Alchemy Methodology

ALCHEMY METHODOLOGY: TRANSFORMING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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Abstract

Alchemy Methodology is an application of Husserl’s Transcendental Phenomenology, which offers a philosophical foundation for doing research. It returns to the original principles of pure phenomenology, and presents a step by step approach to inquiry, based on one’s own, personal experiences. In keeping with the theoretical perspective of Transcendental Phenomenology, it is informed through an epistemology of Objectivism. The paper will clarify this argument, and present Alchemy Methodology as a rigorous, theoretical framework for the application of Husserl’s pure Phenomenology, and as a research methodology most suited to artists, writers and psychotherapists.

The three main ideas presented here are that:

- Phenomenology as a popular research methodology has metamorphosed into an approach that is epistemologically at odds with Husserl’s original conception. The paper will challenge the contemporary misconstruction of Phenomenology in research, and explain the reasons for Phenomenology’s reconfiguration in terms of historical context and twentieth century modernism. It will explain that Heidegger’s torture of Husserl’s terminology has resulted in qualitative researchers’ misunderstanding Phenomenology – seeing it more as a form of Grounded Research than anything resembling Husserl’s simple and exquisite philosophy.
- Alchemy Methodology offers a rigorous theoretical framework for the application of Husserl’s pure Phenomenology
- Alchemy Methodology is suited to writers, artists and scholars with an appreciation of psychoanalysis. It seeks to draw universal insights from personal and creative methods of data collection. I will outline examples of how Alchemy Methodology has been applied to arts-based research, and argue that unlike methodologies that are based on subjectivist epistemologies, this first-person data approach is actually informed by Objectivism, and seeks transcendental objects of universal significance.

Introduction

Educational research now embraces first-person data methods such as those used in Autoethnography (Ellis, 2004) and Visual Sociology. Alchemy Methodology invites the insightful and tacit knowledge inherent in the researcher’s personal data collection, and then goes beyond it to seek archetypal, universal elements. It is a rigorous and theoretically aligned methodology, as I will set out for scrutiny. The paper will argue that Alchemy Methodology reflects the true nature of Husserl’s phenomenology, and now, one hundred years on, well after the reign of modernism, scholars are ready to see what Heidegger and his followers would not.

Working with qualitative research data has been likened to prospecting for ‘true facts and feelings residing within the respondent’ (Silverman, 2016). Ideally, the skilled researcher will be able to extract from the shell of data, uncontaminated truths – pearls of research wisdom. Much has been written about a researcher’s ability to limit the corruption of suspect data in both positivist and post-positivist approaches, so how then might one justify research that uses one’s own, first-person data? Surely it will be saturated subjectivism? I am convinced by Erikson (Bolduc, 2016) and Husserl (Husserl,
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1964/1929) that through the most subjective data, the most universal insights may emerge. Husserl said, in reference to gathering universal insights from personal data, “…I experience the world not as my own private world, but as an intersubjective world, one that is given to all human beings and which contains objects accessible to all….” (Husserl, 1964/1929).

I have been creating Alchemy Methodology for over a decade now. It continues to emerge as an adaptation of Husserl’s pure phenomenology and a way of prospecting for intersubjective elements of truth, via the most idiosyncratic, personal recollection. The unconscious mind becomes the filter through which conscious agenda is removed. Husserl knew, like his contemporaries Freud, Adler and Jung, that the unconscious – uncensored and raw – has the capacity to reveal truths through dream, and painting and altered states of consciousness (C. G. Jung, 1933, pp. 69-70). For the psychoanalyst, these are the elements of the psyche. For the phenomenologist, they are the elements of the research in question. The psychoanalyst will usually focus on the insights for the individual patient. The phenomenologist will always focus on the research insights for human kind. Yet they walk the same path of process.

In last year’s AARE Conference paper (Vallack 2015) I presented Alchemy Methodology in the historical context of Husserl’s misunderstood Phenomenology, and attempted to explain the political and intellectual forces that caused the philosophy to be maligned and misunderstood. I argued that phenomenology confuses students today because ambitious modernists (in particular, Husserl’s own mentee, Heidegger), while retaining Husserl’s terminology, actually distorted its meaning. I will touch on this briefly now, in order to provide context for Transcendental Phenomenology and Alchemy Methodology, which are the foci here.

Phenomenology, as it is construed in many textbooks, no longer makes sense. The harder those who phenomenologist, Michael Crotty (Crotty, 1998) euphemistically refers to as ‘new’ phenomenologists, try to ‘intuit’ essences using logic, the more nonsensical and confusing it becomes. I am referring to contemporary humanists such as Giorgi (Giorgi, 1985) and Wertz, who caused me years of existential angst as a student of phenomenology, working only with secondary sources of information. I had to read the German translations of Husserl’s original writing – as obscure as they then appeared to my novice eye– before eventually understanding simple phenomenology. It is not hard. It was just bent out of shape into something unrecognisable. Later, I was awestruck by the spiritual simplicity and alignment of both Jung’s notion of the Collective Unconscious and Husserl’s transcendent intersubjectivity. Essentially, these concepts are the same, and they are central to Alchemy Methodology. The alchemist, so the stories say, turns base metal into gold. The phenomenologist and the psychotherapist alike, turn every day, personal experience into universal wisdom.

The diagram below (Vallack, 2015) shows the scattered directions of phenomenology, as portions of its concept and terminology were stolen or misplaced by those unable to see phenomenology in its entirety through the limited scope of the modernist lens. To the right, Heidegger led an army of thinkers, who reinterpreted phenomenology as some kind of interview-based data collection process, through which the researcher deciphers themes as answers to the research question. This approach to doing phenomenology is called ‘Existential’(Crotty, 1996), but it is not phenomenology in any original sense. The misunderstanding was brought about because the modernists were unable to grasp the postmodern, metaphysical concepts inherent in phenomenology, including that which Gebser would call mythical consciousness (Gebser, 1986). Through mythical consciousness, one grasps understanding of human situations through stories, which feature archetypal protagonists.
Contemporaries, Gebser and Jung focused on myth as a way to understanding humankind. Jung refers to the Collective Unconscious (C. Jung, 1966), and Gebser talks of Mythical Consciousness (Gebser, 1986). The concepts are similar, and they align with Husserl’s notion of Intersubjectivity (Husserl, 1964/1929). The method of Epiphany in Alchemy Methodology is the point where the purely subjective transcends to an insight of a more globally inclusive nature. I will explain these basic concepts now, so the reader may appreciate the connections between the thinking of contemporary philosophers, Husserl, Jung and Gebser. Their theories align and support one another, and the theories inform the epistemology of Alchemy Methodology.

What did Gebser say?

Jean Gebser informs us that as human consciousness has evolved, we have learned to know things in different ways. The following summary of his thesis shows that until the last 400 or so years, magical and mythical consciousness played an important part in human perception. Mental mode, the dominant form of sense-making that is used in western society today, has a unique characteristic whereby it gives no credence to any other way of knowing. Most of us were taught this at school - any idea that cannot be reasoned and tested cannot be deemed valid. But Gebser argues that the ancient ways of knowing are still with us and relevant, albeit somewhat repressed. According to Gebser, intuition and storytelling (frequently used in first-person research approaches, including Alchemy Methodology) are important tools for knowledge.

Here is a summary of Gebser’s theory of the evolution of consciousness:
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**GEBSER’S EVOLUTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS : Ways of Knowing…**

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<tr>
<th>INTEGRAL</th>
<th>When we know that all ways of knowing are valid</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MENTAL</td>
<td>When we know through cognition and logic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYTHICAL</td>
<td>When we know emotionally, through story and metaphor and archetype</td>
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<tr>
<td>MAGICAL</td>
<td>When we just know – intuitively, but don’t know why</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARCHAIC</td>
<td>When we were at one with the environment and there was a vague awareness</td>
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*Figure 2. Author’s summary of Gebser’s theory of Evolution of Consciousness*

Archaic Consciousness is the instinctive sensation that is known to single-cell organisms, as environmental changes are detected. We still have this structure of consciousness, yet some of us are more attuned to it than others. For example, some might know *in their bones* that it will rain. Mahood describes Archaic Consciousness as, “a zero-dimensional, non-perspectival world which could be likened to a state of deep sleep...non-differentiation and the total absence of any sense of separation from the environment” (Mahood, 1996).

Magical consciousness, according to Gebser, is “when the...wakeful consciousness is sufficiently depressed so that the surroundings are no longer present...where even the psychic reality of dream and image vanish...individuality is obliterated in the magic realm” (Gebser, 1986. p.163).

The transitions from Mythical to Mental and to Integral Consciousness are described as follows:

“The clothing of knowledge in myth is what characterized the transition to the mythical structure of consciousness, the two-dimensional, unperspectival state of consciousness that can best be likened to a dream.... This structure is superseded by the mental structure, whose appearance coincides with the rise of Greek civilisation.... Thinking is primary, and in its latter stage, rational thinking is primary. But this structure, too, is yielding to a mutation which Gebser identifies as the Intregral structure of consciousness. This is described as a four-dimensional, aperspectival world of transparency. This is a time-free, space-free, subject and object free world of verition.” (Mahood, 1996, pp. 15-16).

Whereas most research methodologies, even most qualitative methodologies, work only with ‘mental’ mode reason, Alchemy Methodology deliberately aims to embrace more intuitive and creative levels of consciousness. The methods called Epoche and Epiphany align with Gebser’s magical and mythical consciousness’.

**What did Jung say?**

Dynamic psychologists such as Freud and Jung have convinced even the most positivist of thinkers that the unconscious (Jung) or subconscious (Freud) can be a resource for emotional and behavioural information. Anyone who acknowledges the concepts of introversion and extraversion acknowledges the work of Jung. So much of it has become part of everyday thought and speech. Dream analysis, when performed by a skilled practitioner, may highlight otherwise elusive, patient attitudes. The process of luring unconscious information into the light of consciousness is pursued by therapists through such methods as hypnosis, dream recall, and free-association. These are the methods used in Alchemy Methodology to point to universal images and insights.

**How do the theories of Gebser and Jung support Husserl’s Transcendental Phenomenology?**

As researchers, we must address the question of how we know things, that is, of epistemology.
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Alchemy Methodology embraces Husserl’s idea that we know things intersubjectivity:

…I experience the world not as my own private world, but as an intersubjective world, one that is given to all human beings and which contains objects accessible to all….” (Husserl, (1964/1929)).

Transcendental objects of experience, are common to all individuals, regardless of culture or time. Through transcendence, I can empathise with your experience when it is like (but not necessarily identical to) my own. I contend that by researching my intensely subjective experiences, I may produce universal insights, via the conscious, the unconscious, and (to use Jung’s term) the collective unconscious mind.

Epistemology and theoretical alignment in Research

Epistemology, is a term used loosely in academic discourse, yet I think it is essential that researchers have a considered understanding of their epistemological perspectives. In a rigorous theoretical research framework, the Epistemology informs the whole philosophical approach to the inquiry, and must align with the theoretical perspective and methodology. If one is doing phenomenology, one is seeking objects that exist outside of any constructed knowledge. Like the scientist, the phenomenologist works from an epistemology of Objectivism. Crotty (1996) explains that there are three research epistemologies:

1. **Objectivism** – such as that which I have just described. It is the domain of scientists and phenomenologists. Whereas the scientist seeks tangible, lifeworld objects, the phenomenologist seeks archetypal, ideal ones, which always present themselves in symbolic form – usually as images. The key idea inherent in objectivism is that the objects exist, whether or not anyone is aware of them. For example, Jupiter existed as a plant long before it was discovered. Or hypothetically, a relationship may have been narcissistic long before the legend of Echo and Narcissus played out and was brought to consciousness via the lover’s dream.

2. **Constructionism** is the epistemology most commonly used in qualitative research. Many researchers will construct their interpretations of data using rational analysis, coding or specially designed computer software. Constructionism as epistemology holds the idea that truth is interpreted by the researcher. Like each approach, it is thwart with problems pertaining to rigor, but it is trusted because it is seen as logically accountable.

3. **Subjectivism**. This is how we know our everyday world, before cognitive interference. Subjective research data, such as that created as the foundation for autoethnographical research, provides deep insights into human experience. The analysis of the data, however, is usually left undone. It is the reader, rather than the researcher, who must then construct an interpretation of this data, using perhaps, empathy or reason to do so. Subjectivism, as epistemology, is concerned only with the specific case experience. It avoids any sort of general conclusions, and this, I think, is where is falls short as a research epistemology.

So one must be mindful that although the methods of Alchemy Methodology draw on deeply subjective data, the epistemology of objectivism dictates that the final answers to the research question with be in the form of a universally recognised object.

Once the researcher becomes thoughtfully or intuitively aware of the epistemology that will inform the research, it is important that the rest of the research framework aligns with it. For example, if I am working from an epistemology of Objectivism, I need to ensure that my methodology is not one that is informed by Constructionism.
The Structure of Alchemy Methodology

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<tr>
<th>Epistemology</th>
<th>Objectivism</th>
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<td></td>
<td>The way of knowing the world, which assumes that objects exist independently of anyone’s knowledge of their existence. Husserl says, “Subjectivism can only be overcome by the most all-embracing and consistent subjectivism (the transcendental). In this (latter) form it is at the same time objectivism (of a deeper sort)...” (Husserl in McCormic &amp; Elliston, 1981, p. 34)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Theoretical Perspective</th>
<th>Transcendental Phenomenology</th>
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<td>Theoretical Perspective</td>
<td>This is Husserl’s final insight and pieced résistance. Like his contemporary, Carl Jung, and Plato before them, Husserl purports that through the most subjective experiences, universal forms (Plato), archetypes (Jung) or intersubjective elements may emerge intuitively to inform the research.</td>
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<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Alchemy Methodology</th>
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<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Formerly known as Subtextual Phenomenology (Vallack, 2010) and Soliloquy (Vallack, 2014) during its formative stages, Alchemy Methodology aligns the step by step methods for doing research with the overriding theory of Husserl’s pure phenomenology</td>
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<tr>
<th>The Methods</th>
<th>1. Experience</th>
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<td>The Methods</td>
<td>Like other first-person research approaches, such as Autoethnography, Alchemy starts with the intimate and authentic, subjective experiences, which Boucher (in Jones et al 2015, p.51) recalls, cannot be ‘organised into coherent systems, explained by theories, predicted and/or controlled.” Experience is delivered – through telling, or writing or drawing. It is known to the researcher.</td>
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<th>The Methods</th>
<th>2. Epophage</th>
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<td>The Methods</td>
<td>This is the time spent with the experience, without the interference of conscious analysis. Perhaps it is the Zen of the experience? Moustakas (Moustakas, 1990) may call it the ‘incubation’ period. To Husserl, it is the time when the unconscious is processing the experience before revealing the universal image or archetype, which sums up the whole experience. (It is NOT, as some have contrived, the bracketed moments during an interview, deemed irrelevant to the research data (Giorgi, 1985). Interviews do not serve pure phenomenology. They are an appendage of</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Epiphany</td>
<td>Through art work, or dream recollection or writing or conversation – or some way that allows the underlying meaning of the experience to break through into consciousness, the research archetype will present itself. This is the epiphany. It may present itself a number of times before consciousness is sharp enough to recognise it. To paraphrase Milton Erikson (Bolduc, 2016), our unconscious is so much smarter than we are.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Explication</td>
<td>Sometime, when the researcher is experiencing an altered state of consciousness – perhaps while painting or writing or meditating or even just daydreaming – an image will present itself to consciousness. At first, it may not be recognised as significant to the research. When I started trialling this methodology, the image had to be presented more than once. I just failed to link it with the next step involving conscious awareness – Examination.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Examination</td>
<td>Once the archetypal image of the research phenomenon presents itself to the researcher, it can be examined and discussed in a more conventional way. The researcher can then embark on a kind of psychoanalysis, which examines the dream-like image in the light of the formative events and experiences. Curiously, the researcher with even a modest knack for psychoanalysis, will begin to see the big picture that hir unconscious has created and set out for logical analysis.</td>
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Figure 3 The Structure of Alchemy Methodology
Until the final object is recognised cognitively by the researcher, s/he may fear that nothing will come of the inquiry. I reiterate that this research is not for everyone. Those who understand psychoanalysis will appreciate that these seemingly elusive images have a way of just turning up and completing the enquiry. Your research phenomenon will be born unto consciousness, but you should prepare for its arrival – start to paint, or attend meditation classes or take long, stress-free walks that allow your thoughts to drift and wander. Writing down dreams can be a most enlightening activity, albeit one that requires self-discipline at, perhaps, 3.00am.

How to induce a research phenomenon from the unconscious

In my experience, the research phenomenon appears as an image or a voice in my imagination. I will approach this question by sharing some examples of how I have received these archetypal forms from the unconscious, but each researcher will need to discover hir (his or her) own ways.

When I began to create this methodology some years ago, I was recording my personal experiences as a theatre director, on a voice recording device, each evening after a rehearsal. I knew I was searching for the research phenomenon, but I was still confused about how to reach that object, and thought I would need to transcribe the data and search consciously for themes. I misunderstood the literal meaning of “intuiting essences”. Like most new phenomenologists, I had been led astray by the existentialist disciples of modernism – Heidegger and those who followed him. I had not understood Husserl’s assurance that the research phenomenon would find me, so when it did present itself, I did not recognise it. But as everyone who has experienced a recurring dream will know, the unconscious haunts you until you see what it needs you to see. My research into theatre directing revealed an archetype in the form of the Wizard of Oz. By the end of the research, I had interpreted it to mean that like the Wizard of Oz, the type of Director I had become was collaborative and actor-centred. Popular belief holds that the Director is the great visionary who creates the theatre by manipulating actors as though they were puppets. Unconsciously, I knew that in the rehearsal room, theatre is created collaboratively. The concept of an almighty director, like that of the almighty Wizard of Oz, is fraudulent. However, like I am want to do when directing actors, the Wizard counselled his people to know their inner strengths and abilities, so they may use them to create the magic. So how did the Wizard appear?

My PhD supervisor at the time, Professor Bernie Neville, had expertise in psychoanalysis. Sometimes he would encourage us to draw our theses or meditate in the search for answers. One day, as I was meditating on my question about phenomenology, in my mind, Michael Crotty (Crotty, 1998) came to me, took me by the hand, and suggested we should go together to visit Husserl to secure an answer. Then Michael laughed and said, “I hope he’s not the Wizard of Oz”. Had I not written the details of the meditation afterwards, I probably wouldn’t have recalled it. Much later, I was writing a play in which I was trying to make connections between directing and qualitative methodologies, as the play was to be performed at the Association for Qualitative Research Conference in Melbourne, 2002. I was trying to be rational and clear, but many writers will understand that characters sometimes take on a life of their own as they are being created. All of a sudden, one of the characters said that the director was the Wizard of Oz. The notion jolted my consciousness with a sense of deja vu, just enough for me to revisit the meditation notes and go on to make sense of the metaphor. That was the moment of Epiphany. Once it had landed, I could progress more traditionally with my inquiry, and use my mental consciousness to analyse and explain.

Alchemy methodology will show the big picture of a research topic, whereas other qualitative, constructionist approaches will show a more detailed part of it. Metaphorically speaking, themes drawn out of interview material may reveal a branch of the research topic, but Alchemy Methodology will present the whole tree.
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Alchemy Methodology scans personal experience for universal significance

In order for one to understand Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, and an approach to implementing it in scholarly research, which I call Alchemy Methodology, one needs to be able to work with both intuition and cognition - both the unconscious and consciousness, to gather and analyse data. Phenomenology is a first-person research process only. It must be done by a researcher who is experiencing the phenomenon first-hand, and collecting subjective data. Then, Husserl explains, through the unconscious, there is an intersubjective manifestation, which becomes the universal meaning inherent in all of this personal experience. It is the phenomenon in the phenomenology, and it is revealed to consciousness through art or meditation or some form of altered state of consciousness that is conducive to its birth into consciousness. Cognition has little control over when or how it will happen. When it does occur, and consciousness can recognise and access it, logic may take over and prepare it for scholarly explanation.

In more philosophical terms, Husserl has established his theory of Transcendental Phenomenology, the only phenomenology, and a science which takes one on a journey past psychological idealism (Husserl, 1964, p.33), through transcendental idealism (p.34) and solipsism to metamorphosis as the alter ego (p.34), that is, the intersubjective embrace of the universal object.

In less philosophical terms, Alchemy Methodology is an approach to doing phenomenological research by immersing in the activity you want to know about, not thinking too much about it for a while, and seeing what eventually comes to mind, in the form of a mythical image. You know you have found your object or answer when the image seems to sum up the meaning of the whole experience. Then marry your mind to your creative intuition, and write about it, or paint it. Or dance it – and listen.

References


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