Communicative Sexualities: Queer and Feminist Theories in Practice

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Introduction

"Communicative Sexualities" is an upper division undergraduate course I have taught every year for the past five years. My purpose in teaching this course is to facilitate a process whereby an open, honest, and direct examination of our lived-experiences of sexuality can take precedence over value-judgments or the imposition of heavily value-laden presumptions that keep our attention away from the immediate and concrete contexts in which our sexual experiences emerge and become meaningful in our lives. The work of this course, therefore, requires a direct, focused and sustained examination of sexuality as it is lived, experience and practiced in the lives of all of us in the class.

My decision to focus the class so specifically and directly on the sexual experiences of those of us in the class has been motivated by a keen awareness of the many ways in which our sexual practices themselves are paradoxical in that they can generate the most precious and life-affirming experiences of our human lives, and, just as well, the most degrading and inhumane experiences. And the space between these two extremes of sexual experience is often filled with varying degrees of ambiguity uncertainty, contradiction, conflict, confusion, and more.

My basic presumption in pursuing this classroom-based study of sexuality is that sex is good. I hold the attitude that seeking fulfillment of sexual desire is entirely consistent with the best kinds of adult intimacy, and that seeking such fulfillment contributes significantly to developing and sustaining healthy communities. In teaching this course, I favor an examination of sexuality as it tends toward its precious and life-affirming expressions.

At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that sexuality is often used and experienced in very negative, harmful, and even violent ways. Even though my predominant attitude toward sex and sexuality is positive, it is important to keep in mind the more negative expressions of sexuality so that we may accurately differentiate between those and healthy life-affirming expressions of sexuality.

Accurately and adequately differentiating between these two extremes of sexual expression and experience requires a dedicated commitment to the fact of our immediate and direct experience that does not presuppose or impose this differentiation a priori. When it comes to sex and love in the United States today, it is all to common to make our experience fit into ideals of romance— something that can easily be encouraged when we are focusing on sexual expression as life-affirming. But as most people who have lived through the ups and downs of sometimes more and sometimes less successful intimate adult relationships know, the discovery of life-affirming sexual practices is rarely simple, obvious, or easily sustained amidst the complexities of interpersonal, familial, and community relationships. Sometimes what begins as profoundly life-affirming sexual practices paradoxically become non-life affirming. The ambiguities and contingencies of communication and relationship development, coupled with our culture's mass-media obsession with celebrity sex-lives, make any such straight-forward achievement of life affirming sexual practice that is sustainable over the course of a lifetime difficult to achieve.

When people come together seeking intimacy—be it purely physical or deeply emotional—they do so within contexts that include varying degrees of awareness of themselves and others related to their own and others' complex life histories and desires, and the social and cultural pressures exacted by the communities to which we belong. We are always, in other works, to some degree ignorant of some of the many forces influencing our very experience and understanding of our sexual experience. The complexities of these circumstances mean that no matter how clear and firm we are in our ideals, the actual pursuit and achievement of those ideas is rarely straight-forward.

Thus, whether we are talking about ideals of romance and love, ideals of physical release, ideals of sexual mastery or seduction, or ideals of sexual freedom, in all cases those ideals must be made explicit within our study and examined as both a constraining and enabling force rather than invoked as a taken-for-granted end to which all things are unconsciously directed. We must, in other words, be willing to see and understand ourselves and our experiences in new ways.

What's to Come

What follows is basically a description of the major features of "Communicative Sexualities" as I have taught it over the past five years. I begin with a discussion of the theoretical and methodological commitments I bring to the course, and this entails a specific trajectory of thought within three major scholarly traditions: feminist theory, queer theory and phenomenology. I should make two provisos, however. First, it is true that each of these traditions has a rather complex history and that they share many points of convergence. Thus, my effort is not so much to engage feminist theory, queer theory, and phenomenology as three separate traditions, but to identify their key points of consonance as they allow me to pursue the goals I have already outlined in teaching "communicative sexualities." Second, my discussion of phenomenology follows a very specific trajectory of scholarship from the work of Husserl, through Merleau-Ponty, and articulated contemporarily in the work of Lanigan. This discussion of phenomenology falls properly under the designation "communicology." My focus for today's discussion will be on semiotic phenomenology as the methodology of communicology. Like my discussion of feminist and queer theory, my discussion of semiotic phenomenology will be to identify key points of convergence as they inform my teaching of "communicative sexualities."

And What Comes Next

Following my discussion of these theoretical and methodological commitments, I will turn to a discussion of application in which I will detail the process through which I conduct the course. The central feature of the course is a semester-long group research report—with 30 students typically enrolled in the course, I divide them into five six-member groups. They work together throughout the semester producing a research report that features their own lived-experiences of sexuality.

And Finally

Finally, I turn to a discussion of some of the specific problems of application. These specific problems are central features of continuous consideration throughout the course as we all grapple with what exactly we are doing—what is the topic we are studying? What is the site of the research?

Clearly our own bodies are involved in both the topic and site of the study, but exactly how? And, finally, what is the relationship between speech, linguistic representation, and culture in the actual research process? I conclude with some consideration of some of the ethical implications of teaching communicative sexualities.

Feminist and Queer Theory

These specific humanistic goals that I identified in my introduction directly inform the particular set of theoretical and methodological commitments I use as the foundation of the course. These commitments are rooted in feminist theory, queer theory and semiotic phenomenology. As I mentioned previously, both feminist and queer theories have complex histories with many different trajectories of development, some of which are in contradiction with each other. It is also true, of course, that feminist theory and queer theory have their own history of contention. My discussion here is not meant to diminish or deny the complexity of these bodies of scholarship, but rather to focus on those elements that provide the foundation for "communicative sexualities" as I teach it. These elements include a basic understanding of human existence as situated, ambiguous, contingent, and free; they also include a basic perspective on the nature of human embodiment and "performativity;" and, finally, a perspective on sexuality that understands it to be essentially multiple and shifting.

Human Existence

With these famous words: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1989/1952, p. 267), Simone de Beauvoir announced what would become an enduring theme of feminist and queer scholarship over the ensuing five-plus decades. She wrote these words, of course, during a period of her life characterized by intense engagement with the problematics and thematics of existential philosophy, phenomenology, and the political realities of socialism and communism on the heals of Hitler's genocide during World War II. In this work, first published in English in 1952, she declared that, "The biological and social sciences no longer admit the existence of unchangeably fixed entities that determine given characteristics, such as those ascribed to woman, the Jew, or the Negro. Science regards any characteristic as a reaction dependent in part upon a *situation*" (Beauvoir, 1989/1952, p. xx). Over the course of a 700-plus page book that is *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir proceeds to articulate, often in exhaustive detail, key elements of this "situation" as it both constrains and enables women in becoming more or less fully human.

Grounded in a neo-Hegelian dialectic of Self-Other, Beavuoir details an existentialist position in which human beings exist in a world not of their choosing, but within which they are free to choose. Human beings exist *situated* in a world in which who we are and what we become are contingent— not predetermined. Such is world is essentially ambiguous, so that in all things related to the construction of meaning, human being must choose among many possibilities. We are, therefore, essentially, free.

Embodiment and Performativity

To point out that we are, as human beings, essentially free, is not to deny or evade the very practical and concrete realities in which some human beings are more greatly constrained in their possibilities of becoming than others. A specific focus on the terms human embodiment and performativity allow us to unpack some of the constraints and possibilities of human becoming with regard to gender and sexuality. In her classic essay on "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," Judith Butler (1990) lays out just such a

focus. Butler argues that Beauvoir's phenomenological account of the "becoming" of woman takes gender as "an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts," and that "gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which the bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (p. 270). Butler is explicit in stating that "the phenomenological theory of 'acts,' espoused by Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and George Herbert Mead, among others, seeks to explain the mundane way in which social agents constitute reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign" (p. 270).

In this formulation we must be careful about presuming "the existence of a choosing and constituting agent prior to language" (p. 270). Rather, we should understand "the social agent as an *object* rather than the subject of constitutive acts" (p. 270). Such a formulation is also articulated by Teresa de Lauretis who argues in *Technologies of Gender* (1987) that the key to the "technology of gender" is that it disguises its production as a natural and determined reality which conceals its own production as part and parcel of the constituting or self-determined acts of persons. Thus, in understanding the social agent as an *object*, we take persons to be situated within social, cultural, historical—in short, semiotic—contexts not of their own choosing, and which can constrain much of their possibilities of becoming without any conscious awareness of those very constraints. This is, in short, the way culture works.

This is not to suggest, however, that the social agent, as object acted upon, is doomed to the terms of constraints within which she or he currently lives. This is because all such moments of being acted upon come to exist within a context of *social temporality*. The establishment of gendered or sexual identity as a stable and continuous feature of the self is dependent upon what Butler calls, "a stylized repetition of acts," wherein such performance of stylized acts must be understood in terms of the mundane and everyday life world of the becoming of the body. Because of the condition of social temporality and the necessity of repetition, these very appearances of "natural" gender or sexuality can be subverted. Such subversion, however, always occur within a context of "regulatory regimes" in which the possibilities and even actualities of subversion may not even be recognized when they are enacted. Rather than recognize my violation of gender norms as positive, I feel uncomfortable and dislike the ways in which I "stand out" among certain groups. And even if I learn to become comfortable with my gendered and/or sexual difference, I am often acutely aware of the potential punishment I will receive as a result of that difference. Thus, even though we can clearly articulate the theoretical terms in which subversion and disruption are possible, pursuing that in the mundane and concrete realities of our everyday lived experience is quite another matter.

Sexuality as Essentially Multiple

One of the things that limits our ability to achieve the subversion and disruption with regard to gender and sexuality seems to me to be the fact that we have such a deeply presumed and rigid notion of gender and sexuality an essentially a binary—one is either male or female, either heterosexual or homosexual. These presumptions allow much of what we experience in our mundane sense of sexuality to remain hidden and unknown. There are many more than just one type of closet related to sexuality, and in each case these "relations of the closet" can be, as Eve Sedgwick points out, "particularly revealing" (1990, p. 3). On the other hand, the power of the presumed binary of hetero and homosexual means that this particular closet has, generally speaking, more to reveal about our culture as a whole than other sexuality related closets. Sedgwick's point regarding these "relations of the closet" is that "'closetedness' itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of silence" (p. 3). For Sedgwick, this performative silence "depend on and highlights…the fact that ignorance is as potent and multiple a thing there is as is knowledge" (p. 4). When it comes to sexuality, "ignorance and opacity collude or compete with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, [and] persons" (Sedgwick, p. 4). The challenge in teaching "communicative sexualities" is engage precisely this collusion and/or competition between our ignorance and opacity, and knowledge of sexuality.

Sedgwick on Sexual Differentiation

Because we tend to believe so heavily in the presumption of sexual binaries, we tend not to see the many dimensions of sexual variations that exist not only among members of the same culture, but also within us over the course of our lives. Sedgwick's list is rather evocative and provides a good illustration for how to begin a sustained study of sexuality as it is lived and experienced. So, the first task in teaching the course is to expose and acknowledge our most basic categories of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual behavior, so that we will be less limited by them as we examine the fact of our own experience.

There are three basic categories that will help us sort out the some of the complexities of sexuality: *Biological Categories*, *Social Roles Or Gender Categories*, and *Categories Of Sexual Practices*. A fourth category is a combination of *Both Biological And Social Role Or Gender Categories*. It is important to remember that this classification is itself culturally specific. In other words, our common culture allows this scheme to be coherent for us.

Other cultures have different schemes in which sexuality is understood.

Biological Categories

1. *Male*: persons who are born with biologically male sex organs (XY chromosomes, testes and penis)

2. *Female*: persons who are born with biologically female sex organs (XX chromosomes ovaries, vagina, mammary glands)

3. *Intersexed*: persons who are born with some variation of male and/or female chromosomes (not XY or XX) and sex organs

Social Role or Gender Categories

1. *Masculinity*: personality characteristics associated with biological males by virtue of cultural and social norms; may be manifested by any human being

2. *Femininity*: personality characteristics associated with biological females by virtue of cultural and social norms; may be manifested by any human being

3. *Heterosexual Nuclear Family*: male and female practicing exclusive monogamy and procreation under authority of marriage

4. *Non-Heterosexual Family:* non-heterosexual persons parenting children

Both Biological Categories and Social Roles

1. *Transgendered*: gender and personality identifications that are contrary to biological sex (if clearly male or female); may be manifested by any human being

2. *Transsexual*: persons who have physically altered their bodies (by hormones and/or surgery) to change from one biological sex to the other biological sex

Categories of Sexual Practices

1. *Heterosexuality*: erotic attraction to members of the opposite sex

2. *Homosexuality*: erotic attraction to members of one's own sex

3. *Heterosexual Procreation*: procreation by sexual intercourse between a biological male and a biological female

4. *Non-Heterosexual Procreation*: procreation by any consensual means other than sexual intercourse between a biological male and a biological female

5. *Non-Procreation*: to not procreate

6. *Bisexuality*: erotic attraction to members of both sexes

7. *Multi-Sexuality*: erotic attraction to both sexes and transgendered persons

8. *Asexuality*: persons without erotic attractions

9. *Non-Sexuality*: to not practice sexuality

10. *Life-Time Monogamy:* to seek a single life-time sexual partner

11. *Serial Monogamy:* to have one sexual partner exclusively for a certain period of time, and then select another exclusive sexual partner for a certain period of time

12. *Polyamory*: to have two or more sexual partners at the same time

13. *Polygamy*: a male married to two or more wives

14. *Bondage, Discipline, Sadomasochism*: erotic pleasure derived from bondage, discipline, and/or sadomasochism

15. *Fetishism*: erotic pleasure derived from a particular object

16. *Autoeroticism*: sexual self-stimulation

17. *Pedophilia*: erotic attraction to children

18. *Sexual Violence*: sexual pleasure derived from non-consensually hurting another person physically and/or emotionally

Semiotic Phenomenology

Phenomenological research is concerned with the meaningfulness of lived-experience. It studies the "phenomena" of experience and attempts to discover the "structural invariants" or "essential structures" that make particular experiences possible. As such it is concerned with the "universal" aspects of experience as they are manifested in the particular experience of a particular person. People are unique and therefore have many idiosyncrasies or peculiarities. Phenomenologically, it is important to differentiate between those idiosyncrasies and aspects of experience that essential to a given phenomenon as it is typical within a specific cultural time and place.

FIGURE 1: Every human being is born into culture at a specific historical moment and in a specific location. As a result we inherit specific facts of language, social institutions (social structure), history, and

practices (ways of doing as prescribed by our culture). As we exist within the specifics of this situation, we have *experiences*. These experiences are *social* and *lived*-through.

That is to say that even our most private experience is enabled by the fact that we exist within the specifics of our situation. The combination of culture and experience is what gives us our ever evolving and dynamic sense of self as a person and the world as we live in it—we develop a certain body (both the actual physical body and our feeling about our body), with certain habits, preferences, and a certain style, none of which can be reduced either to the norms of culture or the idiosyncrasies of experience. The arrows indicate the dynamic, interdependent, and mutually re-constructive aspect of these relationships.
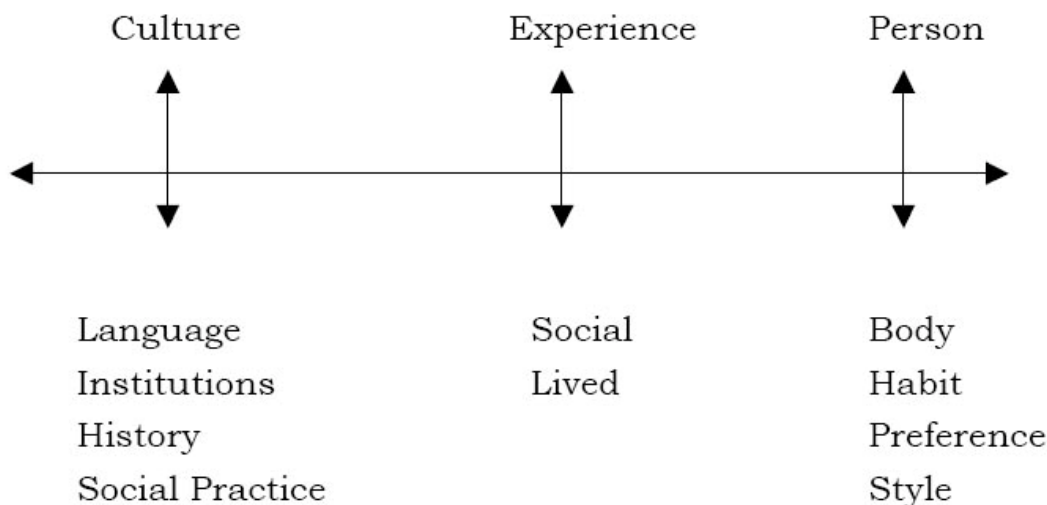
Culture	Experience	Person
Language	Social	Body
Institutions	Lived	Habit
History		Preference
Social Practice		Style

Figure 1. Dynamic Interrelatedness of Person and Culture

Basic Concepts of Phenomenology

In order to "get at" these dynamic, interdependent, and mutually reconstructive aspects of these relationships, we need some common conceptual foundations. We will use these terms below as a common reference point in our study of communicative sexuality. It is important to recognize that the definition of each of these terms emphasizes process over product, re-creation (or re-construction) over social creation (or social construction), and preconsciousness over conscious intent.

1. *CULTURE*: sets of common patterns of perceptions and expressions that are re-created through communicative practice.

2. *EMBODIMENT*: human condition of living within culture where by humans unconsciously and pre-consciously take-up and recreate the norms of culture in experience

3. *PERCEPTION*: the act of re-constituting the world as meaningful; occurs pre-consciously; is often mistaken to be "pure" or unaffected by social and cultural forces

4. *SOCIALITY*: the condition of being inextricable socially interconnected within human groups; this condition precedes conscious experience and is sustained through experience

5. *DESIRE*: both a social and personal phenomenon; both conscious and pre-conscious; bears a strong connection to power as socially expressed.

6. *ESSENTIAL STRUCTURE*: that without which experience could not have been what it was; strongly connected to the modalities of experiencing that are universal to the phenomena under study within a given culture, time, and place

7. *EPOCHE*: bracketing of presuppositions regarding the phenomena under study

8. *NOEMA*: the "what" of our experience

9. *NOESIS*: the "modality" of our experience

10. *INTENTIONALITY*: the directedness of consciousness; the fact that human consciousness always has a direction toward which it is oriented

11. *IMAGINATIVE FREE VARIATION*: imaginatively varying parts of experience in order to discover what is essential to it; key aspect of the *reduction* phase of phenomenological research.

Methodological Procedures

At this point, we are ready to address the question: How, exactly, do we gain access to those aspects of lived-experience that are also essential to a given culture, time and place?

We begin with lived-experience. We understand that experience comes to us already *structured*; this structure does *not* determine what our experience is or will be, but both constrains and enables it. Our goal is to discover this structure that both constrains and enables. We can only do this through a focus on specific, concrete, immediate experience (experiencing) as untouched by conscious reflection as possible. In other words, we want to discover the *reflexive* condition in which this particular experiencing became what it became.

This reflexive condition is one way of talking about "*phenomenological intentionality*," or the directedness of consciousness. Consciousness is directed by virtue of two brute facts: that we have a body, and that we exist within culture (social structures). That we have a body and exist within culture accounts for the *modalities* in which we live in the world. In phenomenological terms, these modalities provide *noetic contexts*. Within these noetic contexts, specific "things" appear in experience. These "things" that appear constitute the content, or the "what" of our experience. In phenomenological terms, this "what" of our experience is called the *noema*, or *noematic content*. In discovering the correlation between the noesis and the noema we will have discovered phenomenological intentionality, or the reflexive condition in which a particular experience became what it became.

The major difficulty with this effort is the fact that the only way we can attempt to discover intentionality is through *language and reflection* which necessarily alter the experience itself. Because we cannot avoid this problem, we must be very sensitive to it. We must scrutinize our use of language and be doggedly faithful to the experiencing of the experience. We can never escape the fact that we are *experiencers-experiencing-the experienced* in an inseparable whole. So, we must interrogate this to the greatest degree possible.

What, exactly, is a "phenomenon"? How do we select a "phenomenon" to study?

A phenomenon is anything experienced that becomes meaningful. Selecting a phenomenon must involve a process of intuitive guessing. Because we are working in groups, the experiences of each of the group members will be central to discovering the phenomenon to study. You must listen carefully to each other

(invoke the epoché) and seek to discover experiences that are common, or that intersect, or in some way have a likeness or alliance with each other.

The phenomenon you will come to study must *emerge*. Once you have a general idea of the phenomenon you must remain *oriented toward* it. You must draw a fine balance between being open to all the manifestations of the experience and being overly oriented and closing off your access to those manifestations. A major part of the research process involves conducting phenomenological interviews with your class mates. The duel challenge of being open yet oriented will present itself strongly in the interviewing process.

Remember, we are studying the meaningfulness of phenomena. Our purpose is to ask the question: How did the meaning come to be what it was?

Different people can have the same experience but come to construct very different meanings from it—thus, they experienced different phenomena even though they were both present in the same time and place when the same thing happened. Similarly, different people can have very different experience of very different events, but come to construct very similar meanings. Don't be thrown off track by looking for sameness in either the noetic context or the noematic content. Ultimately the only sameness that matters is in the *correlation between* the noetic context and the noematic content.

Selecting a good topic (phenomenon) for phenomenological research therefore requires that we focus on the meaningfulness of lived-experience that is lived concretely in the particulars of persons' experience, but which is also something characteristic of a cultural time and place.

Phenomenological Methodology

Phenomenological research has three basic steps:

1. *Phenomenological Description*: Invoke the epoché (identify the noema); descriptions of experience as experienced without explanation or reflection;

2. *Phenomenological Reduction*: Thematize the description; involves the use of imaginative free variation (identify the noesis)

3. *Phenomenological Interpretation*: Explicate the essential structures of the phenomena; specify the correlation of the noesis and noema; discover phenomenological intentionality

Phenomenological Description

At first glance, the effort to describe one's lived-experience seems obvious and easy. Once we begin this effort, however, we find that it is neither.

Part of the reason for this is the fact that "lived experience first of all has a temporal structure; it can never be grasped in its immediate manifestation but only reflectively as past presence" (Van Manen, 2003, p. 36). Try it. Take just five minutes and describe your experience. Okay, what have you described?

Was what you described actually what you originally selected to describe?

What was "it" that you selected to describe? How close did your description get to "it"? It's a bit of a predicament.

Given this predicament, we will follow the four "operational rules" or "hermeneutical rules" set out by Ihde (1997):

1) "attend to the phenomena of experience as they appear" (p. 34)

2) "*Describe, don't explain*…. To *describe* phenomena phenomenologically, rather than *explain* them, amounts to selecting a domain for inclusion and a domain for exclusion" (p. 34); "one must carefully delimit the field of experience in such a way that the focus is on describable experience *as* it shows itself." (p. 35)

3) "*horizontalize or equalize all immediate phenomena.* Negatively put, do not assume an initial hierarchy of 'realities.'" (p. 36)

4) "*seek out structural or invariant features of the phenomena.*" (p. 39)

Notice how rules 1-3 require an invocation of the epoché or "bracketing." We invoke the epoché so that we can get as close as possible to the experience as we experienced it without seeing it through our post-hoc rationalizations.

One way we have of doing this is by understanding "experience" as having a structure that entails at least three dimensions: 1) the experiencer, 2) experiencing, 3) the experienced. In phenomenological research, we begin with the experienced, or the "what" of experience. This is called the "noema." Next, we move to the experiencing or the "how" or "modality" of experience. This is called the "noema." Only lastly can we get at the person in the experience. *A major problem for people new to phenomenological research is not quite being able to get themselves (the experiencer) or their interviewees (also the experiencer) out of the dominant position within the research.* Figure 2 below give us one way to depict the process of phenomenological research (Ihde, 1997, pp. 44-54):
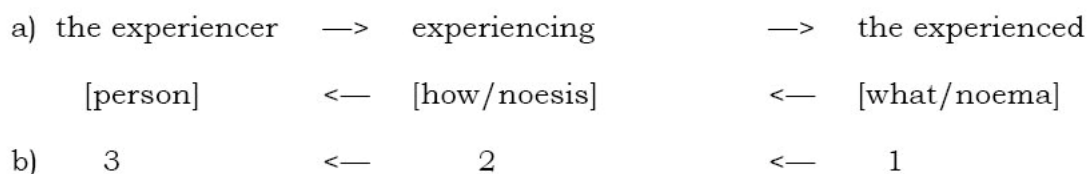
a) the experiencer   —>   experiencing   —>   the experienced

     [person]   <—   [how/noesis]   <—   [what/noema]

b)   3   <—   2   <—   1

Figure 2. Order of Experience vs. Order of Analysis

Notice the arrows in the three lines above. The first line (a) is what we call the "order of experience." As persons in our everyday world we are the center of our experiencing. That comes first. Then we live through our experiencing and finally come to be able to say what we have experienced. In phenomenological research, we study human communication by reversing this order. We engage what we call the "order of analysis," which is depicted in line (b) above. We begin with the "what" of experience, then move to the "how" of experience, and only in the end get to the person actually experiencing the phenomena. And, upon arriving at "the person" in this stage of the research we discover a very different understanding of "person" than our typically Western notions of individuality allow. This is why phenomenological research is never just psychological—that is, it is never really concerned with *why* a particular person feels, says or does a particular thing; we are *not* interested is psychologizing the person. Rather, phenomenological research is interested in the possibilities for experience (and its meaningfulness) as they become actualized in particular instances and thus manifest as typifications or tendendicies (habits) that are characteristic of a cultural time and place.

Phenomenological Reduction

To understand phenomenological reductions it is important to recall what I wrote above to begin the discussion of phenomenological descriptions:

At first glance, the effort to describe one's lived-experience seems obvious and easy. Once we begin this effort, we find that it is neither. Part of the reason for this is the fact that "lived experience first of all has a temporal structure; it can never be grasped in its immediate manifestation but only reflectively as past presence" (Van Manen, 2003, p. 36).

This makes one wonder, is it ever possible to get a "pure" description?

Aren't we always already, inevitably, and despite our best efforts, locked into a "reduction" mode whereby what we come to experience is a result of thematization—in other words, no matter what "phenomena" we experience, we experience them through an already existing frame of meaningfulness?

Well, the answer to the former question is, basically, "no, it is not possible to get 'pure' descriptions of experience." And, the answer to the latter question is, basically, "yes, everything we experience comes through an already existing framework of meaningfulness." Herein lies a certain "magic" to phenomenological theory and practice. We do not delude ourselves about the possibility of getting at a pure description of lived-experience. But, what happens in our non-deluded effort to get at this unattainable pure description of lived-experience is that we uncover those very "always already" present thematizations and make particular experiences possible. In other words, it allows us to account for our experience of *this* or *that* coming in to existence.

Whatever *this* or *that* is, it never exists separately from our experiencing of it—it is never merely an object in our environment.

The phenomenological reduction is the key to all of phenomenological research. The other two basic steps are essential—we can't do without them.

But, the reduction has a special place, both theoretically and practically.

Although we talk about beginning the research with description, the reduction and interpretation are always there at the start as well.

Well then, you might ask, what *is* a phenomenological reduction in *practice*? Basically, the phenomenological reduction is the practice of Imaginative Free Variation (IFV). IFV is a crucial step toward the interpretation phase where we specify the essential (or invariant) structures of a phenomenon. As Ihde (1997) puts it, "the use of variations requires obtaining as many *sufficient* examples or variations upon examples as might be necessary to discover the structure features being sought" (p. 40). And, "Variations 'possibilize' phenomena. Variations thus are devices that seek the invariants in variants and also seek to determine the limits of a phenomenon" (p. 40). Virtually all of Ihde's examples, especially the pictographs, reveal for us what we get via the process of Imaginative Free Variation. Read through these carefully.

Van Manen gives us a slightly different take (yet, consistent with Ihde's) on phenomenological reduction. Whereas Ihde tends to us the visual as the basis of his discussions and illustrations, Van Manen is very much focused on language and text. Van Manen talks about the reduction as a linguistic "thematization." In this case, we take the textual descriptions of experience we have generated and perform a thematic analysis. Van Manen gives us several methods for conducting thematic analyses.

Phenomenological Interpretation

In colloquial terms, we understand this stage of phenomenological research as the "results"—which is, in fact, what it is. Yet, when we understand the phenomenological interpretation exclusively in terms of the "results" of our research, we tend to concretize the "knowledge" produced through phenomenological research and add it to the stack of "knowledge" we like to measure as contributions.

But, as you might imagine, I'm going suggest that this is *not* the best way to think about the phenomenological interpretation. And the reason is that in thinking this way we tend to presume that knowledge can and should reach a status of "apodictic" certainty (Ihde, 1997, p. 73). Yet, given the concerns and goals of phenomenological research, we realize that such apodictic certainty is not attainable, not desirable, and is a fundamental distortion of the phenomena we study. Thus, we need to think in terms of "adequate" certainty (hde, 1997, p. 73). In chapter 7, on "Horizons: Adequacy and Invariance," Ihde offers us a way of understanding the "product" of phenomenological research that is itself reflective of the nature of the phenomena we study.

Yes, the point of phenomenological interpretation is to discover the essential or invariant structures of a phenomenon which make it possible for it to have appeared (and become experienced by a person) in the way that it did.

This is an effort to get at *phenomenological intentionality* (which is not to be confused with our common understanding of "intention" as conscious choice).

Phenomenological intentionality is what unites the particular human being to the culture, language, institutions, and other supra-social structures in which we are all inextricably interconnected. The complexity of this inextricably interconnectedness is what accounts for my caution in thinking of this final stage of phenomenological research as a "result" to be added to the "knowledge" we build up and store. Yes, we can understand this complexity much more through our phenomenological studies, but we are always, at best, reaching for something that is in part and invariably out of our reach. What we get in that reaching is something that is much more valuable than stacks of knowledge we might, I would argue, otherwise build up.

Methodological Synergism in Phenomenology

If the previous discussion leaves you with the feeling that these "three basic steps" in phenomenological research are interconnected and not entirely distinct, then you are understanding correctly. But, the fact that these three basic steps are interconnected and not entirely distinct *does not* equate to things being confused. Rather, it merely indicates the proper complexity of our general research effort. Human communication, like human experience, is incomprehensibly complex. In all our efforts to study it, we inevitably make it static or partial. Phenomenological research is specifically designed to study human communication holistically and in its dynamic process of happening.

This is why the methodological procedures themselves are *synergistic*—and apparently indistinct. Figure 3. below (Lanigan, 1988,p. 9) illustrates the synergism of the three basic steps in phenomenological research.

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Phenomenological Description
        1. DESCRIPTION (entails)
                a. description
                b. reduction
                c. interpretation
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Phenomenological Reduction
       2. REDUCTION (entails)
              a. description
              b. reduction
              c. interpretation

Phenomenological Interpretation
       3. INTERPRETATION (entails)
              a. description
              b. reduction
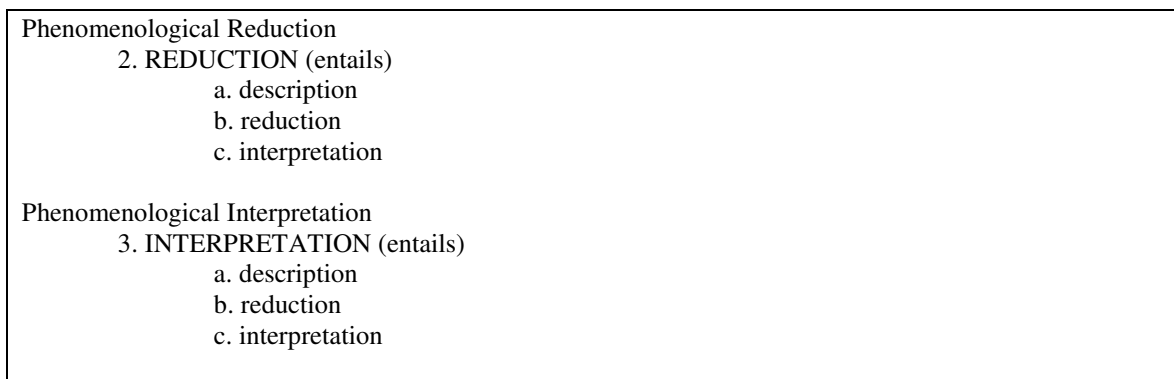   c. interpretation

Figure 3. Lanigan's Illustration of Synergistic Relationships in
Phenomenology

There are a few practical implications that come from this discussion of methodological synergism in phenomenology. First, we use the three basic steps of description, reduction and interpretation as *guide posts*, or markers.

In every stage of the research, especially when we get to the point of writing it up for presentation to an interested audience, we want to be able to clearly identify what is happening in which stage of the research process. This is like making the skeleton visible so that readers can see how we have attached this to that to get the other. But, on the flip side of this effort, we never want to forget that a completely "clean" or "accurate" representation of these three steps is never possible because each step entails the other three— there is no such thing as a "pure" description; the reductions that are explicated from the descriptions have, in many cases, informed the construction of the descriptions to begin with.

I like to explain the synergism of phenomenological methodology as like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. There is no set way for putting a jigsaw puzzle together except for trial and error—we try this piece, we try that piece.

We look for edges, for hints of color, for the contour of pieces, we compare to the completed image, and we keep trying until we get the fit. And when it fits, we *know* it. It is the same process with phenomenological research except that you must decide on the image and you must create and contour the pieces as they fit together to make the whole.

As we begin on this journey of learning about and doing phenomenological research on phenomena related to human sexuality, we have worlds of possibilities before us. What are the images, those final puzzle pictures, that we will be moving toward as we begin looking for pieces, studying and shaping their contours, and crafting their fit together? Answering this question is the work of the class, and neither you nor I know the answer now.

We must discover it together.

Engaging our Bodies

- the meaningfulness of sexuality as the subject matter of study;
- the body and the immediacy of lived experience as the site of study;
- and the relationship between speech, culture, and linguistic representation in the research process

Ethical and Political Implications

There is no doubt that the "communicative sexualities" classroom is radically different from the classrooms that most of us have been in. In every instance of teaching it I have found that students come to disclose and consider aspects of their experience that they have rarely considered with others or even themselves.

There are many dangers and responsibilities that go along with trying to create a classroom environment in which such personal and social risks are taken. Respect for difference must be more than an idea, it must be discovered in the very moments in which we are listening to ourselves and each other. Along with mutual respect must come a supportive environment in which judgments of all kinds are suspended. That does not mean, however, that we abandon the commitment to strenuous and critical thinking. The complexity of thinking required in our study of sexuality through semiotic phenomenology allows for an attitude that is both accepting and discerning, where there can be a suspension of judgment of any one person along with a critical consideration of the social and cultural contexts within which we have come to the experiences we have. It is very much with this sense of ethical commitment to both the persons in the class and the dedicated study of research process that I pursue "communicative sexualities."

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