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Series Foreword

Qualitative approaches have become accepted and indeed embraced as empirical methods within the social sciences, as scholars have realized that many of the phenomena in which we are interested are complex and require deep inner reflection and equally penetrating examination. Quantitative approaches often cannot capture such phenomena well through their standard methods (e.g., self-report measures), so qualitative designs using interviews and other in-depth data-gathering procedures offer exciting, nimble, and useful research approaches.

Indeed, the number and variety of qualitative approaches that have been developed is remarkable. We remember Bill Stiles saying (quoting Chairman Mao) at one meeting about methods, "Let a hundred flowers bloom," indicating that there are many appropriate methods for addressing research questions. In this series, we celebrate this diversity (hence, the cover design of flowers).

The question for many of us, though, has been how to decide among approaches and how to learn the different methods. Many prior descriptions of the various qualitative methods have not provided clear enough descriptions of the methods, making it difficult for novice researchers to learn how to use them. Thus, those interested in learning about and pursuing qualitative research need crisp and thorough descriptions of these approaches, with lots of examples to illustrate the method so that readers can grasp how to use the methods.

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The purpose of this series of books, then, is to present a range of qualitative approaches that seemed most exciting and illustrative of the range of methods appropriate for social science research. We asked leading experts in qualitative methods to contribute to the series, and we were delighted that they accepted our invitation. Through this series, readers have the opportunity to learn qualitative research methods from those who developed the methods and/or who have been using them successfully for years.

We asked the authors of each book to provide context for the method, including a rationale, situating the method within the qualitative tradition, describing the method's philosophical and epistemological background, and noting the key features of the method. We then asked them to describe in detail the steps of the method, including the research team, sampling, biases and expectations, data collection, data analysis, and variations on the method. We also asked authors to provide tips for the research process and for writing a manuscript emerging from a study that used the method. Finally, we asked authors to reflect on the methodological integrity of the approach, along with the benefits and limitations of the particular method.

This series of books can be used in several different ways. Instructors teaching courses in qualitative research could use the whole series, presenting one method at a time to expose students to a range of qualitative methods. Alternatively, instructors could choose to focus on just a few approaches, as depicted in specific books, supplementing the books with examples from studies that have been published using the approaches, and providing experiential exercises to help students get started using the approaches.

In this book, Scott D. Churchill describes existential phenomenological research (EPR), a philosophy-based qualitative method that focuses on how we understand the nature of our subject matter, as well as how we access that subject matter. The data of EPR focus on how individuals are "thrown into" situations in life and how, within those situations, individuals find "avenues of choice." Researchers access such phenomena via empathy, intuition, or "listening with the third ear." As central features of EPR, Churchill notes the following: an evidence-based method examining individuals' psychological lives, researchers who "bring themselves to the evidence," reliance on first-person descriptions of experience and researchers' reflections on those experiences, and researchers' cultivation of both sensitivity to meaning and a sense of empathy, curiosity, and wonder in human experience.

—Clara E. Hill and Sarah Knox

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1 CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH

There are two general kinds of research where existential phenomenological methods are particularly useful. The first application is when one is seeking knowledge about what constitutes certain "kinds" of experiences, such as the various emotions. In these cases, we find ourselves asking what characteristics are invariably there when one experiences anger or shame or fear or joy as kinds of experiences. The findings of such studies have implications for how we understand ourselves, as well as for psychological practice, because they yield general insights into the "lived meanings" of emotions, perceptions, and problematic behaviors (including their motivational contexts). In the second kind of research, we wish to open up the individual level of experience for a more in-depth understanding, as we might see in case studies where there is a need to grasp the intricacies of human experience.

As a method for embracing both nomothetic and idiographic dimensions of human experience, existential phenomenological research (EPR) draws on both the "pure" phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and the "existential" phenomenological work of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre. On the one hand, Husserl's (1913/1962) "transcendental" philosophical method was aimed toward what he called "universal"

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dimensions of consciousness, and this is where his "intuition of essences" can be adapted to produce an understanding of what is most generally true of particular "kinds" of experiences—from the types of emotions felt by all humans to general experiential phenomena such as learning, anxiety, interpersonal attraction, forgiveness, humiliation, gender identity, procrastination, self-esteem, shaming, and victimization, to name a few. On the other hand, there is the possibility of building on Heidegger's (1923/1999, 1927/1962) "existential-hermeneutic" method, which was ultimately aimed toward understanding the individual, particular, and even peculiar ways that people "find themselves" in their everyday world. This aspect of the EPR approach is useful, especially when we are interested in understanding how persons uniquely experience the situations that befall them, as in the case of spinal cord injury, recovery from traumatic injury, or the loss of the other's loving regard. Looking at ordinary experiences through the filters of phenomenological "guiding concepts" (e.g., "intentionality," "in-order-to motives," "existential freedom") and "ways of knowing" (e.g., "empathy," "deep listening," "purifying reflection") can bring rich understanding to a wide range of phenomena. It was Heidegger's (1923/1999) hope that the "existential characteristics" he identified at the most general level could be used to illuminate what is happening in a more nuanced way at the individual level by providing lenses through which to observe and better elucidate what is going on, concepts that "open up" human experience for further inquiry and reflection.

We begin with a sense of curiosity, fascination, and even wonder in the face of some aspect of human experiencing. We hope to gain a better sense of our chosen "phenomenon" through clarification of how it appears to us—that is, through (a) an articulation that enables others to understand what it is we have come to see and understand about the evidence to which we have brought ourselves and (b) the "sense of the whole" that we have developed in bringing ourselves to the encounter with specific kinds of human existence.

This method of research has a 50-year history, beginning with its inception at Duquesne University with the collective work of Colaizzi (1967, 1973, 1978), W. F. Fischer (1974, 1978, 1985), Giorgi (1970, 1975, 1985), Van Kaam (1966), and von Eckartsberg (1971, 1986). Since then, there have been legions of international researchers further developing the methodological work begun at Duquesne (Aanstoos, 1985; Adams, 2016; Angel, 2013; Applebaum, 2014; Ashworth, 2003; Beck, 2021; Churchill, 2000, 2006, 2010b, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2018a; Churchill et al., 1998; Churchill & Wertz, 1985, 2015; Dahlberg et al., 2008; Davidson & Cosgrove, 2003; DeRobertis, 2017; Englander,

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2016, 2019, 2020; Finlay, 2011; C. T. Fischer, 1998, 2006; Galvin & Todres, 2013; Garza, 2004, 2007; Gendlin, 1978; Gurwitsch, 1977/1979; Halling, 2008; Halling et al., 2006; Keen, 1975, 2003, 2011, 2012; Kruger, 1979; Langdridge, 2007; Lee, 2016; Morgan, 2011; Morley, 1998, 2010; Morrissey, 2014; Moss, 1982; Moustakas, 1994; Mruk, 2010, 2013; Packer, 2017; Pollio et al., 1998; Romanyshyn, 2007; Smith et al., 2009; Tomkins & Eatough, 2013; Valle, 1998; Valle & Halling, 1989; Van Kaam, 1966, 1987; van Manen, 1990, 2017, 2002; Walsh, 2016; Wertz, 1985, 2010; Wertz et al., 2011).

THE "HUMAN SCIENCE" APPROACH AS A WAY OF SEEING

The heart and soul of the "existential phenomenological" research method is to be found in our "approach" (Giorgi, 1970), which involves how we understand the nature of our subject matter, as well as how we establish our means of access to it. Without this approach—which embodies a distinctive "theory of science" (Dilthey, 1924/1977a; Gurwitsch, 1974, Schütz & Luckmann, 1973)—some of the features of our method might not appear to be different from other qualitative methods. This is because the basic steps of our method are infused from the outset with an understanding of psychological science that is radically different from other researchers, both quantitative and qualitative. The basic theory of science (methodology and epistemology) underlying empirical research methods had remained largely unquestioned during the first century of psychology as a science. The rationale for conducting experiments to determine the "causes" of behavior had been generally taken for granted as the (only) way to do science, notwithstanding a half century of critiques of this paradigm (Churchill, 1991; Gannt & Williams, 2016; Giorgi, 1970, 2009; Koch & Leary, 1985; Strasser, 1963).

Giorgi's (1970) landmark text *Psychology as a Human Science: A Phenomenologically Based Approach* is the seminal work that established the foundations for a qualitative method grounded in the critique of the empirical sciences articulated by Dilthey and Husserl over a century ago. Giorgi introduced the concept of "approach" to clarify the interrelated assumptions underlying scientific practice that has more recently been employed by Levitt et al. (2017), who called on qualitative researchers to connect their research procedures with their philosophical foundations in the name of "methodological integrity." Every aspect of EPR is directly informed by concepts and reflective procedures borrowed directly from phenomenological philosophy. This includes ontological assumptions about what psychological phenomena are and epistemological clarifications regarding how they are best accessed and known.

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Most important in my own learning of EPR was acquiring not so much a new "body of information" as a new "way of seeing." This is already informed by the chief insight of phenomenology: namely, that "what you see" (*noema*) is a function of "how you are looking" (*noesis*). This is as true when we are looking at others' behavior as it is when we are looking at movies, paintings, even inkblots. Every "what" is constituted by a particular "how": Every perception is constituted by a unique act of perceiving, every idea by a particular way of understanding. The "how" of our psychological reading of data is informed by a literature that has emerged during the 20th century as a direct consequence of Dilthey's (1924/1977a) famous dictum, "We explain nature; we understand psychological life" (p. 27). To paraphrase: While it is possible to "explain" natural events by means of causal thinking, psychological life requires something else for its elucidation—what the German philosophers called "understanding" (*Verstehen*). When Dilthey (1924/1977a) articulated the foundations of "the human sciences" (*Geisteswissenschaften*) over a century ago, he was naming not just a field of studies, but more important, a particular way of studying that field (see Churchill, 2018b, pp. 70–73, for further clarification of this expression). This field of study aims at elucidating "existential gestalts" or "life as a whole" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 72), beginning with a focus on the individual's point of view. As we shall see, however, the adoption of a phenomenological attitude means much more than simply adopting the other's perspective; it means, rather, the employment of a particular method of reflection on the perspective that is provided to us by our research informants. When we place ourselves as researchers "into" the experiences described to us, we must engage in certain reflective modes of focusing to bring the "phenomena" of human experiencing into view—namely, the acts of human consciousness and their motivational contexts.

As qualitative researchers, we often begin with collecting descriptions from people undergoing the experiences that interest us. The question is, what are we doing when we are reading these descriptions? How are we attending to the words and expressions of our informants? And how do we guard against unwanted biases or preconceptions entering into our findings? Dilthey's (1924/1977a, 1927/1977b) method of understanding was founded on what he called a "sympathy" or "transposition" of oneself into the life context of the person one is attempting to understand. For Dilthey, for us to cultivate a sensitivity to meaning in the lives of others, we must necessarily draw on all the powers of our psyche in observing human experience—not just sensing and judging but feeling, intuiting, imagining, remembering.

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The Essential Role of Empathy in EPR

Like Dilthey, Husserl (1952/1989) was interested in our grasping the meaning of others' experience by means of a "pairing" grounded in empathy, whereby we are able to experience the other's perceptions, emotions, cognitions, and volitions through a special kind of access that is mediated by our shared embodiment. Through this "reflexivity" of the body, which enables us to (figuratively speaking) stand on both sides of an encounter simultaneously, we are able to gain access to each other's psychological lives. Husserl (1952/1989) referred to this as "trading places" (p. 177). We do this not only in face-to-face interaction but also when viewing or reading the expressions of the other (including research data). Why is it that I can be moved to tears when I pick up one of my mother's old handwritten letters to me? Is it not because even years later, I am able to still feel her loving presence manifested in the letter itself? Is not the meaning of her words precisely the love that she was so clearly experiencing and revealing in her act of writing? Finally, is not this underlying affection—which constituted my mother's "regard" for me as well as her intention in writing—the ultimate object of my perception of her letter?

Other examples of our empathic presence to the other taken from everyday life include when we are dancing with another person and unwittingly mimicking their gestures or when during a movie one's face begins to spontaneously adopt the expressions of the character with whom one is identifying. Film theorists even have a name for this phenomenon: "the scene of empathy" (Plantinga, 1999). A humorous example of this can be found in the film *Play It Again, Sam* (Ross, 1972), which begins with Woody Allen's character sitting spellbound in his seat while watching the ending of *Casablanca* in a movie theater, unconsciously mirroring the facial tics of Humphrey Bogart as he says his goodbyes to Ingrid Bergman in one of the most famous scenes in cinema history. During this scene, Allen is resonating with more than just the facial tics—as he walks out of the theater, he develops a swagger like Bogart. And by the end of the film, we witness him beginning to embody a new *persona*—or what phenomenologists might call a new "intentionality" or way of "being-in-the-world."

The Concept of Intentionality

Once Husserl (1901/1968) had issued forth the "battle cry" of phenomenology—"We want to go back to the 'matters themselves' [*den "Sachen selbst"*] . . . and bring ourselves to the evidence" (p. 6)—it then became a question of determining the nature of the matters that would concern us,

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as well as the proper mode of access to them. For Husserl (1913/1962, 1925/1977), the phenomena to which we should turn to find evidence for our reflection were the "affairs of consciousness"—which he embraced collectively with the concept of *intentionality*, a term he had derived from Brentano (1874/1973). Even though this term means much more than our deliberate intentions or aims within a situation, the reader can use the idea of there always being some meaning or purpose to be achieved in human behavior (including acts of perceiving, imagining, remembering, feeling, willing, encountering) as a kind of placeholder. In the case of *Play It Again, Sam*, the character's underlying wish was simply to be more like Bogart.

Intentionality is a term that has been used by virtually every phenomenologist and figures prominently in the entire literature of both philosophical and psychological phenomenology. The human, as well as animal, experience of corporeality, spatiality, sociality, and temporality are all subsumed under the rubric of this most important and central philosophical concept of "intentionality." We can say that intentionality refers to the cognitive, perceptual, volitional, emotional, imaginal, and gestural threads that bind us to the world in a meaningful way, albeit in a way that we take for granted. The phenomenological method consists of so many ways to "slacken the intentional threads" (or conscious acts) that connect us to the world, thus bringing them to our attention and making these acts available to reflective analysis (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. xiii). This is why phenomenology is often expressed in a language of prepositions (being-*in*, being-*with*, being-*toward*, being-*ahead-of*, *before*-which, *in-order-to*, and so on)—because prepositions describe relationships as seen from a reflective distance, and intentionality is the most generic term we can use to describe the multitude of relationships that define our lives. Van den Berg (1972) distilled all of these into four fundamental relations that he called the relations of oneself to one's world, one's body, other persons, and one's past and future. These relationships, which are accessed through reflective acts of "grasping at meaning," make up what Dilthey (1927/1977b) called "the secret of the person" (p. 177).

Observing and thematizing intentionality became the aim of phenomenologists, as it also became one of the aims of Freud's early "depth psychology." What makes psychoanalysis and phenomenology kindred disciplines is their common interest in the *latent content* revealed in the expressions of psychological life: namely, the "meaning," "motives," and "intentions" of our acts (Freud, 1905/1963, pp. 34, 35, and 37, respectively). It is this "cross validation" of the two fields that led Merleau-Ponty (1960/1969) to famously remark, "Phenomenology and psychoanalysis are not parallel;

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much better, they are both aiming toward the same *latency*" (pp. 86–87, italics in original; see also Wertz & Olbert, 2016). What this means for EPR is that what we are attending to is something that does not always lie at the surface of our descriptions but, rather, at their depths. This requires the researcher to try "to get under the data" in the same way that in reading my mother's letters, I was present to more than simply her words. To be present to these depths in a manner that allows us to elucidate them requires the cultivation of a sensitivity to meaning that comes not only from reading primary source literature in phenomenology but also from our life experiences.

Accessing Intentionality

The defining methodological character of EPR is embodied in the illuminating presence of the researcher, who is trained in the use of the phenomenological *epoché*, the phenomenological reduction, some degree of eidetic intuition (the seeing of essences), and use of free variation in the imagination in the move toward generality. I shall briefly define here the first two terms and leave the others to our later chapters.

The Greek term *epoché* refers to a preliminary step whereby the researcher "brackets" or "takes out of play" things that are taken for granted to allow something else to come into view, something we would not be able to see through the distorting lenses of our existing assumptions and beliefs. As Schütz (1962) observed, there are as many *epochai* as there are fields of interest that we may wish to explore because to turn our attention in one direction, we must necessarily turn away from other interests. This is why we employ an *epoché*: To discover an entity or an experience in its own self-givenness, we start by "bracketing" what we have come to know about it. When I take students to the zoo to encounter animal behavior or to a museum to observe human artistic expressions, I ask them to put aside what they think they already know about the species they are about to observe and to bracket the belief that the wheat fields painted by Van Gogh might have "actually" appeared the same way to anyone who was looking over his shoulder. These represent the two primary epochai of the phenomenologist: first, the bracketing of the conceptual prejudices that we carry with us as filters (which can also be "blinders") and, second, the bracketing of the "natural attitude" or belief that the world actually is the way it appears to someone. These two epochai free us to look through the other's eyes without critical judgment, to see and grasp the world as they experience it.

The "phenomenological reduction" is an expression that Husserl (1913/1962) coined, adapted from the Latin *reducere*, which means "to lead"

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(*ducere*) ourselves "back" (*re-*), or "to restore." For Husserl, this meant, on the one hand, "restoring" the world of perception to see our subject matter as if for the first time, without distorting preconceptions. And on the other hand, it meant "guiding" ourselves "back" from the content of consciousness (which he termed the *noema*) to the conscious act (or *noesis*) that "coconstitutes" that particular content or meaning. The tree standing in the meadow as an "object" of perception may come to have different meanings (*noemata*) for different observers, depending on their particular interests (*noeses*): To the woodsman, the tree might represent fuel for a fire; for two lovers, a place to carve their initials to commemorate their love; for two chipmunks, a place in the branches to construct a habitat. Each perceiver's attitude constitutes a different "meaning" for the tree. To appreciate each act of perceiving the tree, we bracket the question of what the tree (as a self-standing "object") "actually" is. Only then can we bring ourselves back to the "practical" attitude of the woodsman or the "romantic" attitude of the lovers.

This is enough, for now, to introduce some of the basic language of phenomenology. While philosophical phenomenology takes on a wide spectrum of its own research interests, psychological phenomenology leans heavily on the concepts and methods of the existential philosophers, who took phenomenology more in the direction of a science of human persons.

WHAT IS THE KEY INSIGHT OF EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGY?

Viktor Frankl (1959) put it most simply when he stated that the greatest of human attributes is the freedom "to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances" (p. 86). It is precisely this concept of "existential freedom" that is a key insight guiding our research investigations using EPR. In Heidegger's ontology (1927/1962), it was our free (and yet always situated) projection of ourselves into possibilities that defines us. A key to the reading of data by psychologists using EPR can be found in this principle: How does this moment described within the data reveal both the circumstances that situate and (more importantly) the projects that animate this person in this moment of their life?

The "Existential" Approach to the Person

In what is perhaps the most radical statement of 20th-century philosophy, Heidegger (1927/1962) wrote, "The 'essence' of [the human kind] lies in