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# Phenomenology As Philosophy and Method

## *Applications to Ways of Doing Special Education*

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### ABSTRACT

PHENOMENOLOGY IS A PHILOSOPHICAL MOVEMENT THAT APPROACHES THE STUDY OF HUMAN BEINGS AND THEIR CULTURE DIFFERENTLY FROM THE LOGICAL POSITIVIST MODEL USED IN THE NATURAL SCIENCES AND IN SPECIAL EDUCATION. PHENOMENOLOGISTS VIEW THE APPLICATION OF THE LOGICAL POSITIVIST MODEL TO THE STUDY OF HUMAN BEINGS AS INAPPROPRIATE BECAUSE THE MODEL DOES NOT ADDRESS THE UNIQUENESS OF HUMAN LIFE. IN THIS ARTICLE, THE THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATIONS OF PHENOMENOLOGY ARE DISCUSSED, FOLLOWED BY THEIR APPLICATIONS TO WAYS OF DOING RESEARCH IN SPECIAL EDUCATION.

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**P**HENOMENOLOGY IS AN INVENTORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS as of that wherein a universe resides. (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, p. 215)

Present Level of Performance:	Nathan has poor grammar skills
Annual Goal:	Learns Grammar Skills
Short-Term Instructional Objectives:	(1) Identifies parts of speech correctly. (2) Writes correct sentences and uses them properly. (3) Writes short paragraphs in order to communicate more effectively. (Individualized Education Program for a 13-year-old young man with learning disabilities, 1993)

The theoretical positions of the preceding two texts create significantly different orientations to the life worlds of people. The quote by Merleau-Ponty describes the essential focus of the phenomenological movement in philosophy—human *consciousness*. The Individualized Education Program written for a 13-year-old young man with learning disabilities characterizes the prevalent view of individuals working in the field of special education—an orientation directed toward changing the *behavior* of individuals with disabilities. Whereas phenomenology privileges the nature of the meanings that people construct in their lives and that guide their actions, special education focuses on the study and practice of behavioral change outside the context of the life meanings of individuals with disabilities. The shift that Bruner (1990) described in the early stages of the cognitive revolution from an emphasis on the “*construction* of meaning to the *processing* of meaning” (p. 4) aptly characterizes the essential differences between phenomenology and special education, respectively. In the construction of meaning, individuals’ beliefs and desires are implicated, but in the processing of information, an emphasis is placed on the computational systems of mind without reference to individuals’ meanings.

Philosophers are inquirers who are interested in describing the foundational concepts within some domain. A group of philosophers whose theoretical beginnings can be traced to Hegel (1910/1967) questioned the validity of employing the positivistic scientific model in studies of human beings and their world. In spite of the wide acceptance of this model in the natural sciences, these human science philosophers objected to the analogy that was made between the content of the natural sciences—the natural world of plants, animals and other non-human material matter—and the subject matter of the human world, human beings, and their cultures.

In response to the faulty analogy perceived by these human science philosophers, a movement of descriptive philosophy named *phenomenology* bloomed in the early twentieth century. This movement attempted to clarify a way of viewing human beings and their lives that identified the essential *uniqueness* of the human world. Husserl (1913/1962, 1936/1965), a man trained as a mathematician, is regarded as the father of phenomenology. Among his phenomenological followers are Schutz (1932/1967), Giorgi (1970), Merleau-Ponty (1942/1967), and James (1890/1983). Hermeneutics, a closely related philosophical movement concerned with the development of a philosophical theory of understanding, originated from Hegelian/Marxist sources (Howard, 1982). Dilthey (1923/1988), Heidegger (1931/1962), Gadamer (1960/1975), and Ricoeur (1963/1992) are among the leading figures in that movement (Howard, 1982; Polkinghorne, 1983).

In order to develop a conceptual framework for phenomenology, Husserl drew on the Kantian distinction between noumenon and phenomenon. Husserl argued that there are two kinds of reality: (1) *noumenon*—being in reality itself and (2) *phenomenon*—appearance of reality in consciousness. According to the phenomenologists, explanation of the mechanisms of noumena seemed the appropriate subject for the natural sciences, and the description of phenomena should be the focus of study in the human sciences.

Husserl (1913/1962, 1936/1965) argued that the positivistic paradigm was inappropriate for studying phenomena because it could not describe the essential phenomena of the human world. Among these essential phenomena were values, meanings, intentions, morals, feelings, and the life experiences and creations of human beings. In order to study these phenomena, human *consciousness* should be the primary unit of analysis in the study of human life. The domain of phenomenology was defined as *consciousness*, not in its materiality (i.e., the faculties associated with consciousness, such as neurological mechanisms), but rather the act of consciousness in its *intentionality toward something or someone* (i.e., how something or someone is experienced by me) (Polkinghorne, 1983). Husserl and his followers, while sometimes disagreeing on particular conceptualizations of consciousness, all agreed on the central point of phenomenology. They viewed the positivistic scientific paradigm as flawed for studying human beings and their lives because it could not consider human consciousness in its *meaning-making* capacity.

Special education has been mostly exempt from philosophical scrutiny during the field's short history, but recently a group of scholars both inside (e.g., Heshusius, 1982; Poplin, 1987; Skrtic, 1993) and outside (e.g., Coles, 1987) the field of special education have begun to examine the knowledge base in special education. These philosophically oriented scholars have argued that the foundational knowledge in special education is rooted in the positivistic

tradition of the natural sciences. While there has been some counter-argument suggesting that the roots of special education emerged from nonpositivistic theoretical bases such as psychodynamic approaches (Ulman & Rosenberg, 1986), the prevalent critical, philosophic view regards special education as emerging from a natural science worldview.

Like the phenomenologists, the philosophic critics of special education argue that the positivistic scientific view that has been incorporated into special education theory and practice is not appropriate for advancing the field today. The explicit reduction of human life to attributes of the natural world has created a view of the individual with disabilities that is mechanistic and psychological in the narrow sense, rather than holistic and psychological in the broad sense of being culturally sensitive. As a result of the adoption of the positivistic model, these critics argue, the desires and beliefs that shape the activities of individuals with disabilities in specific cultural contexts are not well understood. Recent work, however, has begun to redress this problem via the adoption of a sociocultural orientation to the study of learning handicaps (e.g., Cousin, Aragon, & Rojas, 1993; Klenk, 1993; Palincsar & Klenk, 1992; Stone & Reid, 1993; Stone & Wertsch, 1984) and a phenomenological hybrid perspective (McPhail, 1993).

Before launching into an elaboration of the philosophy and methods of phenomenology, I will discuss briefly some of the central tenets of positivism. Because the positivist science movement spawned phenomenology and now is seen by many in special education as the conceptual basis of the field, it is important to position a discussion of phenomenology and special education within the root paradigm. A description of the assumptions of the positivist science frame of reference will clarify and highlight the similarities to and differences from the phenomenological philosophical view.

The worldview inherent in positivism that appeared to capture the imagination of Renaissance scientists like Galileo and Newton was that the discoverable, regular patterns of natural phenomena could be explained in mathematical/logical formulas. This view created the possibility of human beings establishing a world through their scientific investigations that was not ruled by superstition, chance, and local knowledge, but rather, by a universal system of knowledge based on rationality containing unprecedented opportunities for prediction and control.

When this way of seeing the world was extended to the study of human beings through the writings of Hobbes, Comte, and Mill, the phenomena associated with being human, such as thinking and behaving, were also assumed to function with the regularities of natural phenomena (Polkinghorne, 1983). This view necessarily regarded internal experiences, such as sensation, perception, and the emotions, as well as the external behaviors of human beings and the nonhuman material, natural world as material

things that could be studied and analyzed in order to unlock the regular patterns. In this worldview, the most noble task of human scientists was to discover the regularities in human behavior, and then represent them in a logical model or system. This logical system could then be used to influence the motion of the natural world *and* the behavior of human beings to improve the conditions of life.

It is not surprising that early special education scholars embraced this worldview, a worldview that seems to hold so much promise for individuals with disabilities. In fact, it can be reasonably argued that the application of the positivist science model to the study of disabling conditions has been beneficial in permitting us to develop effective interventions such as drug therapy for individuals suffering from depression. Additionally, the positivist paradigm has shed light on some of the neurological correlates to learning disabilities that would otherwise have remained undisclosed (Flowers, 1993; Galaburda, 1990). However, these discoveries must be placed in the context of the human natural tendency toward meaning making. Damasio (1994), a neurologist, summed up the limitations of the positivist science approach to the understanding of mind as follows:

First, as I previously indicated, only a part of the circuitry in our brains is specified by genes. The human genome specifies the construction of our bodies in great detail, and that includes the overall design of the brain. But not all of the circuits actively develop and work as set by genes. Much of the brain's circuitry, at any given moment of adult life, is individual and unique, truly reflective of that particular organism's history and circumstances. . . . Second, each human organism operates in collectives of like beings; the mind and the behavior of individuals belonging to such collectives and operating in specific cultural and physical environments are not shaped merely by the activity-driven circuitries mentioned above, and even less shaped by genes alone. To understand in a satisfactory manner the brain that fabricates human mind and human behavior, it is necessary to take into account its social and cultural context. (p. 260)

### ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HUMAN BEINGS AND CULTURE

The first of the three requirements of a scholastic tradition, according to Jacob (1987), is that a group of scholars must share the same worldview regarding the domain of their study. Although differences do exist among phe-

nomenologists (e.g., in specific ways of conceptualizing consciousness), in the following section I highlight the shared core assumptions that have undergirded the movement.

### *Consciousness*

For phenomenologists, perhaps the single most important assumption about human beings is that *consciousness* is the sine qua non of human life. Among the various contents of consciousness are imagination, remembrance, perception, and logical forms. The importance of these aspects of consciousness is not in the natural science atemporal conceptualization of them as separate faculties, but instead in the part they play in bringing signification to experiences. Husserl (1936/1965) wanted to develop a "phenomenology of consciousness as opposed to a natural science about consciousness" (p. 91). He was interested in understanding things as they appear in individual consciousness.

### *Elimination of Dualisms*

The second important assumption of phenomenology is the belief that in consciousness, or the meaning making source of living, experiences are constituted holistically—there is no substantial difference between the subjective and objective world. This is because consciousness is always constituted in a reality that is not isolated from the experiential world. This assumption clearly breaks with the empirical tradition of dividing the world into material and nonmaterial, or the objective and subjective realms. Husserl wrote: "To the extent, however, that every consciousness is 'consciousness-of,' the essential study of consciousness includes also that of consciousness-meaning and consciousness-objectivity as such" (1965, p. 90).

Hegel, who is often considered a forerunner of phenomenology, described the essential connectedness of the subjective and objective in consciousness: "What at first appeared as object is reduced, when it passes into consciousness, to what knowledge takes it to be, and the implicit nature, the real in itself, becomes what this entity per se is for consciousness . . ." (1910/1967, p. 144).

Phenomenology has sometimes been viewed as being merely a subjective philosophy, but this is an erroneous interpretation. According to phenomenology, every act of consciousness contains the objective/subjective aspects of the same thing. In fact, phenomenology views the study of consciousness as the only access to the realities of the experiential world of human beings.

### *Consciousness Is Temporal*

Another important assumption of phenomenology is that consciousness has a temporal aspect to it; each individual consciousness carries the lived experiences of the past

within it as well as anticipations of the future. Essentially, there is no stopping point to consciousness in that along with its historicity and futurity, it is always being reconstituted in new experiences. James (1890/1983) described this phenomenon well: "Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows around it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead" (p. 246).

Whereas Husserl paid scant attention to the historical quality of consciousness, Heidegger (1931/1962) constituted his hermeneutics with an acute sense of the influence of time. He viewed human life as "thrown" into a way of being and giving meaning. A part of this assumption is the notion that experiences are lived before they are understood. Thus, it is in the "flow of life" that meanings are lived and only later brought to consciousness. This assumption naturally creates a tension with the positivist science goal of explaining structures of consciousness that are timeless and universal.

### ***The Cultural World Is a Creation of Human Meanings***

The last assumption to be addressed arises from the previous ones. The cultural world is a creation of the meanings human beings possess in consciousness. This assumption has two parts: (a) The cultural world is created through the meaningful connections each individual experiences in her or his contexts, and (b) cultural institutions are the creations that have emerged out of life activities. Thus phenomenological-hermeneutical study necessarily involves a study of the cultural systems in which individuals live.

Culture is not something constructed outside of consciousness or the constitutions of meaning, but rather, is co-constructed in lived experiences both on the individual level and the group level. Whereas Mill (1953) viewed society and its laws as the response to humans registering sensation in a passive way, the phenomenologists saw culture as the result of the active meaning-making systems of individuals as they engaged in their daily lives.

Concerning human sciences, however, it has become clear to us that psychic and psychophysical facts constitute the foundation of a theory not only of individuals but likewise of systems of culture as well as external organization of society and that these facts underlie historical intuition and analysis in every one of their stages. (Dilthey, 1923/1988, p. 147)

Thus, the study of human consciousness is both the study of subjectivity and the objective cultural circumstances as constituted in experience of them.

## **FOCI OF PHENOMENOLOGY**

Phenomenology's foci emerge from its central assumptions. First, it is "lived experience" as constituted in consciousness that is the unit of analysis for uncovering the structures of experience. Lived experience is a holistic phenomenon in consciousness that contains the multiple constituents of consciousness, such as numerous cognitive and affective dimensions. Because there is no way of attaining a stance outside of experience to attain understanding of human life, all attempts to penetrate the meanings of human life must be situated within the flow of natural life experiences. Thus, phenomenologists do not construct inauthentic, laboratory situations for the study of the structures of life, but rather, situate their investigations of consciousness within the everyday world. It is in the everyday world that human beings constitute the meanings that guide their actions.

Second, since phenomenologists are interested in individuals as meaning makers, they study meaningful action rather than behavior. Within this distinction, action is viewed as being guided by values and motivations, whereas behavior is not. According to Schutz (1967), "action is (1) a lived experience that is (2) guided by a plan or project arising from the subject's spontaneous activity and (3) distinguished from all other lived experiences by a peculiar Act of attention" (p. 215). Thus, phenomenologists would not observe behavior in isolation (e.g., response time and memory), that is, separated from the contexts in which these are meaningfully employed in action patterns.

Finally, phenomenologists are interested in the various structures of consciousness that lend meaning in life. Thus, they do not privilege formal reasoning in their study, but instead focus on all the structures of relationships that may emerge in individual consciousness that shape meaning. Among the patterns that emerge may be relationships of self and world, means and ends, and power. As a result, phenomenology often investigates what psychologists refer to as practical reasoning or folk psychology (see Bruner, 1990). Imagination, affect, and remembrances are some of the other structures of consciousness that are focused on by phenomenologists in the process of coming to understand the meanings of human life and the constructions that develop from those meanings.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Unlike the prescribed methodology of the positivist sciences, phenomenology does not follow prescribed rules. Rather, it has a set of guiding principles that researchers must keep in mind as they proceed. In order to explicate these principles fully, I will contrast the context of doing positivist science with that of phenomenology.

Positivist science is oriented toward knowledge acquisition or *episteme*. Polkinghorne (1983) described three

basic canons of positivist science designed to meet the goal of episteme:

1. Knowledge is not opinion or *doxa*. Knowledge is represented in statements of direct observation, or is derived from statements that have been deductively linked to direct observation. Inductive statements are less valid than deductive ones because they only represent approximations of episteme.
2. Knowledge is achieved when statements can be deductively generated and linked from axiomatic statements, and empirically verified.
3. Statements of opinion are inadmissible in scientific research because they are not grounded in observation and an axiomatic system.

When this model is applied to the study of human beings, *doxa* is necessarily omitted from analysis. Thus, human beings must be studied in the ways that are subject to verification through observation. Mere opinion and other aspects of subjectivity cannot be included as evidence that will stand up to logical analysis.

The philosophical context in which phenomenological research is situated contrasts sharply to that of positivist science. Phenomenology is not interested in episteme or verifiable knowledge, but has as its goal the uncovering of *doxa* or the belief patterns of human beings that provide their meaning, guide their actions, and have been constructed in the act of living. Human beings in their numerous meaning-making processes are the subject matter of phenomenological research. *The goal of this type of research is not to arrive at explanation, but rather to come to understand the processes that human beings engage in as they construct meaning from experiences.* Phenomenological methods are judged by their usefulness in improving our understanding of human meaning making within a particular area of inquiry, not by their ability to lead to new discoveries or to verify laws.

One of the difficulties of phenomenology is that the researcher is engaging in the description of meanings that always stand in relationships that are ever-changing. The phenomenologists recognized this dilemma and responded to it in different ways. Husserl, for example, believed that through the collection of carefully selected individual cases in which the structures of consciousness become revealed, a systematic knowing of the ways human beings construct meaning could be elaborated. Dilthey (1923/1988) submitted that through descriptive/interpretive research one could not arrive at objective knowledge, but that one could move closer to approximations of truth. Heidegger (1931/1962) believed that the process of doing descriptive/interpretive research is a circular process of understanding that is itself constitutive of

meaning. Researchers necessarily approach their project with the preconceived notions that are a part of their being. As researchers proceed, however, they can work toward revealing their own preconceptions, thus illuminating opportunities for change or growth. Thus, interpretation is necessarily involved in understanding, and the hermeneutic circular process describes the movements that are critical to that understanding. However, the results of this process do not produce verifiable knowledge, but instead understandings that can be judged by their effectiveness in addressing the concerns of the inquiry (Packer & Addison, 1989).

Within this context, human beings and their numerous ways of making meaning have a privileged status. This status is related to one of the guiding principles of phenomenological research: The goal of research is to create an openness regarding the possibilities for human beings to uncover *their own categories* or organizing themes. In other words, phenomenological research asks the researcher to respect the unique meaning-making structures of the individuals with whom they are engaged, rather than imposing a priori categories. Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, and Mulderij (1983) suggested that one of the goals of phenomenological research is to effectively communicate "the other's" way of seeing things.

So, instead of offering a prescriptive set of techniques for doing phenomenology, phenomenology and interpretive research call researchers to study human life in ways that will create understandings about the processes individuals engage in as they construct meanings. This kind of call challenges researchers to construct methods of investigation that are appropriate to advancing our understandings of human life in an area of inquiry. Thus, whether it is personal consciousness, cultural practices, or artifacts under study, researchers must ground their undertakings in the view that human life is constructed in meaningful experiences. The action of describing the patterns involved in human life experiences, as well as penetrating their meanings through interpretation, is the art and the purpose of phenomenological/hermeneutic research.

### APPLICATIONS TO WAYS OF DOING SPECIAL EDUCATION

The theory and practice of phenomenology as such has not made an inroad into special education research and practice. Yet, through recent attempts to ground special education research and practice in sociocultural theory, many of the ideas central to phenomenology are being employed (e.g., Cousin et al., 1993; Klenk, 1993; Palincsar & Klenk, 1992; Rueda & Mehan, 1986; Stone & Reid, 1993; Stone & Wertsch, 1984). In an article devoted to elaborating Vygotsky's sociocultural theory through explication of his earliest writings on the psychology of art and the psychological development of individuals with disabilities, Minick's (1989) characterization of many of the conceptual under-

pinnings of Vygotsky's theory are remarkably similar to those in phenomenology. Minick described Vygotsky's conceptualization of psychology in the following way: "Psychology, Vygotsky argues here, is a social science because *everything within us is social*, yet it is a science not of cultural or ideological form but of the *psyche of the single individual*" (1989, p. 7). Minick continued, "The child's consciousness and development, Vygotsky argued here, is defined not by the social world as such but by the child's relationship to that world" (p. 19). Finally, Minick stated, "Vygotsky defined *experience* as a unit of analysis, arguing that it represents the link between the whole personality and the social situation in the same sense that word *meaning* represents the link between cognition and speech in social interaction" (p. 25).

Without carefully analyzing the similarities and differences in these two theoretical frames of reference, a task beyond the limits of this article, it is clear that the sociocultural perspective addresses many of the same concerns as phenomenology relative to the study of human beings and their culture. The meaning-making processes of consciousness or mind while engaged in practical activities became the cornerstone of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development.

Consequently, phenomenological tenets are being used in many interesting and innovative research projects in special education under the rubric of sociocultural theory. Time does not permit me to do justice to all of the work that is being done in special education in sociocultural theory or phenomenological hybrids, but I will address two studies for the purpose of describing the kinds of understandings that can occur with this kind of research.

Cousin, Aragon, and Rojas (1993) recently completed a study of the literacy development of an adolescent male with learning disabilities over the course of a year. They were interested in coming to understand how he practiced and understood literacy under the condition of engagement in various kinds of literacy activities. Thus, through observation in the classroom, interviews, and examination of various artifacts, such as work samples, certain patterns emerged that suggested his constructions of meanings relative to literacy. Analyses indicated that the quality of this young man's literacy improved when he was engaged in activities that were more natural, such as writing a letter to one of the researchers about a novel he had read, rather than school-like, such as writing about the same novel but as part of a journal assignment in school. Also, in interviews and letters in which this young man described his perspectives on himself and literacy, it became apparent that he was conscious of his individual strengths and weaknesses in literacy and development in general, and of how these attributes played themselves out in varying real world contexts.

This study advanced our understandings of the meanings this young man with learning disabilities carried relative to his relationships of self and the everyday world of

literacy and learning. Developing a beginning understanding of these relationships increases our abilities to see how the activities this young man engages in are guided by the meanings he has constructed, and is constructing, in real world activities. We have a glimpse into the ways he has constituted social meanings, a goal of both phenomenology and social constructivism.

The second study (McPhail, 1993) is a phenomenological-hybrid endeavor, so called because the methodology used, although primarily cast from phenomenological principles, utilizes principles from measurement research practices and ecological research—the Experience Sampling Methodology developed by Prescott, Csikszentmihalyi, and Graef (1976). In this study, daily *experiences* of three groups of adolescents over the course of a week were studied. The goal of this undertaking was to increase our understanding of the ways average-achieving adolescents, low-achieving adolescents, and adolescents with learning disabilities were experiencing their life situations. Through sampling experiences, both during and after school, patterns of thinking, affect, motivation, and self-esteem emerged. These patterns reflected the meanings these adolescents had constructed and were constructing relative to their daily activities.

Analyses from this study suggested several counterintuitive findings. Contrary to the prevalent belief in the deleterious effects of labeling, particularly for older students, this study indicated that adolescents with learning disabilities experienced their school situations more positively than both of the other groups of adolescents. Additional analyses (McPhail & Muhlberger, in preparation) suggested that within the group of adolescents with learning disabilities, specific kinds of school contexts had different impacts on these adolescents. Specifically, the students with LD experienced the resource room more positively than other contexts, such as self-contained content classrooms.

It could be argued that one of the strengths of this kind of phenomenological study is that "the other"—in this case, adolescents with learning disabilities—is provided the opportunity to reveal his or her ways of viewing the world. This kind of understanding then creates the opportunity for those of us not engaged in the practices of being an adolescent with learning disabilities to come to see the ways meanings can be constructed in specific contexts, contexts that are otherwise outside of our experiences. Also, because various constituents of consciousness are involved in the experience samplings, such as components of affect, thinking, cognition, motivation, and self-esteem, more holistic pictures of daily experiences emerge.

## CONCLUSIONS

Coming to understand and appreciate alternative approaches to doing research can benefit the field of spe-

cial education. Questions and issues that we have not been able to address before can be studied with new methodologies. Although some might be concerned that the loss of hegemony of the logical-positivist paradigm in special education research and practice will create anarchy and potentially retard the development of our field, this outcome is not inevitable. Instead, loosening the logical-positivist stronghold in special education research and practice can advance our knowledge of the phenomenon called special education through increasing our understandings. As our understandings of other ways of studying human beings increase, we can create a community of special education scholars, including those in the logical-positivist tradition, that slowly circumambulates the phenomenon of special education for the purpose of identifying critical issues and problems. We might ask important questions, such as, What is the purpose of special education? Then, through discourse with members of our community, we can craft inquiries that are grounded in methods appropriate for addressing our concerns.

Descriptive-interpretive inquiry has two very important contributions to bring to the methodological discourse table. First, phenomenology suggests that the narrow psychological frames of reference we have traditionally used in research and practice in special education do not capture the sociocultural contexts that are an integral part of the psychological development of individuals with learning differences. Vygotsky (1993) understood that the study of the ways social relations are reorganized for individuals with disabilities was the proper area of inquiry, rather than the nature of the disabling condition in and of itself. Although Curtis (1978) conceived of the purpose of education, in general, as attempting to assist the child to "make sense of things for himself" (p. xx), this orientation could also be applied to individuals with disabilities. Phenomenology could permit us to explore these important domains, and as a consequence advance our understandings of the ways individuals with disabilities create and use meanings in their lives.

Second, the interpretive tradition challenges us as special education researchers to make our own consciousness an area of inquiry. Our "fore-structures," as Heidegger suggested, undoubtedly influence our research and practices. Entering into the hermeneutic circle of inquiry by making of ourselves a study, as well as those we are engaged with, could infuse a freshness and honesty to the field of special education. ■

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#### AUTHOR'S NOTES

1. I am particularly indebted to the writings of Roy Howard (1982) and Donald Polkinghorne (1983) for their historical analyses of hermeneutics and phenomenology.
2. I would like to thank Annemarie Palincsar for pointing out the Cousin, Aragon, and Rojas (1993) study.

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