



Book Reviews

Giorgi, A. (2009). *The descriptive phenomenological method in psychology: A modified Husserlian approach*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 233 pp., ISBN 978–0–8207–0418–0, \$25.00 (paper).

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In the interest of transparency, I begin with the context of my point of view in this review. I was a student of Amedeo Giorgi at Duquesne University, where I studied and worked closely with him from 1973 to 1982. Like him, I work from the phenomenological point of view. Although Professor Giorgi and I share a common commitment to phenomenology, we have worked independently over the last three decades, though we share probing conversations on such topics as the similarities and differences in our practices and accounts of research methods. My focus in this review is not on the fine points of research method but rather on the larger significance of Professor Giorgi's new book.

For almost fifty years, Amedeo Giorgi has devoted himself to developing phenomenological research methods for psychology that would be applicable across all subject matters of the discipline, in other human sciences, and in such interdisciplinary professions as concern health, education, industry, and social service. What has distinguished Giorgi's work is his extensive knowledge of phenomenology and his creative fidelity in adapting its methods to human science. Giorgi has combined his background as a natural science methodologist with sophisticated philosophical knowledge, extensive historical scholarship in psychology, and broad experience in applying the methods he has developed. The elegant simplicity of the method makes it practicable in diverse projects, accessible to researchers with skills ranging from novice to advanced, and applicable to topics as widely ranging as the human experience itself. The procedures follow directly on the one hand from the demands of human phenomena and on the other hand from scientific requirements, including systematization and accountability. This achievement, of the utmost significance for human science, is made more clearly and definitively available to the scholarly community in his latest book than in any previous writing.

Giorgi has not peppered the field with facilely written or redundant volumes of his work. The text being reviewed is his second authored book, following the

1970 classic, *Psychology as a Human Science*. In his first book, Giorgi made a compelling case that psychology's persistent problems, reflected in critical protests throughout the discipline's history, are rooted in the erroneous adoption of a *natural science approach*, which continues today along with a myriad of such difficulties as the field's remoteness from life, theoretical fragmentation, and research-practice chasm. Giorgi's thesis, quite original in the discipline of psychology, was based in twentieth century continental thought, especially phenomenology. Even more important than Giorgi's critique was his positive solution, *human science psychology* based on phenomenology.

Giorgi's 1970 work set the foundation for numerous journal articles based on his own research, methodological reflections, and over a hundred dissertations addressing virtually every established area in psychology and many new topics. Giorgi's scholarship on the philosophical foundations of psychology, such methodological issues as reliability and validity, and procedures ranging from the conceptualization of psychological problems to data collection, analysis, and reporting were brought together in his 1985 edited volume, *Phenomenology and Psychological Research*. Here Giorgi spelled out the procedures of human science method and demonstrated its applications in research on learning along with four other researchers who applied phenomenology in other areas. This volume has been used by a generation of human science researchers all over the world for the last twenty five years. In his new 2009 book, Giorgi offers a more elaborate and comprehensive treatment of the same research method. This book will inform, guide, inspire, and provoke scholarly discussion among researchers long into the future. It is unlikely to be surpassed in clarity, level of self critical reflectivity, and correctness.

Giorgi's book includes a brief account of his career, beginning with his mission at Duquesne University in 1962 to craft a phenomenological research method for psychology. Giorgi has devoted the years since then to intensively and extensively studying phenomenological philosophy and developing, applying, and teaching phenomenological research methods in psychology. In the first chapter, entitled "The Conceptual Framework," Giorgi describes the work as drawing upon the intersection of philosophy, science, and psychology. He cogently argues that the phenomenological perspective is a key to resolving the historical tensions among these fields and to establishing their mutual compatibility in a model of research that, although different from the natural science approach of the empirical tradition in psychology, is equally rigorous in meeting the demands of psychological subject matter and of science. Here he introduces the phenomenological tradition with references to the work of Husserl and his basic concepts as intentionality, the lifeworld, and the phenomenological approach to science. Chapter 2, "The Qualitative Perspective in Researching Psychological Phenomena," provides readers with an introduction to and informative overview of the long and significant

history of qualitative research in psychology, with references to Brentano, Dilthey, and research in continental Europe and the United States. Giorgi provides more elaborate examples of qualitative research in the work of James, Titchener, Bartlett, Allport, Piaget, and Coles. Although he credits these researchers with important methodological practices and substantive contributions to knowledge, he notes that their common inductive methods fall short of the more radical and crucial eidetic method offered by phenomenology and spelled out in later chapters. Chapter 3, “The Research Process,” is a brief overview of the research process, delineating the organic relationships among lifeworld phenomena as subject matter, the identification of research topics, the choice of research method, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and research reporting. Here Giorgi highlights the differences between quantitative and qualitative research and the unique scientific logic guiding qualitative researchers through the established steps of research. Chapter 4, “Scientific Phenomenological Method and Its Philosophical Context,” offers readers a crystal clear exposition of the phenomenological theory of science developed by Husserl and highlights its implications for psychology and the human sciences. Chapter 5, the heart of the book—“The Phenomenological Method,” details the methods of philosophical phenomenology and the modifications of phenomenological methods necessary for psychology. This chapter incisively compares and relates philosophical and psychological phenomenological methods and spells out the procedural steps of human science research, featuring data analysis. The sixth and final chapter, “An Application of the Method,” is a demonstration in which the research method is carried out on “jealousy.” The full analyses of two descriptions by two different researchers—Amedeo Giorgi and Barbro Giorgi—are presented, compared, and used to illustrate the principles and procedures of the descriptive phenomenological method in psychology.

Although this book contains challenging passages, it can be read at various levels of depth and sophistication. From the above outline of topics, one can discern a logical development that begins with an extremely wide lens revealing the historical disciplinary problems of psychology. The focus becomes progressively more detailed, finally delving into a most fine grained exploration of the inner workings of phenomenological psychological analysis and results. This book can be read many times, and many passages can be fruitfully thought over again and again. The author has meticulously constructed a book that offers sound preliminary answers but not final answers. Giorgi invites the reader on a journey that opens into an infinite task that leads beyond the reading of this book. I fear that some, perhaps many readers, will view this work as a closed case with settled solutions, which they either will or will not accept, and then they will be done with it. However, the thought here is subtle, deep, and reaches far into obscurities that no one including the author has resolved. The extraordinarily critical and reflective

thinking which has guided Giorgi's choices in developing the phenomenological psychological method and continually accompanies its exposition is truly breath-taking. Neither Giorgi's foundational confidence nor his caution and tentativeness regarding the destination to which this work leads are to be overlooked or taken lightly. The long way Giorgi has traveled has led him to present us with an immanently workable method, a solution of great promise. However, Giorgi's humble engagement with a host of uncertainties, though eye opening and challenging, may be difficult for those who are looking for "a quick read" with simple and final answers.

Giorgi opens, placing readers on familiar ground, by stating that this book dwells at the intersection of philosophy, science, and psychology. We know what these are, or do we? Giorgi hastens to add that when different perspectives intersect, scholars must adjust their expectations and be prepared for modifications that, however alarming to purists in each separate domain, are necessary for historical movement. Giorgi claims, with masterful support, that his modifications are consistent with the basic values of all three scholarly traditions. Indeed only by seeing into the heart of each of these traditions is Giorgi able to show that they *require* the very sorts of modifications he offers and also that the optimal development of each of these traditions remains unaccomplished even today. Giorgi provides a thumb nail sketch of the history of science, demonstrating the impressive emergence, spread, and transformations of natural science since the seventeenth century and the ingenuity with which psychologists modified research methods in their attempt to reduce their phenomena to meet received scientific criteria. Giorgi's project is to modify these criteria without compromising rigor in order to study psychological phenomena more faithfully and with a success comparable to that of natural science studies of physical nature. The approach Giorgi develops is consistent with long-standing but isolated qualitative research methods, whose history has not been written. In order to establish a scientific perspective in psychology that is appropriate for these marginalized research methods, Giorgi turns to phenomenology, which itself has many versions, has undergone modifications throughout its history, and will require further revision in the present project. Giorgi shows that psychology—however well institutionalized, funded and prolific—has struggled with its identity throughout its history. Its basic approach or attitude, its subject matter, its methods, and its unitary identity have never ceased to provoke contentious debates and remain largely unresolved contemporary challenges. Giorgi does not claim to have solved these problems of science, phenomenology, and psychology, but by honestly recognizing them and locating the most forward-moving trends in all three fields, he provides a new direction by way of a research method that guides psychology toward genuine scientificity through phenomenology. Giorgi cautions, "This model at the moment is an embryo; it does not come ready made" (2009, p. 14).

Key to the success of this embryonic model is phenomenological philosophy, and although a comprehensive and precise definition of this approach is exceedingly difficult, Giorgi offers a clear exposition of Husserl's philosophy of science, fundamental concepts, and research methods. The choice of Husserl from among the many phenomenological philosophers is a good one, for besides being the wellspring of the entire phenomenological movement, Husserl is especially relevant because of his focus on epistemology, the foundations of the sciences, innovative research methods for the study of experience, and psychology. In the course of this volume, Giorgi provides an orderly exposition of Husserl's thought that will provide basic knowledge for unfamiliar readers and will serve as a sharp refresher course for those who have spent their careers struggling to understand such basic matters as Husserl's definition of science; the intentionality of consciousness; the lifeworld; reflection on relational meaning; the transcendental and psychological phenomenological attitudes; and the methods of free imaginative variation and eidetic analysis. Giorgi's history of the qualitative movement in psychology and its enigmatic relationship with quantitative psychology is a fascinating story of a science, including contributions to qualitative psychology from the likes of Wundt, Titchener, Watson, and Skinner as well as James, Piaget, and Allport. Giorgi emphasizes that neither phenomenology nor the qualitative research tradition preclude the development of empirical, quantitative psychology, but this story makes clear the primary importance of phenomenologically developed qualitative psychology, on which quantitative psychology and the unity of the science must be based.

In elaborating the scientific phenomenological method in its philosophical context, Giorgi shows how this perspective is more comprehensive than the *de facto* empirical psychology and is also capable of integrating, yet going beyond in important ways, the rich qualitative tradition in psychology. He insists that a proper psychological science cannot be detached from a phenomenological theory of science, even though the latter is still a work in progress. Husserl provides the "principle of principles"—the insistence on originary "intuitive" evidence, and the eidetic method, including the procedure of free imaginative variation, which enables the grasp and description of "what phenomena are." The employment of this powerful method leads to a psychology that is more authentically scientific than existing mainstream psychology. It is worth noting that Giorgi's grounding of psychology as a human science places the discipline squarely in an interdisciplinary context of shared philosophy and methods with such disciplines as anthropology, political science, sociology, and communications, all of which face similar problems of achieving a non-reductive human science that integrates disparate theories and knowledge of both qualitative and quantitative aspects of their phenomena. At key junctures, Giorgi calls on Husserl and insists on appropriating

his clarification of the essential characteristics of experience and the eidetic method of *descriptively* studying human phenomena. Giorgi is not opposed to interpretation, quantification and explanation, but he insists that without first knowing *what* is to be interpreted, measured, and explained, these modes of knowledge lack a rigorous scientific basis. Giorgi offers assurance that these approaches to knowledge will ultimately have to be addressed and in some way integrated into psychology, but he cogently argues that this historical achievement will not be possible without a descriptive phenomenological method, which is only now coming into existence.

Giorgi's book deepens considerably when he turns to the descriptive phenomenological method itself. He begins with a deft exposition of the philosophical phenomenological method for studying consciousness, then works through the modifications of method required for the scientific investigation of psychological topics, and ends with a delineation of the step-wise procedures, including the nuts and bolts of this modified method. Husserl's philosophical method is credited with revealing the fundamental characteristics of lived experience and with introducing basic procedures of reflection on meaning and eidetic analysis using imaginative variation that are required for knowledge of experience and its basic types. Giorgi offers accessible expositions of the procedures, so often misunderstood by critics, of the phenomenological reductions and bracketing past experience and knowledge, which may be difficult but are necessary and doable. To the philosophical method Giorgi adds two general modifications, the scientific level of analysis and psychological sensitivity. Giorgi continues to remind readers that however sure the footing, this direction is new. He quotes Sartre, who wrote with regard to the "truly positive study" of the human being, that "phenomenology is hardly born" (Sartre, 1962, pp. 28–29, cited in Giorgi, 2009, p. 95). However, the method that follows has now been born and has been carefully developed by Giorgi over the last four decades. Giorgi specifies here, in readily understandable and practicable terms, the procedural modifications of philosophical phenomenological methods as the collection of descriptions *from others*, the practice of the phenomenological *psychological* reduction, the explication of *contextually constituted psychological structures*, and an explicit *means of accounting* for the human scientific research process.

As justified and substantive as is the descriptive phenomenological method in psychology, Giorgi calls this method "embryonic" because of its challenging open horizons. Some of these include obscurities and unanswered questions in such crucial areas as the nature of the psychological attitude—the very meaning and definition of psychology itself; the limits, ambiguities and "inchoate" nature of descriptions of human experience; and the proper levels of generality that are to be sought and achieved in psychological research. The procedures and steps of this

method are further clarified in its application to the phenomenon of “jealousy.” Moreover, Giorgi’s seasoned, searching, and insightful reflections on the concrete conduct of research, with its myriad of problems and perplexities, are consistently offered as a commentary. He addresses questions of novices and stretches the thinking of seasoned researchers. Although the “meaning of the psychological” has not been established as a theoretical achievement, it may be grasped in practice through the application of analytic procedures along with ascending reflections in the course of researching concrete phenomena. Giorgi acknowledges that descriptions of lived experience are full of ambiguities, in part due to their thick multi-contextuality in the lives of real individual human beings, which require the utmost carefulness and conceptual precision in their explication. Of particular interest is Giorgi’s open, data-driven approach to the issue of whether multiple examples of the research phenomenon are best known through a single or through multiple eidetic structures. In the demonstration research on jealousy, both Amedeo Giorgi and Barbro Giorgi find that the two descriptions of jealousy exemplify a single structure. Incidentally, readers will find an interesting contrast in the results of Giorgi’s (1985) previous demonstration analysis of learning, in which the data yield multiple structures. The one structure solution well fits the two examples of jealousy utilized in this demonstration, given imaginative variations that are relatively restricted to the existential conditions of these examples. Additional descriptions of jealousy or a more widely ranging employment of the method of free imaginative variation in future research might lead a researcher to further grapple with questions concerning multiple types of jealousy and with the important issue of the most appropriate and fruitful levels and kinds of generality in psychological knowledge.

This book teaches us an important and profound lesson. As well established and powerful as are the great traditions of science, phenomenology, and psychology, their meanings cannot be taken for granted because they are not historically fixed and require reflective modification through practice in order to live up to their innermost values and to fulfill their goals. When a research method is established that moves all three of these traditions forward together in a way that answers persistent questions in each of their histories, a very significant event has taken place. When such a method is crafted by a scholar whose understanding of all three traditions is as sound as that of Amedeo Giorgi, and when a method has taken shape in the course of four decades of painstakingly careful practice and reflection, broad notice and acknowledgement are in order. During the last twenty years, qualitative research methods have finally been gaining attention and becoming more accepted in psychology, and some are better than others. One would be hard pressed to find any that has been developed with the scholarly scope and expertise, not to mention the years of committed practice, that characterizes this

descriptive phenomenological human science method. This method opens upon larger problems and is offered with humility and historical perspective. Giorgi's book teaches us that fundamental challenges still remain before us. What does psychology really mean? How are its various forms of knowledge to be assessed and integrated in disciplinary unity? Although a method capable of addressing these problems is presented in this book with sufficient sharpness and clarity for readers to understand, its employment requires a high level of education, training, acumen, and creativity. Hopefully, tough-minded researchers and scholars will appropriate and master this method, because it is sorely needed and capable of moving human science closer to the historical achievement of its loftiest aspirations.

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