

6-1-2002

# The Technicity Paradigm and Scientism in Qualitative Research

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## Recommended APA Citation

Steiner, C. J. (2002). The Technicity Paradigm and Scientism in Qualitative Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 7(2), 1-28. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol7/iss2/4>

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This philosophical paper suggests that almost all academic research, including qualitative research, is conducted under the influence of a "technicity paradigm" which values objectivity, generalisability and rationality. This paper explores, from a Heideggerian perspective, the fundamental characteristics of research under the influence of technicity and discusses how these characteristics manifest in qualitative research. It includes a reflection on what qualitative research might be like if it could escape the influence of technicity and realise its potential for inclusive and relevant knowledge making.

### Keywords

Heidegger, Phenomenology, Philosophy, Rationalism, Paradigms, Research Techniques

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# The Technicity Paradigm and Scientism in Qualitative Research

by  
Carol J. Steiner<sup>±</sup>

*The Qualitative Report*, Volume 7, Number 2 June, 2002

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## Abstract

This philosophical paper suggests that almost all academic research, including qualitative research, is conducted under the influence of a "technicity paradigm" which values objectivity, generalisability and rationality. This paper explores, from a Heideggerian perspective, the fundamental characteristics of research under the influence of technicity and discusses how these characteristics manifest in qualitative research. It includes a reflection on what qualitative research might be like if it could escape the influence of technicity and realise its potential for inclusive and relevant knowledge making.

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## I. Introduction

Qualitative research holds the promise of an escape from smug, exploitive, scientific, reductivist research. It has the potential to restore respect for ontological integrity and to bring worldly engagement back into knowing. It has the capacity to replace esoterica with relevance. But does qualitative research deliver on its promise; does it achieve its potential? In too many instances, it does not. This is because, too often, qualitative research places the emphasis on *research*, which undermines qualitative reflection. Within the philosophical framework of Heideggerian phenomenology (Heidegger, [1954/1977a](#)), research is the arrogant hallmark of our modern existence under the influence of what Heidegger ([1952/1977b](#)) calls "technicity" (*Technik* in German).

This paper explores some of the founding assumptions and values of the technicity paradigm, and explicates alternative assumptions and values that might characterise qualitative reflection (rather than research) influenced by Heideggerian phenomenology. Such an exploration is needed because even qualitative researchers still seem to be under the covert influence of technicity while they overtly reject many of the trappings of scientism and positivism. While there is no reason why qualitative researchers should abandon their technicity-influenced approach, I think their accounts of their work would be more internally consistent if they acknowledged the scientific and positivistic tentacles that still have a grip on their thinking.

This paper outlines the characteristics of research under the influence of the technicity paradigm and provides some examples of how such characteristics are manifest in qualitative research. It

concludes with a picture of what qualitative research might look like if it were approached with a phenomenological attitude.

## II. RESEARCH IN THE EPOCH OF TECHNICITY

According to Heidegger, we live in an epoch of technicity. At the root of the epoch of technicity lies a belief in rationality as a solution to almost every problem, but especially to problems of control (Heidegger, [1954/1977a](#), [1952/1977b](#)). The epoch of technicity is also characterised by scientism, specialisation and abstraction. Many of these characteristics are manifest in "research," a special way of making, acquiring and evaluating knowledge based on specialisation, efficiency of knowledge production (Heidegger, [1954/1977a](#)), and detachment of what is studied from its usual context so that researchers can focus on the area of special interest and be most efficient (Heidegger, [1927/1996](#)). This detachment is the origin of abstraction. "Research," in a Heideggerian scheme, is the rigorous, institutionalised pursuit of certainty through rational, objective representation of experience.

"Research" as a manifestation of the epoch of technicity is distinguished from "reflection" as a way of acquiring knowledge (Heidegger, [1954/1977c](#)). Reflection is "calm, self-possessed surrender to that which is worthy of questioning." (Heidegger, [1954/1977c](#), p. 180) In contrast, research involves the frantic accumulation of specialist data for its own sake, as the basis for expertise and for the power to control the territory defined as the specialist discipline. To facilitate this accumulation, research relies on agreed and controllable methods for accumulating and evaluating knowledge to permit division of labour and a faster aggregation of a body of knowledge valuable to the discipline (Heidegger, [1954/1977a](#)). These "methods" rely on and create the characteristics of research-driven knowledge making in the epoch of technicity: scientism, specialisation, abstraction and rationalism.

### A. Scientism

Scientism characterises research in the epoch of technicity not just because people count and measure empirical phenomena but because, from their standpoint of belief in one people-centred scenario of knowledge production or another, an entire schema of operation emerges that determines their research. Heidegger ([1954/1977a](#)) calls such a schema "the rule and law of science" and says science requires "binding adherence" to that rule and law. Kuhn ([1970](#)) calls this phenomenon "a paradigm."

The *rule of science* refers to the prescription of a domain, a set of practices and an attitude to the world. These are the equivalents of such Kuhnian paradigm elements as world view, values, techniques, symbolic generalisations and exemplars. The *law of science* manages the match between the rule of science and the knowledge emerging from that rule, ensuring that the rule adjusts so that it is never too out of sync with what is known. Kuhn discusses the rule and law of science in terms of how "normal science" deals with minor anomalies between paradigm-sanctioned "facts" and emerging, contrary ones. "Normal science" is characterised as like-minded members of a discipline community engaging in a respectful struggle with competing ideas to resolve minor theoretical or methodological disagreements.

The rule and law of science (paradigms) create a closed system of knowing that permits what Hacking (1992) calls "the self-vindication of science": whatever science discovers or proves emerges from and fits within its closed system of paradigm understanding which is self-certifying. What is certified is what fits the paradigm understanding. If the new knowledge doesn't fit, it is usually assumed that there was something wrong with the methodology that produced it, rarely with the paradigm understanding itself.

We see this concern with getting the methodology right and operating within the agreed scenario of knowledge production in debates about what constitutes good qualitative research practice across many fields that use qualitative methods (e.g., Ackroyd, 1996; Drisko, 1997; Gordon, 1999; Orosz, 1997; Rennie, 1998). We also see the hunger for a defined rule and law to close the system of qualitative research in support for various methodological ideologies; for example, semiotics (Valentine, 1996); Husserlian phenomenology (Giorgi, 1997; Roberts, 1997); grounded theory (Goulding, 1998; Rennie, 1998); realism (Healy & Perry, 2000) and social constructivism (Hackley, 1998). Each of these research specialisms equally, by virtue of being underpinned by an ideology that excludes as much as it includes, falls prey to the scientism of the epoch of technicity.

For example, the world of symbols studied by a semiotician would be a poor basis for theorising by a grounded theorist or Husserlian phenomenologist who must "bracket" (exclude) their preconceptions (King, 1994, p. 27; Husserl, 1973), while to semioticians, people who believe in "things in themselves" probably seem to have only a crude and naïve appreciation of their own experiences. Social constructivists believe the realist world of absolute phenomena is unknowable (Collins, 1985), while realists wonder what the point of knowledge making is if there is no underpinning reality to support it, only social interpretations (Hasse, Krucken, & Weingart, 1994).

Binding adherence to the rule and law of any "science" requires a form of blindness to excluded possibilities, even though those possibilities are the basis of other disciplines. The origin and effect of this blindness caused by the phenomenon of "thematization" is discussed in greater detail in the next section. But to understand Heidegger's concept of scientism and my contention that most qualitative research is scientistic, we also need to explore further, the idea of binding adherence, another important characteristic of scientism in the epoch of technicity. Why it is important will also emerge in the next section.

People who don't adhere to the rule and law of their discipline, who fail to toe the paradigm line, are considered incompetent and unreliable outsiders; to be an insider is to understand and *accept* the rule and law of one's paradigm and to work to maintain them.

To put it more colloquially, to be an insider is to be judged by one's peers to be competent, professional, skilled, reliable, to be accepted by one's peers as a "good operator," someone who understands and respects professional standards, values and practices, who does things the "right way." An outsider is someone who doesn't accept what counts as quality research and who wants to work outside the paradigm guidelines and prescriptions.

But it is important to distinguish between people who operate outside a paradigm or who don't adhere to the rule and law of science because they are sloppy, careless or ignorant of the "right way," and those who operate outside a paradigm by conscious choice, by rejecting the limitations of the paradigm because the paradigm cannot accommodate their results or because it limits the approach they choose to embrace. The outsiders I am contrasting to paradigm insiders are the consciously unconventional, people who I like to say have "the courage to be incompetent" (Steiner, [1998](#)). Historically, many paradigm outsiders are ultimately recognised as innovators and paradigm shifters within their discipline communities, but only after their outsider views are welcomed inside, usually after many long and painful years of ridicule and rejection by their discipline communities and their journals.

This paper is an outsider paper because although I identify with the qualitative research community, I am challenging the foundations of qualitative research. When I try to do my research with my Heideggerian values and beliefs, I am often conscious of being considered insufficiently rigorous for not following conventional qualitative methods. When I teach research students my values and beliefs, I am seen as an amusing heretic who can even be a bit dangerous to know when one is trying to produce a conventional (passable) qualitative thesis or dissertation. Because I don't feel bound to adhere to any one predominant rule and law of the various qualitative research paradigms, I exist as a somewhat incompetent outsider to them all.

In summary, in the epoch of technicity, scientism requires that those who engage in research choose their paradigm and adhere to its rule and law if they wish to be seen as competent members of their discipline community. It seems to me that this scenario of scientism is quite a good description of most approaches to qualitative research.

## **B. Specialisation and Abstraction**

Research communities both reflect and encourage research specialisation. Specialisation is a response to the technicity-inspired desire for control. It is easier to control the small and simple than the big and complex. In rendering phenomena manageable, the domain of interest narrows. This is where experts, as opposed to polymaths, come from.

Specialisation is also a response to the technicity-inspired pursuit of efficiency. The most effective way to improve the efficiency of research is to narrow the field of study and increase the number of knowledge-makers who can work cooperatively on the task. Think of the efficiency of the internationally dispersed human genome project.

The most effective way to narrow the field of study is to detach (physically or conceptually) the objects of study from their complicated contexts. This is the essence of the reductivism and abstraction that characterise Western thinking in this epoch and that produce research specialties. For example, to understand a culture, some researchers study texts, others study oral history, others study rituals, others study family dynamics, others study gender relationships - and too rarely is there convergence or cross-pollination. Heidegger calls this process of reduction and abstraction that characterises research "thematization," reducing holistic phenomena (like culture) to nothing more than a narrowly conceived abstract theme for research (like rituals or oral history).

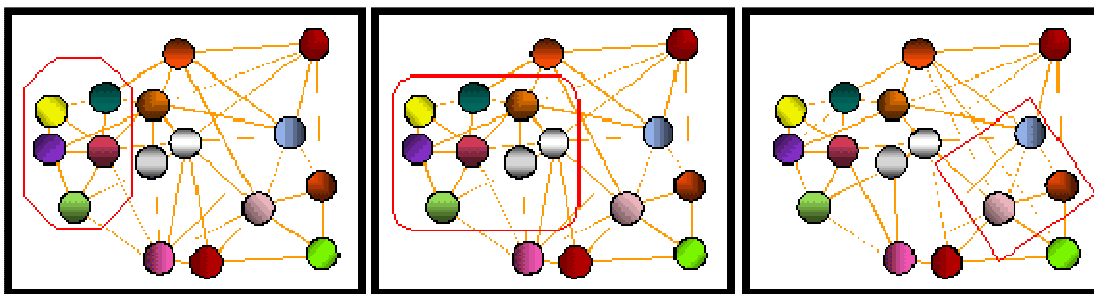
The most effective way to enable more people to work cooperatively in the same discipline is to render their diversity uniform or immaterial to the work. This is the origin of the myth of objectivity as an aim and prescription for effective knowledge making. The scientist isn't supposed to matter. Of course, in qualitative research, we own up to our subjectivity, but I'll now explain how that doesn't stop us from rendering ourselves uniform.

## 1. Thematisation of the World

Heidegger (1927/1996) described a holistic, *concrete* world constituted by all our life experiences, even the mundane and fleeting, and both personal experiences and those handed down to us by others through education and socialisation. The phenomena of all these experiences are linked together to create their significance, their ontological essence, the concrete world of our experience. The connectedness of this holistic world is undermined by *thematisation* that detaches phenomena and people from their places within its context.

Thematisation is the mechanism for delimiting domains of research interest. Thematisation confines a researcher's focus to the "theme" of most interest to the researcher's paradigm. Thematisation influences how much of the holistic concrete world we experience because thematisation determines how open we are to the holistic world, how much we are prepared to consider significant. For example (see below), if all the interconnected coloured spheres together represent a multi-dimensional culture, each of the red geometric outlines represents how research themes (rituals, texts, history) frame and exclude some of the other dimensions of the culture.

Figure 1



Researchers are usually open only to experiences that fit the pre-determined paradigm boundaries of their research specialty. These boundaries effectively detach phenomena from their holistic context by rendering other phenomena in that context insignificant or irrelevant to the research task, outside the boundary of the theme. This reduction simplifies the phenomena of interest (inside the boundary), but it diminishes their concreteness by ignoring their contextuality (which extends outside the boundary). This is the essence of *abstraction* -- taking something away from its concrete context and reducing and simplifying it. This is how researchers create abstract theory and create theory-practice gaps.

For example, qualitative management researchers regularly reduce people to abstract "employees" by detaching them from their holistic context. This detachment excludes experiences and phenomena unrelated to the employing organisation or work matters. They then



study these abstractions within the limited context of a human resource or industrial relations management issue or problem (their theme). What they learn through such research is often difficult to re-integrate with the complex context of a real organisation populated by real people with lives beyond the organisation and their jobs (Hartshorn, [1997](#)). The theory-practice gap is created.

For example, if one is interested in studying how job security affects a person's commitment to their employer (the research question), one would ask people questions about how job security makes them feel about their employer, how they think their employer feels about them, and how their job security affects the way they approach their job and think about their career. But if the research is done within the narrow themes of workplace relations or conditions of employment or staff retention, then researchers might never uncover the effect of family responsibilities or non-work related personal ambitions on how job security affects workers.

In one study (Kunda, [1994](#)), an ethnographer exploring the theme of organisational culture and refusing to be bound by any methodological constraints, found that a job-for-life policy at one workplace made people feel trapped because, although they were unhappy in their work, they felt they couldn't quit because doing so required them to reject absolute financial security which they considered too important to their families to sacrifice. The same pressure might thwart any desire to leave work to pursue a selfish pleasure like travelling the globe or to commit to an altruistic task like doing relief work in a foreign land. These concerns would normally lie outside the thematic boundaries of qualitative research on workplace relations, conditions of employment or staff retention. They may also be considered beyond the scope of the research question. Yet, without these insights, the significance of anything people might say about their enthusiasm for job security or their commitment to staying with an employer would be, to use Heidegger's term, "deficient." (Heidegger, [1927/1996](#), p. 53). Not wrong, not mistaken, just not all it could be, due to self-imposed thematic blindness.

Likewise, qualitative market research reduces people to *consumers* (Gabriel & Lang, [1995](#)); social work does qualitative research on *clients* (Halmi, [1996](#)); and librarians qualitatively study *users* (Park, [1994](#)). These italicised terms represent the thematic reduction of whole, rounded human beings who exist in complex networks of relationships and experiences into abstracted entities confined to the thematic framework of a discipline. Who of us ever think of ourselves as consumers, as patients of our doctors, as users of our libraries? I never thought of my foster daughter or myself as clients of our social worker. These are abstract, constructed and diminished personas that exist only within the boundaries of a research theme and within the imaginations of discipline-bound researchers. They exist as types, samples or respondents. Heidegger says researchers "dream" them (Heidegger, [1975/1988](#), p. 54). Outside those thematic boundaries, these personas blossom into human beings of unknowable complexity and distinction.

## **2. Thematisation of Researchers**

Thematisation also *reduces researchers* who feel compelled to conform to the parameters and interests of their discipline, to confine their interests and efforts to their specialised abstract world. Researchers are said to be reduced because, in a Heideggerian scheme, *we are the world*



*we experience*. Without a concrete world to fill our lives with meaning, we are an empty space, what Heidegger ([1927/1996](#)) calls "the there."

Interestingly, Heidegger claims the world does not have meaning; it has only significance. Only people have meaning. Only people can be meaningful, full of the significance of the world. (Heidegger, [1927/1996](#), p. 142) When we are filled with a thematically reduced world of significance, *we* are less meaningful. When we thematise, *we reduce ourselves* to a discipline-defined identity. We become merely researchers rather than whole and diverse individuals with a more meaningful identity and a more significant world in which to exist. Bochner ([1997](#)) provides an excellent insight into how this reduction feels.

Each of the red geometric outlines referred to as research themes in the illustrations above actually represent the shape of the researchers who approach the world thematically (their professional personas). Each shape is a "there" delineated by its commitment to a certain way of looking at the world, as a semiotician, as a textual analyst, as a grounded theorist. What is inside the geometric outline is what makes the personas meaningful. The less there is in there, the less meaningful the researchers are as human beings. People who are not able to embrace all their possibilities because of, in this case, professional constraints, can be expected to sometimes feel "deficient" themselves and, in response, seek new careers or lifestyles, or opportunities to break out of their paradigm. (Saying someone is less meaningful or deficient is not a judgement on their worth. It suggests they are denying themselves existential possibilities.)

Researchers are also reduced in another way by thematisation. To be human, in a Heideggerian scheme, is to be *in-the-world*, to be involved with the holistic world from a unique place in it. Each person has the ontological potential to experience the world from a unique perspective. ([See the first two frames below.](#)) But when people create abstract worlds through identification with a discipline or profession, their unique place in the world disappears and is replaced by an impersonal "one," as in "doing what *one* does." "One's place" is dictated by one's thematic area of interest (paradigm). ([See the third frame below.](#))

Researchers committed to the same paradigm stand in much the same place in the world, and their perspective is confined to the bounds of their paradigm. Their experiences and possibilities are diminished, they are less meaningful as human beings, and their subjectivity is no longer personal or unique.

**Figure 2**



This loss of a uniquely personal role or place in experience is acknowledged in the concept of objectivity. But restrictive paradigm boundaries also alter one's subjectivity, one's perspective, one's sense of one's place in the world. Paradigm subjectivity looks like objectivity because it is neither personal nor unique.

The similarity between subjectivity and objectivity can be seen in concerns about validity and reliability, which are no less popular in qualitative research (Hall & Rist, [1999](#); Healy & Perry, [2000](#); Kirk & Miller, [1986](#); Seale & Silverman, [1997](#); Sykes, [1990](#)) than they are in quantitative research. These concerns relate to objectivity because such concerns grow out of residual realist beliefs in "accurate," paradigm-sanctioned experience from which the human variable has been removed. But they persist in qualitative research as well, despite a seeming commitment to infinite personal or interpersonal (subjective) interpretations of experience that could never approach "accuracy." But under the influence of technicity, even qualitative research paradigms sanction only experiences attained from certain paradigm-approved perspectives or through paradigm-sanctioned methodologies.

For example, triangulation is used to increase the validity and reliability of subjective findings (Williamson, [2000](#)). Williamson says, "The advantage of triangulation is that conclusions are likely to be more reliable if data are collected by more than one method and from the perspective of more than one person" (p. 36) and "ethnographers attempt to develop dense and widely scoped texts whose validity can be ensured through the use of triangulation" (p. 166).

But the very ideas of validity and reliability are inconsistent with the uniqueness of individual perceptions and are based on positivist assumptions about truth. The idea of validity assumes that what we measure or observe has an existence beyond our experience of it; validity is how close we get to that "real" existence. Validity is based on the traditional realist assumption that underpins the correspondence theory of truth (Russell, [1912](#)). The idea of reliability values ideas or beliefs that have consistency or persistence over time. This is the basis for the coherence theory of truth (Bradley, [1914](#)). As positivist concepts, both of these ideas have their roots firmly in rationalism, realism and technicity. They are incompatible with the uniqueness of human experience but they are not at all incompatible with bounded subjectivity within paradigm-bound qualitative research.

The similarity between objectivity and subjectivity can also be seen in how many qualitative researchers seek to generalise their findings. The original aim of objectivity as a requirement for sound research was to enable the efficient production of generalisable knowledge by eliminating the most unreliable variable, the subjective researcher. In such a system, knowledge could only be sanctioned if it could be replicated by anyone, anywhere, using the same sanctioned methods. If it could be replicated by anyone, anywhere, then its findings could be safely generalised.

A few researchers still believe in absolute replicability, but most other researchers, especially qualitative researchers, no longer do. Yet they still seem to believe in the *generalisability* of their qualitative knowledge, much to the amusement or dismay of scientific researchers. Believing in the generalisability of their own and others' experiences means they assume such experiences to be the same as those of others whom they expect will see things the same way, share the same perspective, and experience the same possibilities. Generalisability assumes it is possible to draw

others into the bounded persona of the paradigm researcher. At its worst, generalisability assumes this ontological assault on human uniqueness is acceptable.

The odd and cognitively dissonant assumption of the generalisability of qualitative data is revealed in the way researchers write up and apply their research.

Anyone who uses words like "is" and "are" when reporting their research, or words like "should" or "must" when describing applications of their findings, appears to be generalising their personal experiences. To avoid the appearance of generalising one's subjective observations, one might use expressions like "seems" or "appears to" in place of "is" and "are." To advise or prescribe behaviours flowing from one's research, one could use words like "might" or "could" instead of "should" or "must." To do the former is difficult, as evidenced by all of this paper that is written conventionally, except for the first sentence of this paragraph. That the latter is difficult is evidenced by the weakened force of the second and third sentences in this paragraph that sound wishy-washy.

I am not advocating that qualitative researchers imprison themselves in a linguistic straightjacket of self-conscious censoring. Rather, I am trying to bring to light the powerful assumptions of technicity that persist, unacknowledged, even in the least scientific qualitative research.

As long as we believe that others can and should see the world as we see it (that "accurate" interpretations of experience are generalisable), we have still lost our unique place in the concrete world, detached ourselves from it, and taken up an objective "subject position" in the abstract world of our making (the place of "one" in the previous illustration). This is the other detachment that comes from thematisation, our *personal* detachment from our place in the concrete world, which reduces us to deficient personas with limited possibilities.

This dual detachment -- detachment of phenomena from the concrete world of complex significance, and detachment of researchers from their own unique places in that concrete world -- renders the products of such detachment *abstract*, removed from the rich context of familiar, everyday reality. Detachment and the resulting abstraction render the products of research *esoteric*, exclusively accessible and significant only to the paradigm community that produces and sanctions them. This detachment and abstraction produce the differences between paradigm worlds and the "real" world and opens the chasm between theory and practice. Ironically, Ackroyd (1996) argues that qualitative methodology itself has become an esoteric field, detaching itself from the disciplines that produced and sustain it. It has even spawned its own discipline marker, specialist journals!

### **C. Rationalism**

At the root of scientism and abstraction lies rationalism. Technicity is the full flower of rationalism. The seeds of technicity, rationalism, scientism and abstraction were planted in ancient Greece. Heidegger (1952/1977b) suggests that Plato sowed the seeds of technicity when Plato changed the meaning of "idea" (*eidos*). Heidegger says "idea" used to refer to the *visible* aspect of something, but that Plato

extracts of this word...something utterly extraordinary: that it names what precisely is not and never will be perceivable with physical eyes...[idea] names and is also that which constitutes the essence in the audible, the tastable, the tactile, in everything that is in any way accessible. (p. 20)

When "idea" no longer refers to what appears but to the invisible essential *form* of it, then our own experience becomes questionable and we need a higher source to validate our experience. Plato provided forms as that higher source. Dark Age philosophers provided God. Descartes provided self-certifying rationality. No longer could knowledge emerge from some mysterious but pure revelation of reality. Now knowledge could emerge only when some knowing subject thought it.

Our inheritance from Plato and Descartes, via a coterie of other rationalist thinkers including Husserl, is a belief in "rational" thinking that deprecates "unsupported" common sense and individual experience, that denies the existence of phenomena that do not conform to the approved vision of the world, and that dismisses any thinking that departs from rationalism's methodological prescriptions. This is Heidegger's description of the rule and law of science, Kuhn's description of paradigmatic science, and modern social studies of knowledge's description of science (e.g., Hacking, [1992](#); Lynch, [1993](#); Pickering, [1992](#), [1993](#)). It seems scientism, rationalism and research cannot be disengaged from each other.

The glorification of rationalism can be found in calls for more rigour in qualitative research (Ackroyd, [1996](#); Gordon, [1999](#); Hall & Rist, [1999](#); Seale & Silverman, [1997](#)), in calls for more Husserlian phenomenology and grounded theory (Giorgi, [1997](#); Goulding, [1998](#); Rennie, [1998](#); Roberts, [1997](#)) and the ultimate harnessing of rationalism in the form of quantification and use of machines to analyse qualitative data (Green, Wind, Krieger, & Saatsoglou, [2000](#); Hyde, [2000](#)).

The irrationality and even thoughtlessness of practice make it highly dismissable by rationalist researchers who feel they know better how to do things properly (rationally) (Skinner, Tagg, & Holloway, [2000](#)). The privileging of rationality even leads some qualitative researchers to seek avenues to knowledge about subjects' thinking that reach beyond subjects' personal accounts (e.g., Roberts, [1997](#)). This illustrates the arrogance that flows from rationalism.

But why has rationalism emerged as a defining characteristic of the epoch of technicity? The answer probably lies in rationalism's capacity to create a sense of control. Control is a central value in the epoch of technicity. The control Heidegger is talking about relates to the power to define and assign, to place within a framework (*Gestell*) (Heidegger, [1952/1977b](#)).

The urge to control is manifest in research in the proliferation of new terms and names for familiar phenomena, in the propensity to analyse everything into its component parts as a way to get a handle on things, and in the popularity of charts, graphs and models that can capture and stabilise dynamic relations -- all the products of abstract rationalism and scientism (e.g., Green et al., [2000](#); Pieters, Bottschen, & Thelen, [1998](#); Valentine, [1996](#)).

For example, Burgess ([1984](#)) named and defined four kinds of researcher: the complete participant, the participant as observer, the observer as participant and the complete observer. Tracer studies introduced the world to "tags," (Hornby & Symon, [1994](#)) obviously because

"documents" and "records" were inadequate names. Analysis has introduced us to seven stages in the hermeneutic process (Forster, 1994). It has also given us twenty statements to establish personal identity (Spitser, Crouch, & Stratton, [1973](#)) and 31 categories into which to place responses to those twenty statements (Rees & Nicholson, [1994](#)). To plot the dynamics of knowledge construction, we have the repertory grid (Kelly, [1955](#)). To categorise data, we can let a computer build NUD\*IST trees for us.

This is a quite different notion of control than we normally associate with the power to govern or the power to manipulate. It relates more to *ontological power*, the power to say what and how something is. The familiar gap between theory and "real life" represents a struggle over the ontology of the phenomena and people in the worlds of research and life. When the jargon, the over-analysis and the cooked up models stretch the credulity of the practically inclined to breaking point, the gap between theory and practice opens like a groaning chasm. The dismissal of research and theory by business practitioners can be seen as a refusal to grant ontological control of the world of business to the forces of scientism, rationalism and abstraction, despite the observed commitment of some managers to positivist values (Skinner, Tagg & Holloway, [2000](#)).

But is it possible to be a *researcher* without succumbing to scientism, rationalism and abstraction? Probably not. But I think it is possible to be a reflective *scholar*. What would scholarly qualitative reflection be like if it could escape the influence of the technicity paradigm.

### III. POST-TECHNICITY REFLECTION

Post-technicity *reflection* (as opposed to *research*) would replace the conventional, rationalist belief in the theory-ladenness of all experience with a belief in the constitutive power of history and would legitimate personal experience.

#### A. History

In post-technicity reflection, history *constitutes* personal experience; history is *what* we experience. History does not mediate experience. It is not a theoretical filter through which we interpret experience. History is what we experience *immediately*. History is present to us and is experienced as future possibilities. History comprises all the stuff of life, past and present, linked and rendered significant by their relations to other stuff. History on this conception is represented in the previous illustrations by the interconnected spheres said to represent the dimensions of a culture, research themes and the there of researchers and others. History is the milieu in which we live our lives. It is the source of our experiences and what makes us meaningful.

I don't mean this metaphorically. I mean that the life we experience - the trees, the people, the activities, the values that we live with - are historical. They *were* and they *were significant* before we experienced them. If they aren't before we experience them, then how do we experience them? Constructivists say we bring them into being by the way we understand them. I say we understand them because they are already when we encounter them. The constructivists may be speaking metaphorically because they subscribe to the mind/body duality that flows from rationalism and are comfortable distinguishing "reality" from our idea of reality. But I can't see

the need or purpose for that distinction. (I agree with Heidegger's comment on the "scandal of philosophy." Kant once famously said that the scandal of philosophy is that philosophers still have not come up with a convincing proof for the existence of reality. Heidegger's riposte is that the scandal of philosophy is that philosophers are still looking for such proof.)

This conception of history does not refer to the familiar and now oft-challenged product of what Heidegger ([1927/1996](#)) calls historiology. Historiology produces the tedious, contentious, rationalist narratives comprising strings of abstract "facts" of another time that we usually think of as history.

In contrast, history for Heidegger is preserved human experiences that precede our own and that are handed down to us, not as discrete experiences but as the holistic world of significance, a world of things, relations and human purposes already known, all interconnected and there for us to experience immediately and holistically from our unique perspective among them.

While the metaphysics behind this conception of history is interesting, it is more useful to our current purposes to explore the considerable significance of this conception of history for post-technicity reflection. This conception challenges a popular assumption about the nature of the experiences we have when conducting research; that is, that we construct the significance of our experiences through interpretation.

Heidegger maintains that the relations among things (the connections among the spheres in my illustration) pre-exist our experience of them and make experience possible by making things significant. Without those pre-existing relations, things have no significance, so we can't understand them. The significance of the world is historical because the relations among things that create their significance are historical, not made on the spot. History is the world made significant for us by history's preservation of how things have been related throughout history in the experience of others. Our own and others' previous experiences of relations among things prime us to experience similar things and understand and interpret things in similar ways.

To understand this notion of historical relations determining the significance of our experience, consider the experience of walking into a home and being greeted by the fragrance of freshly baked cookies. The pleasant associations we have with the smell of freshly baked cookies are not created by us exclusively, and certainly not at the moment of walking in the door. They are memories of our own previous pleasurable experiences with cookie baking, and they tap into social memories of the meaning of home cooking and a caregiver welcoming us, and deeper human memories of being feed and protected by caregivers. Those memories swirl around us. They are not confined to some dusty file cabinet in the mind, waiting to be called up so we can interpret that lovely smell. They come to light because the fragrance has directed our attention to them. The fragrance is part of a holistic matrix of things and relations that say homely pleasures, care and love. Any part of that matrix could lead us to the rest of it. That matrix is what is represented in the spheres-and-connections illustrations.

What is very interesting about this alternative account of experience, as the apperception of historical significance, is that it accords very well with recent accounts of how brains work. Brains are made of 10 billion neurons interconnected through a quadrillion synapses (a little



more complicated than my spheres and connections illustrations). Most of those synapses develop over time through experience and education (a few are hard-wired).

The synapses fire in response to stimuli. The stimuli determine what synapses will fire. They have the potential to fire in  $10^{1,000,000}$  permutations. Each firing is another experience, not all conscious. We do not control the firing of those synapses. We do not organise them. We cannot construct them at the moment of experience. Some of the synapses are strengthened through repeated firings, so they become habits of thought or experience (e.g., paradigm knowledge, brainwashing, neural programming).

The historical synapses that develop after birth enable us to understand a world that makes sense. Before we understand the world, our brains fire meaninglessly, until what Pinker (1998) calls "patterns of thought" begin to form. These patterns of thought allow us to have meaningful experience because they tap into the significance (interconnectedness) of the historical world. Stimuli triggers synapses along well-trodden paths and we experience something familiar. When we experience something unfamiliar, our brain struggles to find a familiar path - that's why we mistake strangers for friends, and describe unfamiliar things as being like something else.

The point is that, according to brain science at least, *meaningful* experience requires the firing of pre-existing synapses. We can't *construct* meaning from experiences because we can't order our synapses to fire along particular paths. We don't have to construct meaning from experiences because experiences are always already meaningful. Babies do not construct the sense and meaning of their mothers' voices or smells. The significance of these stimuli gradually emerges as pleasant associations with other stimuli generate patterns of thought in the baby. Babies don't have to rationally interpret these stimuli to construct their significance. Experience grants that significance. That experience does not have to pass through a rational filter (a theoretical framework) in order for the stimuli to get meaning. The experience comes complete with its own significance.

I am not suggesting that brain science has nailed down the definitive explanation of experience and "proves" that Heidegger's account of history is right. But it is interesting that brain science has come up with this account of brain function which runs counter to prevailing constructivist and rationalist ideas about how the mind works and how we experience the world. It seems to at least invite more careful scrutiny of the assumptions of rational constructivism that underpin our sense of what we are doing in research. We should at least entertain the possibility and implications of history rather than rationality as the source of meaning.

But does this account of the historical givenness of significance mark a return to a form of uncritical realism and absolute truth that leaves no room for subjectivity or the personal dimension of experience? If we don't make meaning ourselves but rather experience meaning as historically given, won't we all just travel the same paths, understand the same meaning, and have the same possibilities? And if we are constantly swathed in a holistic, interconnected world of historical significance, how are we not overwhelmed by stimuli and meanings? Can we only know the world holistically, or is it possible to focus our attention on something? The source of *personal*, as opposed to communal, experience in a holistic, historically given world is discussed below.



## B. Personal Experience

We influence how much of the world we will experience by how open we are to it. How open we are to the world is determined by how we understand ourselves. Heidegger's notion of self-understanding was alluded to in the earlier sections on thematisation and the discussion of "the there" and personas. Using a spatial metaphor, how we understand ourselves - as researchers, as parents, as Catholics - determines the "shape" of our openness. The shape of our openness (our there) determines what can fit into it, what I am open to, what I can understand.

For example, a person who understands herself as a quantitative researcher will be open to what can be counted and measured. A person who understands herself as a qualitative researcher will be open to what can be interpreted. Their research questions and areas of thematic specialisation will further shape the openness of both. Both people can adopt the persona of the other, at which time their openness will change shape and they will experience differently. Both people can also adopt other personas, such as mothers or daughters or brides or joggers. These personas will also reshape their openness. The shape of our openness can change from moment to moment. This should highlight that a persona is nothing like a persistent self. It is only a fleeting self-understanding. People are free to choose their personas or to not choose one at all, to just be. People who understand themselves as personas, who conform to a conception of a certain type of person, are, in Heidegger's terms, *inauthentic* - not really themselves. They become "one", doing what one does. Heidegger's critiques of technicity, science, rationalism and research are all based on their requirement that people operate inauthentically, that people accept a persona that limits their openness to the world and their possibilities. When one's openness is constrained, one has fewer possibilities - for understanding, for action, for decisions. Further, when one is inauthentic, one's possibilities are no longer unique. They are the same as those of others adopting the same persona. To be authentic is to have all one's unique possibilities. I suspect that these unique possibilities account for creativity, vision, leadership, innovation - all the traits that distinguish individuals from their conformist associates.

As someone committed to scholarly reflection, I prefer to inquire without imposed boundaries so I reject the persona of qualitative researcher and try to maintain an outsider perspective. But if I try to avoid a persona when doing my scholarly work, do I then begin to see the world as anyone else rejecting a persona would? No. The world of significance that I experience is granted to me by history, but while I share a lot of world with people who share my history, there are always parts of the world that are not given to me because of the limits of my history, my education, my socialisation, my acculturation. (The same applies even if I adopt a paradigm-determined persona.) Everything *isn't* always there for me to know, regardless of how open I am. This creates the possibility of error and ignorance, which in turn encourages modesty about what I can understand. This modesty is another characteristic of scholarly reflection missing from technicity-influenced research, which is predicated on the hubristic belief that we can know everything as long as we have enough time and resources to find out.

So post-technicity reflection is characterised by a belief in the historical givenness rather than the rational construction of meaning and by a commitment to scholarly reflection characterised by authentic (personal) engagement with the world rather than to paradigm-bound research

characterised by inauthentic engagement with a thematised world. But how does the activity of reflection differ from research, and how might it affect the practice of qualitative research.

### C. The Activity Of Reflection

The activity of scholarly reflection begins with merely *opening up* to the historically given world of significance. But this opening up is not a research activity; it is a human activity and requires no special expertise. It is our essential nature to be open to the world around us, to smell the rain, to notice someone's new haircut, to find something interesting.

Heidegger believes it is our fundamental nature to be practically rather than theoretically open to the world. To be practically open means to do things with the world, to be active, to be engaged in human pursuits, to be hands on, to get our hands dirty, rather than "living in our heads."

To be *practically* open to the world requires us to engage with the holistic world, to deal with things in their own context of relationships. To be *theoretically* open to the world requires us to detached things from their own context in order to study them thematically. For example, most scientists physically remove objects for study to their laboratory. As discussed earlier, with qualitative researchers this detachment is more commonly conceptual, removing people from their holistic context and studying them as employees, clients, citizens or consumers. To be *theoretically* open to the world also requires us to adopt a subject position disengaged from the world. What moves the subject position away from the world is the desire to observe it on our terms rather than interact with it on its own terms.

To understand this practical/theoretical distinction, we need to keep in mind the notion of historically granted significance. Some critics of Heidegger maintain that research has a "practice" of its own and also deals with things contextually (e.g., Rouse, [1987](#)). This is true and Heidegger ([1927/1996](#), p. 328) acknowledged as much, but the context that Heidegger is privileging is the common, historically granted context that belongs to the thing itself rather than the esoterically constructed one that emerges through research. So even the ethnographer and action researcher are not practically engaged with what they study because they see what they study not as what it is but as a phenomenon for study. Even if they spend a lot of their time doing rather than viewing, they still distance themselves to a "subject position" at least some of the time. This influences the "shape" of their there and so limits their openness.

Opening up to the world practically is a passive activity. Dreyfus ([1991](#)) called it "mindless coping," just getting on with life, doing ordinary things. It's mindless because it doesn't require any rational engagement. Heidegger ([1927/1996](#)) calls this passive opening up *understanding*, a simple "taking in" of what is there to experience.

Understanding is not a rational act. It is not a mental act. It is not a conscious act. It is not an intentional act. It is not an intellectual act. It does not require a mind. It does not require any concepts or language. A newborn baby understands the world, not because of its mind but because of its human nature, its ability to be witness to the existence of the world.

As a practical phenomenon, understanding often takes the form of action. I understand my car when I unlock the door, slide in, put the key in the ignition, turn it on and drive away. I don't have to know anything about internal combustion engines or physics to do this. I don't have to think about the car to understand it. We understand things by using them, by doing with them as their context allows. A chilling example of this kind of practical understanding comes from Bob Dylan: "He understands your orphan with his gun."

Of course, sometimes we just can't do with things. Sometimes things are broken or missing or they don't work as we expect. Then we have to puzzle over them, maybe take them apart physically or mentally, and maybe just kick them in frustration. Or maybe our problem is that we are dealing with an immaterial phenomenon like culture or depression that we can't just use. In such situations, our understanding isn't enough. We need more. We need to "interpret" our understanding. (We don't interpret the world; we interpret our understanding of the world, what we have been open to.)

But the Heideggerian concept of interpretation does not involve adding anything to the understanding, especially not adding anything from some theoretical filter through which we experienced the phenomenon we understand. Interpreting is not at all a synthetic process. It is also not a "bracketing" process of stripping anything away, including any theoretical filters. Rather, it involves *attending more closely* to our understanding, reflecting on it. Since what is being experienced is a *holistic*, historic world of *interrelated* phenomena, whatever phenomenon is experienced initially can lead to other phenomena to which it is linked as part of its context. Interpretation involves noticing and following phenomenal links to a context of wider significance. There are elements of this kind of interpretation in grounded theory's "constant comparison" process (without the theme or category to which the data is being compared). But the qualitative approach that seems closest to this approach to interpretation is the immersion/crystallization process (*sans* the crystallization). This process studies everything on a topic, following phenomenal links even when they lead beyond traditional paradigm-sanctioned sources. (Cassell & Symon, [1994](#)).

A visual metaphor for interpretation might be an expanding circle of light from a spotlight. Understanding illuminates a certain region of the historical world. As the circle grows, more and more of the area can be seen in the light. Interpretation illuminates a larger portion of the historical world already given to the understanding but not noticed because it wasn't important to practical functioning. What makes the light grow is our attention, which expands the shape of our there to make it more open. While understanding is passive opening up, interpretation is active opening up.

Interpretation is not a frenzied journey of discovery or creation or construction but a calm and respectful contemplation of what is given to understanding. Interpretation does not happen in our heads. It happens in the world. Those phenomenal links that are being followed are not in our heads. They are all around us and can be understood if we are open to them.

Interpretation broadens and deepens our understanding of the world by enriching the significant context of our experiences, which we can then share with others or preserve, thereby contributing to the complexity of the world of significance. But much of the enriching potential of

interpretation is lost when research paradigms render parts of the phenomenon's context irrelevant, insignificant, off-limits, outside the domain of interest, beyond the research question, beyond the light.

But could it be that this account of scholarly reflection is simply advocating an alternative paradigm to the technicity paradigm? Will it not produce the same conformist, inauthentic behaviour and its own thematic areas of interest?

I think the notion of reflection is more appropriately understood as an attitude rather than an action plan or paradigm. This attitude of human passivity and intellectual modesty toward experience acknowledges the givenness (rather than constructedness) of experience and shows respect for (rather than control of) the phenomena of experience (the world). This attitude is expressed in what Heidegger refers to as the methodological maxims of phenomenology: "Not to flee prematurely from the enigmatic character of phenomena, nor to explain it away by the violent *coup de main* of a wild theory, but rather to accentuate the puzzlement." (Heidegger, [1975/1988](#), p. 69).

But what researcher can tolerate the enigmatic character of phenomena? Better to analyse it, categorise it, name it, label it, diagram it, model it and render it clear if not controllable. What researcher can resist proffering a theory that can be cited and recited widely so people have a shortcut to understanding that saves them examining their own personal experiences of the world? To researchers it matters little if such a theory violates the ontological integrity of phenomena while emphasising the power of rationalism. And what researcher would actually commit to print, "I don't get it." Even the pseudo-Socratic affectation of claiming to raise questions rather than provide answers is nothing more than what scientists think of as "defining the problem." It is an attempt to set the research agenda, define the research domain. Unanswered questions are the engine that drives Kuhnian "normal science," but *unanswerable* questions are the bane of a researcher's existence (and a total nightmare for students).

But don't these maxims constitute just one more *prescription* for one more ology? Just another alternative paradigm for another specialist discipline? Just one more persona for us to adopt? Just one more set of rules and techniques to constrain the shape of our there and limit our possibilities for understanding?

If the maxims are a prescription for anything, they are a negative prescription -- stop trying to get a handle on phenomena, stop forcing phenomena into frameworks not their own, stop trying to make knowledge. But such exhortations are not intended to constrain our theres, to limit our personal engagement with the world as a paradigm prescription does. Rather, they are seeking to bring to light *more possibilities* for such engagement. Heidegger ([1927/1996](#)) considered this our prime responsibility to others, to help them see their own enhanced potential as human beings. The methodological maxims of phenomenology say, "try me and see what happens."

Also, I don't see Heideggerian phenomenology/post-technicity reflection as a discipline. It has no specialist domain, it has no rule and law, and no phenomenologist/scholar would or could presume to enforce binding adherence. Heideggerian phenomenology/reflection is what Heim ([1982](#), p. 206) calls "the *performance of philosophic thought*." Phenomenology is the study of

phenomena, reflective engagement with all that can be experienced and with the sources of that experience. Nothing is excluded in this holistic domain. I read the maxims of phenomenology as a *description* of one possible way to relate to phenomena. It is not the only way; it is not even the optimal way in all circumstances. But it is a decidedly different way to relate to the world than researchers adopt. It is a way of relating to the world that we more commonly expect of artists, so-called primitive peoples, the mentally ill, the unconventional (professional or social misfits) and, most recently, "transformational leaders" in business (e.g., Bass, Waldman, Avolio & Bebb, [1987](#); Gundry, Prather, & Kickul, [1994](#); Katzenbach, [1996](#); Kotter, [1990](#); Spreitzer & Quinn, [1996](#); Story, [1995](#); Teal, [1996](#)).

This way of relating is not *prescribed* by phenomenology. It is not a paradigm to be adopted and adhered to. Rather, this way of relating to the world is highlighted as an overlooked possibility available to human beings who tire of a paradigmatic existence. It cannot be a prescription or a paradigm because the uniquely personal nature of the relationship between a person and the world cannot be standardised or generalised. Heideggerian phenomenology / reflection as an approach to qualitative "research" will have as many manifestations as there are scholars and these scholars need not identify with phenomenology as a credo; they don't even need to know its name.

#### **IV. PHENOMENOLOGICAL QUALITATIVE REFLECTION**

So what might qualitative reflection (as opposed to research) look like if we were to conduct it phenomenologically?

##### **A. A Phenomenological Attitude**

If we accept that the methodological maxims of phenomenology are more an attitude than a paradigmatic set of prescribed techniques, how might such an attitude influence our approach to qualitative reflection? What might be facilitated and what might be inhibited by such an attitude? We can begin by assuming that such an attitude would inhibit those inclinations fostered by technicity: scientism, specialisation, abstraction and rationalism, and either facilitate something altogether new or make something familiar more common.

If scientism were inhibited, our concerns about rigour would change. Instead of being concerned with researcher's methodologies, the hoops they've jumped through to gain paradigm approval, we would redefine rigour in terms of openness and engagement. The most rigorous would be those most committed to following phenomenal links in many directions to make their understanding more complex and rich. Triangulation might be employed not to increase reliability or validity but to enrich the paths of understanding. The most rigorous would also be those who were the most hands-on and involved with the phenomena of interest. This would suggest that participant observation and action research (without the observation and research) might be combined to create an approach called participant action, which might just get rid of researchers altogether! This is only a half facetious suggestion. In truth, to overcome scientism we must lose our concern about rigour, about judging the reliability and validity of anyone's way of understanding the world. An attitude of reflection would value all experiences and perspectives and would make judgements about them only in terms of their relevance to one's

own interests, activities, experiences or purposes, rather than in terms of the method of their genesis or the person who had them. The end of scientism would mean the democratisation of knowledge and the end of experts. I've worked in many business faculties where academics who began in business are often wary of undertaking what is called research because they feel they won't do it well. It is a great loss to our understanding of the world that such people think there is a right way to experience the world. Can we reconfigure qualitative research to encompass their ways of knowing?

If specialisation were inhibited, the subdisciplines of qualitative research would disappear. Individual methods used to reflect would not reduce the scholar to a persona but rather would be shaped by the person using them. Also, multiple methods could be employed in combination, their choice determined by the phenomena to be studied rather than by the qualifications or persona of the scholar. The direction of one's reflection would be determined by one's practical purpose or aim, rather than by a thematic domain with which one identifies. This would probably mean an end to academic research for its own sake. Curiosity-driven research, powered by the will to master phenomena and stake out a domain as one's own, would be seen as the pointless indulgence of rationality that it is. All reflection would be purposeful and useful -- personally, socially or culturally. This does not preclude reflection on poetry or art or the behaviour of neutrinos. But it means that one needs to reflect within a practical context with the intention of doing something with what is understood, besides publishing a paper. Such non-specialist, purposeful reflection was undertaken by one of my research students. He wanted to understand how to exploit the fanaticism of football fans in marketing to them. Instead of doing standard market research to ask them directly about what pushed their buttons and made them part with their money, he explored the characteristics of fanaticism that emerged from psychology, sociology, theology, anthropology, literature, marketing and management. He then participated in the organised activities of football team supporter groups and interviewed self-identified football fanatics to see how their experiences and views fit into the wide range of characteristics he'd discovered from other sources. Then he related all that to the problems and opportunities of marketing football to such people. His thesis was deemed exploratory because it didn't offer any "wild theory" to explain away all the complexity, but it also got top marks because it was such a rich, boundaryless and yet useful study of such an interesting phenomenon.

If abstraction of phenomena were inhibited, then theorising would not be required. Phenomena that haven't been abstracted from their historical context do not need to be theorised to be made meaningful. Grounded theory becomes unnecessary. If abstraction of scholars is inhibited, generalisation becomes even more dubious than it already is. While the homogenised and standardised experience of paradigm-defined personas has only been deemed generalisable by convention, the individual experiences of qualitative scholars enmeshed in the holistic context remain purely personal. But that does not mean they have no social value. Instead of abstraction, which is removing phenomena from their context, qualitative reflection would involve aggregation of individual, personal experiences to enrich the context in which phenomena of interest exist. By aggregating the understanding of multiple scholars by identifying the linkages between all the related phenomena they understand (by interpreting that understanding), understanding is not generalised but enriched so that it has more relevance to more people.

If rationalism is inhibited, people will be less inclined to retreat "inside their heads" to ponder life's mysteries and more inclined to look outwards to the world around them. The idea of withdrawing from life to reflect would be replaced by increased openness to the environment, to the circumstances of experience. Since the environment of experience is complex, problems and solutions would not be simplified or only partially addressed based on paradigm limits. More importantly, rationalism facilitates the arrogance of constructivism, the delusion that we are free to make meaning and that our worth is dependent on our facility for making meaning. This feeds the elitism that says some of us are better interpreters of experience than others and have more right to be heard, consulted and believed. The end of rationalism would mean that the "quality" of a person's interpretations would be based on their openness, their attention to "reality" and their capacity to help others see the richness and complexity of experience rather than provide them with answers that shut down the openness of others. In our desk research, we have doubtless already experienced the difference between authors who give us authoritative answers that we can cite in our papers and those that draw us away from our papers to ruminate and ponder and marvel at the breathe and perspicacity of some people.

While all of these kinds of changes might cause us to modify and maybe reject the techniques we use in qualitative research, the changes are more attitudinal than technical. As such, they can be implemented even if we stick with some of our existing techniques for finding out about the world. Even a quantitative study (*sans* the statistical analysis) can enrich our understanding of the world, but we need to view the results of such a study as mere raw material for understanding, not as a substitute for engagement with phenomena. Likewise, we can continue to conduct depth interviews and do ethnography, action research, participant observation and even grounded theory, so long as our attitude to our processes and to their outcomes remain modest, respectful to phenomena and engaged with the phenomena of experience. So long as we continue to recognise that our experiences are no more remarkable or creditable than anyone else's, our interpretations are no more insightful than anyone else's, and our methods give us no more control over our experiences and interpretations than the mindless coping of the average Joe or Josie, then we can continue to do our qualitative research with a phenomenological attitude. That would be a transitional phase on the path to phenomenological reflection. A more complete embrace of such reflection would move away from qualitative research techniques based on scientism, specialisation, abstraction and rationalism.

## **B. Phenomenological Reflection in Practice**

Some practical characteristics of phenomenological reflection might include different aims, emphasis on literature reviews, abandonment of research instruments, personalised, unique reports by authentic inquirers, and a different understanding of communication.

The aim of phenomenological reflection is not definitive truth, knowledge making, or even persuasive argument. Rather, phenomenological reflection aims to raise questions and enrich understanding. Consequently, there would be no competition for paradigm control. Contrary viewpoints would not need to be reconciled. Knowledge would not need to be verified or refuted. There would be no need for credentialed expertise or for legitimating academies. There would be no discipline boundaries to defend, extend or exceed. There would be self-identified scholars but no barrier to being one (the end of researchers and experts).



Phenomenological reflection would get serious about the literature review, about reading more widely, more deeply, more historically. Reading outside paradigm boundaries enriches the world available to experience by beefing up the holistic matrix of significance available to our openness. The literature review now is done with the benefit of keyword searches through thematised databases, making it difficult to escape the reduced domains of our disciplines and the fleeting currentness of our knowledge. If the richness of our experiences comes not just from our present circumstances but from our education and socialisation (part of our history), then the more we read and reflect on the past, the greater can be our understanding of the significance of the present and the potential of the future. This does not mean we should read more historiographical accounts of the past. It means we should read the original, historic accounts written by our intellectual "heroes," rather than settle for second-, third- and fourth-hand potted versions of their thought. It is only in reading the originals that we benefit from our heroes' unique and personal engagement with the world. While reading commentaries and accounts of our heroes' engagement with the world still enriches our understanding, it also takes our focus away from the "the matter at hand" and turns it toward the hero as a character in some author's narrative. Secondary accounts also report the commentator's experience rather than the hero's. (So go read Heidegger for yourself!)

Phenomenological reflection would also take longer because we wouldn't have reductive instruments to gather data. We would have to watch and listen and do by ourselves or with others. Then we'd have to share our experiences with each other and try to understand their significance without prescribed techniques and methodologies for interpretation. Understanding the significance of our experiences would involve trying to understand how everything we've learned fits together. "Research" would become a synthetic rather than analytic process, a complicating rather than simplifying process, a puzzle-creating rather than puzzle-solving process. Phenomenological reflection without the reductive instruments might also be cheaper. Inquirers only need libraries and time to do their work (and maybe communication technology).

Reports on phenomenological reflection might become more like conversations with wise elders or perspicacious youngsters, people who speak only for themselves but whose messages are meaningful, inspiring and insightful. They would not provide answers. They would not make us feel knowledgeable. Rather, they would make us modest. Such people show us by their example what an individual can accomplish, the potential of an individual to understand the world. But they also show the limits of that understanding, how even the most wise and perspicacious individual still remains full of questions and wondering.

Reports of reflection would be personal, unique, inspiring and insightful because the authors of these reports would be "authentic" and free to experience the world from their unique place in it. Phenomenological scholars cannot be confined to pre-designed roles. They are rarely predictable in their behaviour or decisions. They are likely to be seen as creative when creativity is understood as unconventional. This is because scholars manifest their ontological individuality by rejecting paradigm conformity. As a result, the experiences they have to report are enlightening rather than familiar.

But how might it be possible for authentic scholars having unique experiences without the benefit of paradigm filters communicate those experiences so others can understand them? It is

the shared understanding made possible by those filters that allows social knowledge making and communication-as-shared-meaning. How can we communicate our experiences to others without those filters to homogenise our experiences to create common ground?

When I ask that question in such a provocative way, I am trying to highlight two key assumptions about communication that Heidegger rejects. We assume that communication either requires common ground or creates common ground. And we assume that communication is a representational act, that it re-presents our experience to others so they can share it.

In contrast, Heidegger ([1927/1996](#)) maintains that communication should highlight our differences. A French philosopher heavily influenced by Heidegger has argued that communicating "spaces" us rather than bonds us together (Nancy, [1991](#)). Both say communicating highlights what is different about us. I understand both these thinkers to be saying what is actually pretty obvious. When we open our mouths or word process our ideas, what becomes most obvious is that we are all different in our perspectives, our understanding, our interpretations. We try to communicate to overcome that difference. We feel that someone hasn't had the experience or knowledge we want to share and that's why they don't see things as we do or behave as we do or *vice versa*. Yet modern communication theory acknowledges that the intention of authors is irrelevant to the meaning that audiences "make" or take from what they read or hear, so we can't overcome difference by communication. I think the idea that communication involves shared understanding and common ground seems to be more aspirational than actual and I wonder if the sentimentality that surrounds the sharing/caring account of communication doesn't mask a more fundamental, technicity-influenced desire to control or be controlled - a desire to have everyone see things as I do, or a desire to hold the dominant view or at least a socially popular view rather than be out in left field. When we change the aim of communication from creating or exploiting common ground to highlighting human difference, then reporting on one's unique and personal qualitative reflection is not problematic.

Heidegger moves even further from conventional thinking about communication by rejecting the representational assumption. To understand his position on this, we need to appreciate that Heidegger distinguishes between words and language. To Heidegger, words are to language as paint is to art. He thinks we are altogether too preoccupied with what he refers to dismissively as word-things. (This from a guy who has inflated and rewritten the philosophical vocabulary exponentially!) To him language is where life happens, where existence plays itself out. It is a place, a site, like our there. (Arguably, it is our there, but that is another paper!)

When I report the results of a phenomenological reflection, the report becomes the site for experience. But it is not the site for a *representation* of *my* experience. It is a site for the matrix of significance that I experienced. The holistic, historical world of things, relations and human purposes exists there. Just as the matrix of significance (the world) that was granted to me made my experience and understanding possible, so too does the preserved matrix in the report exist as potential experiences for others. When someone reads the report (or when I re-read my work), our openness and any persona we bring to our reading will influence how we experience what I have brought to light in the report. In writing my report, I only facilitate an encounter with the world. I only direct a reader's attention to an area of the world. I do not control how others

operate within that world or how they interpret the world (follow its linkages). They may experience something quite similar to my experience. They may experience something quite different. Consequently, when my report facilitates the experience of another, what is facilitated is not a re-enactment of my experience (the representational view). Rather, a new, personal, unique experience is enacted.

This enactment will happen regardless of what we do, but some people try to thwart that free enactment by using overbearing words that demand compliance in thought and experience, words like "is" and "must" and "proves." These words have no place in reporting phenomenological reflection because all we can report is our personal experience, not any mythical "true state of affairs." Also, because we value and acknowledge difference, we don't have a transformational agenda in dealing with others; we don't want to make them think, understand, interpret or act like us. We also do not pursue or encourage conformity in these areas because the more diversity of experience that contributes to the evolving, historical matrix of significance, the richer our experiences will be and the more meaningful we will become.

So if we are going to commit to phenomenological reflection as an alternative to qualitative research, we need to understand and re-evaluate our attitudes toward rigour, specialisation, rationalism, engagement with the "real" world, and the value of personal experience while revising our aims, our methods and how we frame and communicate our findings to others. But is this possible in the current academic climate around the world?

## **V. GET REAL!**

Phenomenological reflection would be difficult, perhaps even foolish, in the present academic climate. The current academic paradigm is likely to favour (and reward) research over reflection because it too is shaped by technicity. Prevailing beliefs and values about education and knowledge require the continuous production of valid, esoteric, exclusive knowledge, knowledge that can only come from research. Many qualitative researchers have felt the disdain of positivist colleagues, reviewers, managers and policy makers whenever they attempt to be even a little phenomenological. Until the academic paradigm changes, we will still need to publish more rather than better papers. We will have to build reputations for ourselves. We will have to get through review processes. But I ask, "Do we have to play the game so well, so enthusiastically, so unreflectively?"

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