

THEMATIC METHODOLOGY EMERGING FROM THE AMPLIFYING COMPLEXITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Sunnie D. Kidd

Presented at the Fourth International Symposium of Universalism,
19 May 1992, London, England

Introduction

This is a response to a growing awareness of the integral relationship of philosophy and psychology. It presents an approach to research and provides the philosophical foundations to support it. A thematic methodology in qualitative research offers opportunities to expand already-established horizons of knowledge. As individual learning deepens, collective knowledge about human nature grows and expands. Revealing both personal and structural aspects of experience establishes a harmony, transcending oppositions and bridging the gap between personal and collective knowledge. This approach arises from a theoretical philosophical proposition first offered by Pierre Thévenaz, a Swiss-French phenomenologist. Thévenaz suggests rather than coming to know oneself *only* through one's relation to others and objects, that is, through intentionality, it is possible to become increasingly conscious of oneself directly. This is reflexive consciousness which is the ground for intentionality rather than the reverse. When this reversal in the priority of the functions of consciousness is applied in a research methodology, a shift in emphasis emerges. Original meaning of experience by a self-in-action, how it moves through reflective consciousness, the dynamics of experience as it happens, can be reached.

Using a thematic methodology in qualitative research offers opportunities to expand the already established horizons of knowledge. What is learned may reveal something which has been unknown or it may correct or expand what is already known. It is a way to simultaneously deepen and enrich the heights/depths of personal and collective knowledge and to expand forward/backward comprehension. As individual learning deepens so at the same time collective knowledge about human nature grows and expands. By revealing both personal and structural aspects of experience a harmony is achieved, transcending the opposition and bridging the gap between personal and collective knowledge, the universal. This is accomplished by an intensification of attention. Until now, this approach has remained only a theoretical philosophical proposition first offered by Pierre Thévenaz.¹ Thévenaz suggests that rather than coming to know oneself *only* through one's relation to others and objects, that is, through intentionality it is possible to become more and more conscious of oneself directly. This is reflexive consciousness and Thévenaz argues that reflexive consciousness is

the ground for intentionality rather than the other way around. When this reversal in the priority of the functions of consciousness is applied in a research methodology a shift in emphasis naturally emerges.

Simultaneously expanding the horizons of already established understanding and transcending oppositions, means that the horizons of consciousness itself are stretched and expanded. From this expansion an enhanced and enriched understanding emerges, more and more becomes visible and available. This does not happen by reducing or bracketing experience. Rather than finding the bones, the structures of experience alone, it becomes possible to see the dynamics, the acts of meaning constitution, that is, consciousness of self-in-expression. The original meaning of the experience by the self-in-action and how it moves through reflective consciousness, the dynamics of experience as it happens, can be reached.

When a person describes an experience there emerges some understanding and comprehension of what that situation means for the person who has described it. This includes guiding and supportive leitmotifs of meaning. These motifs of meaning may not be explicitly stated but become more and more visible and identifiable. They are guides to meaning and run through the description, flowing through the story as it unfolds much as water flows through the terrain. Motifs of meaning describe emerging themes, they may appear, disappear and reappear later, strengthening particular aspects, leading to increased understanding, deepening and enriching comprehension. They are revealed in a spontaneous expression of the self as it is personally comprehended. People describe experience as they have lived it and understand its personal meaning by its impact and effect.

There are three methodological movements in this thematic methodology. The first is identifying Experiential Expressions.

1) Experiential Expressions

Beginning research with Experiential Expressions provides access to what is given, how it is given and to whom it is given. When a person describes an experience, the description contains a fundamental meaning matrix which is specific to that person. But it also contains social and cultural aspects. Meaning is embedded within this 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. Experiential Expressions reveal patterns and boundaries to meaning which may be taken-for-granted. At the same time they point to contours which outline a wider social context. These expressions illustrate emphases which punctuate experience, revealing its mood and tone, that is, the ever-changing variety and inflections of human expression. Because experience always occurs in a situation, in a history,

there are assumptions involved which either have or have not been examined. Cultural aspects give shape and form to experience through assumptions that have been learned and taken up without the benefit of reflective thought. They influence the interpretation of one's own situation.

Experiential Expressions are phrases which illustrate how someone experiences and what that experience means. They are recognized by the way they identify a personal style of experience and reveal the way a person has taken up a particular meaning, the way it is lived. They provide a quick glimpse of the person's ongoing experience of consciousness of self-in-action. Acts which constitute particular meanings are creative acts. Each act establishes the person in a unique style of becoming which is recognizable and identifiable while still sharing some characteristics with others. They can be short expressions or sentences which convey qualitative dimensions, including attitudinal statements, identifying personal beliefs, revealing values or giving expression to other thoughts or impressions. When seen together, Experiential Expressions reveal personalized patterns of meaning.

Prior knowledge and experience are the experiential referents to current self-understanding. They reveal thematic groups and patterns of meaning in their relationship to each other. Experiential Expressions in each description, stand out in ways which, when seen together, represent not only the person who provided them but describe some aspect of collective knowledge and understanding. Emerging out of these cultural and social foundations, Experiential Expressions express an internal dialectic between the personal and the self-other-world. These expressions, when grouped together into natural meaning constellations provide opportunities for amplification.

The advantage of this thematic methodology is that it provides access to these dynamics of meaning constitution while revealing one's grasp of consciousness of self-in-expression. *It shows how things work.* In this method immediate experience is revealed in personal expression and shines through in the findings. Experiential Expressions provide the first glimpse of personal meaning, a nexus of meaning which opens up to thematic amplification.

2) Thematic Amplification

The second movement, Thematic Amplification, is a focusing and deepening of the thematic meaning first identified by Experiential Expressions. Amplifying thematic meaning expands it to reveal what resides *within* the experience, those personal and social referents which guide personal choice and action. This movement also stays close to rather than moves away from the original feel of the description, remains specific rather than abstract. This differs from other phenomenological methods which

reduce experience, thereby taking apart the initial impressions of experience, disturbing the image and destroying intuitive understanding. Amplification of the atmospheric qualities of experience resound its meaning and preserve its dynamic quality.

The movement in thematic amplification is a becoming, an increasingly inclusive movement in consciousness, intensifying, revealing an expressive flow. Thévenaz describes this effort of concentrated attention as an act of will. Becoming conscious of what is present is an action which requires concentrated effort. Amplification of themes conserves and expands subtle nuances and intuitive vibrations which often give shape and form to that which stands out in a 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. Amplification of consciousness works somewhat like time-lapsed photography where slowing down time reveals processes which cannot be seen by a single grasp of the human eye. For example, microphotography opens up the temporal processes and a whole new world is revealed to exist inside another. This thematic methodology is similar in its effect. Intensifying the attention of the researcher reveals not only what an experience is but also identifies its relation to a self-in-action. Expanding the attention can only be done through an effort, increasing the focus upon what is immediately given. What is thereby revealed is included in ever-widening and deepening horizons of meaning, becoming more and more expansive while preserving within it the specificity of the experience, the unique and personal. This shift in research attention deepens and clarifies what is already known, it offers a way to see the workings of experience, the dynamics of meaning constitution as it emerges via personal action. It allows access to the immediate grasp of consciousness of self, that is, the foundation for the emergence of the dynamics of meaning constitution.

3) Reflective Synthesis

In the third movement, Reflective Synthesis, the researcher again reviews the flowing and unfolding meaning which unifies into an overarching, inclusive synthesis. There is a distancing here, a stepping back to allow a panoramic vision, allowing an integration. This is achieved by returning to the projects, goals and objectives in the situated context, maintaining reference points which re-ground what has been revealed in a more fully informed understanding. A Reflective Synthesis does not provide the definition of a phenomenon but culminates in a transcendence of the opposition between structural and personal meaning, it unifies. It is a mutually enriching dialogue, synthetic and synergistic.

Through the movement of Reflective Synthesis the researcher arrives at a comprehensive understanding, allowing a smooth transition 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 structure allow the experience to be seen in its wholeness and to place it within the wider social/cultural and temporal contexts. The particular is preserved within the universal. This comprehensive understanding enables the researcher to relate findings to existing theory, to compare and contrast and make distinctions.

Theoretical Implications

For Thévenaz, 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 meaning. One is conscious of oneself as that being which experiences its own existence and comes to know itself in relation to others, objects and events. Amplification allows methodological access to values which guide action. 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.²

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 *constituting power* more original, a fact more primitive, than intentionality.³

With the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin it is possible to amplify this thematic methodology in yet another advance. If one follows the curve of consciousness a center of spiritual energy emerges. It reaches its culmination in the heart of the Noosphere. Teilhard describes:

...a consciousness becoming ever more centered, emerging from the heart of an increasingly vast system of more numerous and better organised elements.⁴

The whole sheaf can be charged to its fullest extent (see Figure 1). In pursuing its course of amplifying complexity consciousness as a centripetal centrifugal dynamism is a center. The centripetal is reflexive. The centrifugal is reflective. In the center of the Omega symbol is the heart. The Omega symbol itself has centripetal centrifugal curves. The depth of the living complexity of the reflexive (intuitive) and the reflective (cognitive) is its centration. The reflexive is inflexive an inward-folding. The reflective is co-reflective an outward-folding. The reflexive is circumflexive which is the inward-folding sheaf. The reflective is Ultra-reflective which is the outward-folding sheaf.

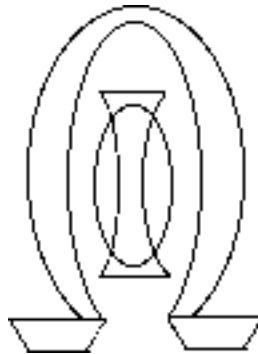


Figure 1

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.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- 4) Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man*, trans. Norman Denny (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 186.