



## The Phenomenology of Intervention

by Dr Steve Edwards

*This work is a response to a request from the phenomenology group at Edith Cowan University. The paper is based on seminar discussions, experiences and ideas that have been contextualized within phenomenological literature. The notion of phenomenology as intervention has become increasingly apparent owing to the value of its practical applications in the human and social sciences. The paper explores the theme with special reference to research and psychotherapeutic interventions.*

### 1. Introduction

This paper was commissioned by the phenomenology group at Edith Cowan University, Bunbury Campus, over a three day visit filled with postgraduate seminars and community talks, where we lived through meaningful experiences centered around such themes as phenomenology of intervention, reconciliation in South Africa and Australia, psychology as the speech of the soul towards building spiritual community and community effects of the exercise experience. This work is an initial response to the specific request for an article on phenomenology as intervention.

### An example of phenomenological intervention

The phenomenological method is initially concerned with the description of the original experience of a particular phenomenon. A beautifully meaningful example was contributed by one of the group in response to my request for a description of the exercise experience.

“Exercise is a breathing experience, a breathing in new vitality and a breathing out of stale devitalized energy. In the breathing in, there is a

stretching of my body muscles, my limbs, my torso. Gradually, piece by piece, limb by limb, the body starts to expand, to accelerate and then to dance. My etheric life force celebrates joining the vitality of all flourishing, living forms until it becomes part of the cosmic experience of expansion, embracing and revitalizing all that is growing within me, my thinking, my feeling, to the core of my spirit.’

This example is instructive in its provision of a reflective experiential description of the immediate straightforward experience of exercise. While all verbalizations of experience are reflective and interpretive in their description of an event that has already taken place in the recent or remote past, this example also conveys some impression of the immediate, transformational, essence of the exercise experience. I feel qualified to make such an interpretation both on the basis of my personal exercise experience, as I have reflected on it, and as others have shared their experience with me (Edwards 2001). To the extent that I may have re-experienced some reflective aspects from this description of the straightforward phenomenon of

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the exercise experience, I may also make the interpretation that this description is a further example of phenomenological intervention in my own life. Furthermore reflection reveals that it contains essentials of both the exercise experience and phenomenological intervention such as presence, correspondence and transcendence in its movement from here and now bodily conscious breathing towards mutual person-world opening and cosmic spiritual experience.

This is a rather long way of saying that, in its fundamental form, phenomenology is interventionist. From an epistemological/ontological perspective, research, psychotherapy and the learning and teaching situation is a matter of coming into (intervening in) another(s) world of knowledge/being. In the phenomenological reduction (*epoche*), we consciously suspend any assumptions, in order to allow original reality to come into our world or alternatively empathize with (enter into) the world of another (as in existential psychotherapy). In fact, in everyday life, we cannot but intervene in each other's worlds and influence each other in that as human beings our individually unique existences are essentially intersubjective and radically social. Our very 'selves' are continuously changing social constructions, in which we continuously influence each other through interpersonal encounters/ interventions in one another's worlds (Spinelli 1989).

Zulu people describe this process as '*umuntu umuntu ngabantu*', which literally means 'a person is a person through others,' 'I only become an I through you', and 'I am because we are' or in Martin Buber's terms 'Only through you do I become an I' and 'I-Thou relationships' (Buber 1958). *Ubuntu* refers to humane care, dignity and cultured humanity, which is reached through such processes of mutuality, humanization, socialization and communal spirituality (Edwards 2000). *Ubuntu* in the sense

of the 'I-Thou relationship' constitutes the epitome of the interpersonal, inter-human encounter.

Besides this original intersubjective perspective, intervention implies an intentional effort to bring about beneficial change. It refers to an active form of what Heidegger (1927) has explicated as a fundamental attribute of being human - care, which underlies such generic processes as interviewing, helping, counselling, psychotherapy, prevention, promotion and healing in the therapeutic and/or research context. It is mainly in this sense that the word is used in this paper.

### **Some meanings of phenomenology as intervention**

For me the phenomenological method has always been a creative way of not only seeing original, new worlds with new eyes, but also a new way of living in a new world. I was trained to care for others as a clinical and educational psychologist by phenomenological psychologists. In this context, phenomenology means to bring about beneficial change in the researcher, therapist, client, research participant, caring dialogue, research setting and/or therapeutic alliance, in its ever-changing context. It automatically implies interventions to help others live in new worlds: to solve, improve or accept problems in living. Every caring interventionist moment and context is unique. Bringing this home to you as reader in a journal of this nature is different from being involved in a community psychological action research setting or sitting in a psychotherapy office, or supervising theses.

Firstly we need to clarify some further meaning of 'phenomenology' and 'intervention'. I also understand phenomenology to be concerned with the meaning (logos) of that which appears (phenomenon). Furthermore, as described above, phenomenology may be essentially described as an approach or method in which we attempt to suspend all preconceptions in order to

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allow original lived world reality to reveal itself. This conscious attempt to bracket out assumptions, bias, prejudice, theory, in fact everything in the natural attitude towards the world, is performed in phenomenological research and therapy precisely in order to perceive more clearly the pre-reflective world in its essential forms and meaning, before describing, explicating and interpreting our experience of the phenomena of this original pre-reflective reality.

Phenomenology is probably the dominant European philosophical tradition of the twentieth century through the instruction of such founders as Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty (McCann, 1993). The electronic medium of the internet has been most valuable in its provision of classic texts by these founding fathers. As a philosophy of science, corrective for positivism, initial attitude for scientific investigations, body of critical thought and broader interdisciplinary movement, phenomenology has received increasing international recognition. In its recognition of multiple world-views, realities and multi-verses, phenomenology may also be viewed as a foundation for such perspectives as post-modernism, social constructivism and narratology.

Intervention also implies intentional action to bring about an immediate and effective form of beneficial change. For example, in the psychological literature, 'crisis intervention' refers to a form of brief psychotherapy, characterized by such helping steps as ensuring safety, mobilizing social support, practical problem-solving, encouraging insight and viewing the crisis as an opportunity for growth as implied by the Chinese characters for the term crisis which mean both danger and opportunity. (Gilliland, 1997). It also implies solution orientated research and counselling.

In a general sense, the idea of phenomenology as intervention is not new. Van den Berg (1980)

has described the phenomenological movement as psychotherapeutic in its potential to bring about a whole new lived world. Giorgi (1984) has explicated the essentially dialogical, descriptive, disciplined, qualitative and participative nature of both phenomenological research and therapy. In an earlier paper I have focussed on poesis and the phenomenology of the therapeutic moment (Edwards 1998). The present paper may be viewed as a brief summary and extension of these and similar earlier studies concerned with phenomenological intervention from various perspectives such as:

interpersonal validating dialogue in research and therapy whereby experiences are empathetically shared; as fundamental form of evaluation

open-ended pre- and post-investigation 'phenomenological' questions requiring participants to describe their experience of the particular phenomenon under investigation in the experiential evaluation of a research programme.

phenomenologically grounded qualitative research projects developing unique action research methodologies.

intentionality in the sense of an investigator or researcher becoming progressively more involved with a particular phenomenon until it 'speaks' to him/her 'from itself'

cosmotherapy in its corrective of the over-emphasis of convergent thinking in the modern world; phenomenology as critical/theoretical corrective movement

a form of community intervention in the sense that a collectivity or group of persons can experience a sense of community which serves to bring about change as in consciousness raising groups e.g. who become their own advocates in a battle against oppression. This may occur spontaneously out of group processes in mutual

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aid groups and /or be effected by a particular facilitator

individual therapeutic moment of action generating insight, peak or, as described in Japan, *satori* experience.

While as Giorgi (1984) has shown, these are interrelated, it is possible and convenient to make a distinction between phenomenological research and therapeutic interventions.

### **Phenomenology as research intervention**

Whether or not a phenomenological approach is consciously adopted, the research event in itself essentially constitutes a form of intervention. This is most obviously the case in qualitative human scientific investigations, but even classical natural scientific experimental designs typically consist of interventions in manipulating independent variables, and keeping other conditions constant, while looking for the effect on dependent variables. Since Einstein's relativity revelations, modern natural sciences such as physics have also explicitly recognized the influence of the researcher. Some ecosystemic approaches bridge Dilthey's distinction between the natural and human sciences in explicitly recognizing researcher reflexivity with the concept of second order cybernetics. However it can be argued that such advances as systems theory and social constructivism have only become possible through phenomenology as an alternative philosophical model of science to positivism.

At Zululand University, postgraduate students have chosen phenomenological methodologies for basic research into specific phenomena such as the meaning of becoming a prophet in an African independent church and/or the meanings behind the use of holy water, wool or vaseline in such churches. Such projects typically consist in participant –observatory and non-directive interviewing techniques centered around the specific phenomenological question. For

example Krynauw du Toit (1991) interviewed volunteers who responded to a request for participants in a research study into the human mid-life experience. Such studies are usually minimally interventionist in that the researcher will simply explore the particular experience through in depth interviews. The projects become interventionist to the extent that insights generated through the interview dialogue may lead to behavioural change. If the interview revealed instances of mid-life crises requiring help, therapeutic intervention becomes required and is provided. If the particular research problem also constitutes a problem in living, we have considered it ethical to include more intervention as part of the research. For example participants are typically asked to both describe their experience of the problem as well as possible solutions and/or coping behaviour. Intervention is dependent on various factors such as the authenticity and accuracy of description of the experience of the phenomenon; the consensual validation arrived at through microskill interviewing techniques such as empathy, clarification and reflection, the evaluative feedback from participants with regard to their individual and collective profiles, external rating and ranking techniques, and degree of faithfulness to the original pre-reflective experience at all stages of the research process. The phenomenological method has become increasingly validated in applied psychological research and therapy (Giorgi 1970; Kruger 1986,1988a,1988b,1991; Stones 1986, van Vuuren 1989, Spinelli 1989, Polkinghorne 1989, Du Toit 1991, Schweitzer 1996)

More applied interventionist studies include programme evaluations. For example, Mbali Dhlomo (2000) developed and evaluated a health promotion programme for a group of single parents, which began and ended with the open-ended phenomenological question: 'What does it mean to be a single parent?' Along with other qualitative and quantitative measures, this served to conscientize participants to their experience

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and evaluate changed experience after the programme. The programme also focussed on the groups mutual aid commitments, instruction and effectiveness in terms of empowerment and health promotion. A similar study by Sharon Mthembu (2001) with mutual-aid groups for unemployed people lead to new developments in qualitative methodologies through the honouring of an original, indigenous methodology of mobilizing support in mutual aid groups. This is in fact the experience of all authentic phenomenological interventionist research – it culminates in new research/ therapeutic methods and interventions. This originality of methodology and interventional value is ultimately the criterion by which all authentic phenomenological research can be evaluated.

#### **Phenomenology as psychotherapeutic intervention**

In an address to mark the centennial celebrations of Duquesne University, Pittsburgh USA, Jan Hendrik Van den Berg (1980:30) defines phenomenology as the science of divergent thinking about man and his world. He provides a penetrating critique of contemporary modern world overemphasis on convergent thinking, positivism and materialism, for which phenomenology is a necessary corrective. He concludes as follows:

‘In a world of all but omnipotent convergent thinking, phenomenology is cosmotherapy. Or else if we strip the word psyche of its one-sided Cartesian meaning, there is this last, more modest, but equally daring and shortest possible definition: phenomenology is psychotherapy.’

In a similar conference plenary address to South African psychologists, critically exposing various dangerously, dehumanizing trends of the contemporary modern world, Dreyer Kruger (1986) argued for a return to primary experience and therefore a human science psychology, based on unbiased and faithful description of human

phenomena illuminated and enriched by hermeneutic understanding.

Kruger (1986) quotes Husserl’s message for Binswanger in the visitors book at the Sanatorium Bellevue as follows:

*‘Ins ersehnte Himmelreich einer wahren Psychologie werden wir nicht kommen, es sei denn dasz wir werden wie die Kinder – We will not be able to enter the heavenly kingdom of a true psychology until we become again like the children’*  
(Kruger 1986:107)

In earlier works I referred to psychology as a dialogue in an ever-changing world context (Edwards 1988) and to phenomenology as an essentially creative methodology (Edwards 1992) consisting of both diverging (*epoche*) and converging (eidetic reduction) movements of consciousness. While not neglecting sub- or supra-human aspects of reality, the psychotherapeutic focus is on the essentially human and humanly essential. In suspending the natural attitude and bracketing of bias, we become more open to allow particular world phenomena to reveal themselves to us more clearly. Add change as a given certainty, and we may understand the human relational event as an ongoing hermeneutic spiraling process of design and discovery which is an essence of the psychotherapeutic and scientific method of reality and truth as revealed through insights, therapeutic moments, ongoing behavioural and life-world changes. What was often neglected in traditional positivistic research was the mutual influence of the designing consciousness of the researcher and/or psychotherapist as well as that of the research participants/clients in the description, explication and creation of new experiences, behaviors, meanings, horizons, realities and truths in their ever-changing world contexts.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Dreyfus (1996) have established and refined the philosophical basis for an essential understanding of

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phenomenological intervention in the concept of the intentional arc and analysis of learning new skills respectively. The argument essentially is that increasingly differentiated and skilled bodily movements require and elicit increasingly differentiated world responses. As we become more open/ involved in the world, (as required in the phenomenological reduction), more refined/cultured situations can be distinguished and differentiated. These situations in turn elicit more refined and skilled interventions in an ongoing intentional arc. (This is also generally true of being/becoming human, an adult, learning, motivation). From a therapeutic perspective, if, as has been argued by Heidegger (1927), supported by phenomenological psychotherapists (Kruger 1988b, Spinelli 1989) and promoted by the caring/helping professions, care is an essential in being human and human relationships, phenomenological psychotherapy is about the continual development and improvement of therapeutic care through feedback from increasingly refined caring situations.

We can amplify and transfer this essential description to the field of philosophy and psychology of education which may be viewed as a matter of unlocking learners for the world and the world for learners (Edwards 1992) or in the words of Degenaar (1982) a matter of making the whole world into a classroom in which everything is still to be learned.

### Conclusion

It appears that to the extent that we are able to discover and design new worlds, we can conclude that all phenomenological research and therapeutic praxis is interventionist. Echoing van

den Berg's (1980) words we are able in deed to reach the conclusion that phenomenology is intervention.

Future implications are that as phenomenology continually transforms from a more purely philosophical movement mainly concerned with critical theory into an interventionist approach and method in applied human and social sciences, its practical value will become increasingly realized. Applied interventionist research and therapy will in turn continually transform and refresh critical theoretical principles and foundational procedures.

Can we somehow end with a message, which reveals the essential moment of the intentional interventional event in the research and psychotherapeutic process? Perhaps TS Elliott in 'Little Gidding' comes closest to describing the essence of this moment in his great dream pledge to life.

'We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploration  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.'

### About the Author

Dr Edwards has had a long-term commitment to phenomenological methodology and has published extensively in the area of community-based psychology, indigenous psychology, healing and mental health. He actively contributes to clinical health practice in South Africa.

Areas of research interest include community-based psychology, Indigenous psychology and mental health.

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