taken for granted in action. At the same time they point to the contours outlining the wider social context as a specific situation is delimited, concretizing the phenomenon of interest. These expressions also have the benefit of illustrating emphases in experience though moodedness and tonal qualities involved in inflection, in writing styles and in other forms of expression. Because experience always occurs in a situation, in a history, there are assumptions involved which have or have not been examined by the person providing the description. Cultural characteristics involved in interpretation of one's own situation always involves assumptions which have been learned and taken up automatically throughout life. Experiential Expressions are one way of uncovering these foundations as they express an internal dialectic between the personal and the self-other world of experience. Prior knowledge and experience become the experiential referents to current experience and its meaning. Experiential Expressions reveal thematic groups and patterns of meaning to stand in relation to one another. These expressions, when grouped together in natural meaning constellations give rise to further amplification.

Emergent Experiential Themes

Themes for amplification develop and gain distinction from arrangement of Experiential Expressions into a natural kind of grouping or cluster of meaning. These clusters express prominent aspects of the experience under investigation. They are naturally emerging meaning constellations consistent with overall meaning in the expression. Several expressions may fit under more than one theme but are placed where they relate most naturally according to tone, mood, thematic content and gestural meaning.

2) Thematic Amplification

The second movement is amplification of themes which have emerged from grouping Experiential Expressions. We see this movement as an intensification of what is available in expression. This movement stays close to rather than moving away from the originality of the description. As earlier mentioned, the tonal qualities, the moodedness of the person as one expresses oneself is often experienced ambiguously. In strictly structural phenomenological method these qualities are not available for inclusion in the meaning of findings. By reducing and taking initial impressions of experience apart, by disturbing the image one senses regarding its meaning,

the intuitive leanings upon first contact with the experience loses its gestalt. Amplification of these atmospheric qualities resound that original sense of presence to the expressed meaning. Obscure qualities rush into the researcher's vision and can be retained by using this Experiential Method.

Movement in amplification is a becoming, an inclusive awareness which intensifies spontaneous dimensions in the expressive flow of the description. This flow of expression as it has been amplified becomes very salient to final interpretation and discussion of findings. This is in contrast to reduction of experience where what is found through specification. The possible situational, contextual influences, the presence of others drops out of existing phenomenological methods. Qualitative emphasis remains focal as does the search for structural aspects of experience. This is used by the researcher as well as one described in experience for the subject. Thévenaz describes this effort of concentrated attention as an act of will.³ Becoming aware, becoming conscious of what is present is an action which requires concentrated effort. As a research approach, amplification of themes conserves and expands subtle nuances and intuitive vibrations which often develop into that which stands out in a particular person's expression. Experiential Expressions are retained through the movement of Thematic Amplification as a way of staying in close touch with and making clear the experiential referents to specific action. Each Experiential Expression will be found in the work under each of the themes into which they have been grouped. These expressions are put into dialogue with the particular event which concretizes its meaning and related to it in its expansion. This Experiential Method lets the researcher be present to creative, constitutive moments in experience which reveal actions of self in process. This comes forward in reflection.

3) Reflective Synthesis

In the third movement Reflective Synthesis, the researcher goes over the two previous movements very closely and moves toward what the experience is, how it is lived and the dynamics involved. This is achieved by returning to the overall projects, goals and objectives in the situated context, using Experiential Expressions and by presenting in more abstract terms what was discovered through amplification of themes. This is not a move toward definition of a phenomenon but is an attempt to balance the polarities of structural and personalized meaning. In this way we can talk about what is going on and about what is given in the expression. Through use of Experiential Expressions and Thematic Amplification this can become a mutually enriching dialogue in Reflective Synthesis. This is a synthetic understanding. In the move to Reflective Synthesis the researcher arrives at a perspective which allows smooth movement from implicit to explicit and from explicit to implicit meaning. The shading of meaning, the obscure feeling qualities in dialogue combined with supportive patterns of

psychological structure provide wholeness and form to possible related perspectives in presentation of findings. This move allows comprehensive understanding and points to theoretical implications, areas which may help clarify the stance offered by the Reflective Synthesis. Dialectical movement between insight and experienced meaning brings being into concrete existence.⁴

Notes

- 1) Pierre Thévenaz, *What is Phenomenology?: and other Essays*, trans. James M. Edie, Charles Courtney and Paul Brockelman, ed., intro. James M. Edie, preface John Wild (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1962), pp. 113-132. Cf. Sunnie D. Kidd and James W. Kidd, *Experiential Method: Qualitative Research in the Humanities using Metaphysics and Phenomenology* (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1990).
- 2) People seem to describe experience in terms of a shift, they tend to notice when things change.
- 3) For Thévenaz our access for reflection is multiple: 1) A recuperating reflection which explicates recovery of the implicit; 2) An amplification of consciousness which is a dilating reflexion. This means that there is no loss of continuity in the movement from explicit to implicit meanings experience. One is aware of oneself as that being which experiences its own existence and comes to know itself in relation to others, objects and events. Amplification allows us methodological access to values which guide that action. This is both a centrifugal (projective) and centripetal (amplifying) dynamism. As Thévenaz says, "In amplifying reflexion, attention renders an adequation of consciousness with itself immediately possible. By being intensified without loss of continuity, it little by little enters into possession of its own powers. This centripetal dynamism concentrates consciousness in itself without it being necessary to empty it of being and of its own being in order to put it in the presence and possession of itself." (*Ibid.*, p. 128.) From this view one first establishes the immediate and explicit relationship to self and secondly, one's relationship to objects. This means that one now interprets intentionality on the basis of reflexion. Thévenaz says it this way, "Far from interpreting reflexion by means of intentionality as Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty do, we must do the opposite: interpret intentionality on the basis of reflexion. Intentionality can very well be revelatory and constitutive of the objective world; it none the less remains that the immediately reflexive consciousness of self is a *constitutive power* more original, a fact more primitive, than intentionality." (*Ibid.*, p. 131.)

- 4) Keeping with proposed methodological tools, we have chosen to speak of the findings in holistic terms by using a narrative style. We feel that the use of narration is called for by the demand for preservation of the resonant tone and mood of description. It allows an attunement of the subtleties and nuances in the original expression. The literary style has the advantage of emphasis, placing theme within theme as it emerges from the findings without disturbing the fluidity of expression by the person. This Experiential Method has the advantage of providing access to the subjective experience. This is not to be equated with subjectivism which is an attitude. If it were so it would not make a difference if one were to study 15 subjects rather than one if it is all simply subjectivism. When the researcher wants to investigate more than one subject, the researcher gathers Experiential Expressions from the written or verbal descriptions of the subjects then does a Thematic Amplification on all of them together. A Reflective Synthesis is then accomplished and put into dialogue with existing research. A literary approach using the narrative in terms of research possibilities offered by amplification and dilation of meaning through intensified effort of the attention can follow variations in experience. In this way the approach remains grounded in the qualitative dimensions of experience and provides openings through which to discover embodied values.