

KA\*719 – Advanced Phenomenological Inquiry  
Module 4 – Transformative Phenomenology  
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After two months of investigating phenomenology, I'm not at all surprised to discover that there is a branch of this philosophical inquiry qualified as "transformative" – indeed, the entire journey could have been considered transformative. Maybe the "transformative" side of phenomenology is not so much redundant as it is a reminder? An emphasis? In any case, I am reminded of the words of Edmund Husserl, originator of phenomenology:

Perhaps it will even become manifest that the total phenomenological attitude and the epoche belonging to it are destined in essence to effect, at first, a complete personal transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion, which then, however, over and above this, bears within itself the significance of the greatest existential transformation which is assigned as a task to mankind as such (Husserl, 1954/1970, p. 137, as cited in Rehorick and Bentz, 2008, p. 26).

I know that most people would like to think their work is important, at least meaningful, but to claim it has the potential to be "the greatest existential transformation" that may be given to mankind is perhaps hyperbole – especially when we consider, "phenomenology has been marginalized within mainstream Anglo-American philosophy and has consequently not had the salutary influence on our conception of human understanding that it deserves" (Johnson, 2007, p. x). Husserl may turn out to be correct – phenomenology does seem to make a restorative correction to the debilitating over-emphasis on rational, empirical thinking that has dominated the Western mind – yet we should hope to see a bit more diffusion first.

Rehorick and Bentz do a fabulous job of capturing and diffusing the inherent transformative power of phenomenology in their edited work *Transformative Phenomenology: Changing Ourselves, Lifeworlds and Professional Practice* (2008). In the opening chapter, Bentz recounts a tale from when she started on the path of phenomenology, how an early mentor jokingly warned her, "Watch out before you study phenomenology; you will never be the same" (p. 9) – so it's certainly no secret. Even so, I thought it was a bit ironic that the majority of authors contributing to this collection *were already in* a transformative situation when they chose phenomenology as the research method to make sense of this situation. As such, I'm in the process of wondering whether phenomenology, in itself, is a *cause* of transformation or whether phenomenology simply *reflects* accurately that which is already an ongoing

transformative process – *being alive*. Maybe a look at some of the stories in the book will help to vivify this possible distinction.

Dudley O. Tower writes about his research study involving male cancer survivors. This was a gripping tale that at once celebrated the joy of being alive yet revealed how tenuous this life can be. To overcome a life threatening disease – to be given a new ‘lease on life’ – is certainly an opportunity to re-evaluate life priorities: “My study indicates that certain survivors will go beyond mere improvements in their quality of life and actually experience a positive transformation in meaning and consciousness that is the direct result of their survival” (p. 68). Thus, the transformation here occurred before any research study. The benefit of the phenomenological method, in this case, was to provide a context through which survivors could offer deep and rich accounts of their transformative process, accounts that could not have been accessed by other research methods. Tower explains: “Several of my more specific findings, discovered in the analysis of themes, run counter to the prevailing wisdom and practice regarding cancer survivorship, and I hope they will inform other survivors and the healthcare community” (p. 80).

Adair Linn Nagata wrote a piece that affected me quite significantly, concerned as it was with such concepts as *bodymindfulness*, *embodied empathic resonance*, and *interbeing*. Nagata’s experience came from working as a senior executive in a transnational Japanese securities firm, where she was given the responsibility of establishing norms of intercultural communication. What she discovered by sensitive observation was that the basis of all intercultural communication was happening at a pre-verbal, pre-conscious level. It could be said that this is the level that phenomenology seeks to access by ‘bracketing’ presuppositions and conceptual prejudices. Based on the deeper understanding that a phenomenological perspective afforded, Nagata is able to say: “I learned to attune to *energetic presence* – a person’s living presence and the message it communicates, whether or not the person is conscious of it” (p. 143). I believe Nagata’s research is operating at the level that could contribute to a species-wide “existential transformation” such as envisioned by Husserl; so, in this case, the techniques of phenomenology could be considered causal and not simply co-extensive.

Finally, Marc J. LaFountain contributed an interesting chapter entitled “Phenomenological Sociology and Tai Chi.” I liked this one because it also emphasized a body-based way of sensing and knowing. “Phenomenology requires that we separate ourselves from what we know, or temporarily suspend what we know in order to grasp this knowing as it comes to be” (p. 176) – and, “as it comes to be” is always first sensed by the body, before it can be processed by the rational mind. “Because the body inhabits space and time, its basic relation to the world is one of being in the world rather than knowing the world” (p. 183). Arguably, the art of “being in the world” is one that has been lost by the rationalizing, theorizing, constantly conceptualizing Western mind. A recovery of this art would constitute a societal transformation

of the highest order. LaFountain restored 'being' through Tai Chi: through staying present, centered, aware of the breath, in the flow, he has managed to access "the embodied mind," the pre-reflective state of being that come before the need to know. This is very much the realm of phenomenology.

So, in these examples we see a few of the different ways in which transformative experiences can be related to phenomenology. Whether the phenomenological reduction – that is, the temporary suspension of input from the rational reasoning mind that may enable pre-reflective, pre-conscious awareness – actually contributes to transformative potential or whether a life already in transformation may be made more meaningful through phenomenological interpretation, either way, phenomenology and transformation are inherently connected – thus "transformative phenomenology" is a statement of emphasis, not just another branch.

- Husserl, E. (trans. by D. Carr). (1954/1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology: An introduction to phenomenological philosophy*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press
- Johnson, M. (2007). *The meaning of the body: Aesthetics of human understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Rehorick, D. and V.M. Bentz (eds.) (2008). *Transformative phenomenology: Changing ourselves, lifeworlds, and professional practice*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books