

## Contributions of the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur to the phenomenological research in psychology

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**Abstract:** The study aims to apprehend the specificity and reflect on possible contributions of the phenomenological-hermeneutic method of Paul Ricoeur to phenomenological research in psychology. The results demonstrate that, in phenomenological psychology, the empirical understanding is synonymous with interpretation and it means direct apprehension of the lived structure (objective pole of the hermeneutic circle), whereas, in the Ricoeur's hermeneutics perspective, it is the radical acceptance of interpretation – understood as a result of the understanding/explanation dialectics – acting in the course of any investigation that ensures the recognition of the inalienable presence of subjectivity and the requirements of scientific rigor to be corresponded. We concluded that the hermeneutics of Ricoeur contributes to the improvement of the empirical phenomenological psychology, since it offers conditions of greater coherence, consistency, depth, and range.

**Keywords:** phenomenological psychology, qualitative research, Paul Ricoeur, research methods – psychology.

### Introduction

This study originated from personal conviction, increasingly conquered, regarding the impossibility of dissociating the subject of the object in the research process. It was imposed from my own experience as a researcher in the context of experimental psychology and it gradually assumed the contours of a philosophical and scientific stance based on phenomenological psychology (see section 2). At the time, it was also from the own research exercise that I was referred to the scope of hermeneutic theories – the impossibility of dissociating the understanding of interpretation when reading a text; the need to better understand the distinction often drawn between understanding and explaining; the need to deepen the level of reading and interpretation of a text in order to apprehend its conscious/preconscious and unconscious meanings, in the systematic sense (topical and dynamic) of the term (Freud, 1915/1974, p. 198; Ricoeur, 1978, pp. 87-104). Thus, I have landed on the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur (sections 2, 5, and 6).

I aim, here, to answer the following questions: a) what is the specificity of the phenomenological-hermeneutic approach regarding the scientific or empirical phenomenological approach employed in research within the field of psychology? b) how does the phenomenological-hermeneutic approach, particularly the one represented by the thought of Paul Ricoeur, responds (if it does so) to the concerns previously mentioned, originated from my praxis as a researcher?

More directly, the study consists of a systematization of readings and reflections carried out aiming to apprehend the specificity and reflect on possible contributions of

the phenomenological-hermeneutic method of Paul Ricoeur to phenomenological research in psychology.

The study is organized in five more sections. In the next one, I contextualize and delineate this study; then, I make explicit the psychological research method proposed by Amedeo Giorgi and begin a comparative reflection between phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches in psychology. In the two subsequent sections, I reflect on the psychological interview technique according to these approaches (4<sup>th</sup> section) and on the very phenomenological psychology as an undertaking coincident with the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur (5<sup>th</sup> section). Yet, I present the reader with some basic concepts of this hermeneutics and, finally, expose the findings enabled by the study (6<sup>th</sup> section).

### Hermeneutics, Phenomenology and Phenomenological Psychology

The actor is heading to the stage to *interpret* a role; the members of an orchestra *interpret* symphonies, musical scores; a student is asked to *interpret* texts; a priest *interprets* the sacred books; a scientist *interprets* data; a judge gives sentences based on *interpretation* of laws; psychoanalysts *interpret the* transfer as well as fantasies, dreams, and speeches of their patients; when translating a text into another language, we necessarily *interpret* it; sometimes we *interpret* well, sometimes we misinterpret what is said or done; there are times we agree on and there are others we disagree on how our gesture was *interpreted*...

It is noteworthy how the verb *to interpret* (from the Greek, “hermeneuein”) and the noun *interpretation* (“hermeneia”) are variedly and widely used in our language, which is not to say that in all these cases a hermeneutics is being established.

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Etymologically, in its former use, the term *hermeneutics* may refer to: “1) to express out loud, that is, ‘to say’; 2) to explain, as when a situation is explained; 3) to translate, as in the translation of a foreign language” (Palmer, 1969/1986, pp. 23-24).

But this is not enough to minimally clarify the meaning of hermeneutics, nor to elucidate the relationship between phenomenology and hermeneutics, since we are dealing with two distinct and complex philosophical traditions in their developments and specificities (Kvale, 1983).

In the first case, it is worth remembering the diversity of formulations that range from transcendental phenomenology of Husserl to existential ontology of Heidegger, to the existential phenomenology of Sartre and existential-mundane phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, among others, each one with their own issues and particularities (Amatuzzi, 1996, 2009; DeCastro & Gomes, 2011; Feijoo & Mattar, 2014; Moreira, 2004).

Regarding hermeneutics, we should say that we are facing a word carrying an issue – the issue of *sign* and *meaning* – firstly raised by the exegesis or “discipline that aims to understand a text from its intention, on the basis of what it intends to say” (Ricoeur, 1978, p. 7).

Initially treated as a technical challenge, it was configured from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with Schleiermacher and Dilthey, as a philosophical problem: the general problem of *understanding*. Henceforth, the issue is not restricted to *what the texts say*, but *what does it mean to understand a text*.

Later, with the emergence of semiotic sciences, new questions arise: what is a text? What distinguishes spoken language from written language? What are the implications of this passage for the process of understanding?

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a clear polarization between two hermeneutic traditions came to existence: the first, originated in Schleiermacher and Dilthey (19<sup>th</sup> century), is most recently represented by the thought of Emílio Betti and Hirsch and constitutes itself as a general body of methodological principles, guided by the ideal of objectivity and validation of interpretations constructed; the second highlights the historical character of understanding and, consequently, the limitations of all pretense to an objective knowledge, as is the case of philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger, Gadamer, Bultmann, Ebeling, and Fuchs (Palmer, 1986). The phenomenological hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, in its way, is characterized by the recognition of the tension, permanently active, between objectivity/subjectivity or understanding/explanation, from beginning to the end of the interpretation process (Melo, 2011).

Thus, the term “hermeneutics” and the problems of understanding/interpretation are present today both in philosophical and in scientific-theoretical and technical-methodological discussions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006).

We live today with several phenomenologies and hermeneutics, based on different ontological, epistemological, theoretical, and methodological assumptions.

This is not the case, here, to explore such vast and diverse fields of study, but only to place the reader in

the broader context in which the present study is inserted, to delimit what we understand by phenomenological psychology.

According to Amatuzzi (2009), it is possible to distinguish at least four possible articulations between phenomenology and psychology. When the phenomenology: a) focuses on objects of study, such as imagination, perception, language etc., objects which are also investigated by scientific psychology; b) acts as a critique instance of the very psychology, to the extent that it discusses the fundamentals of this science; c) aims to clarify human life from its own philosophical postulates (Binswanger, Heidegger, Frankl, Boss) and if it formulates, therefore, more clearly, as psychology; finally, d) when phenomenology seeks to build itself as a scientific production based on qualitative studies undertaken from reports of experiences lived and situated such as *scientific* or *empirical phenomenological psychology*. This phenomenology/psychology interface will be covered in this study.

From the historical point of view (DeCastro & Gomes, 2011), this modality of psychological research was strengthened in the United States of America, in the mid-1960s and 1970s, controlled by psychologists associated with the Duquesne University, among them Aanstoos, Amedeo Giorgi, and many others. It was expanded in England, with an emphasis on the health and education context (at Sheffield Halam University), in the mid-1980s; a trial was held in the Copenhagen School of Phenomenological Psychology, in the mid-1950s; and it has been approaching to neuroscience, from the endeavors of cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists such as Gallagher and Varela.

In Brazil, the consistent beginning of the phenomenological method application in psychological research is assigned to the research group coordinated by professor Joel Martins, of the Pontifical University of São Paulo, in the 1970s (Forghieri, 1993; DeCastro & Gomes, 2011). In recent decades, other research groups were established, associated with graduate programs, each with their own epistemological interests and supports such as the Laboratory of Experimental Phenomenology and Cognition, of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul; the research group Psychological Processes: qualitative approaches, of PUC-Campinas; the Laboratory of Critique Humanist Phenomenological Psychopathology and Psychotherapy of the University of Fortaleza (DeCastro & Gomes, 2011).

In the development of this study, the phenomenological psychology of Amedeo Giorgi (1978, 1985, 2008) will be our reference. First, for its inaugural quality as empirical phenomenological research in psychology; second, because this research tradition enabled reflections on the contribution of hermeneutic thinking to phenomenological psychology, as we will further observe (Giorgi, Knowles, & Smith, 1979); and third, for its influence in the research group of Prof. Joel Martins (Martins & Bicudo, 1989; Bicudo, 2011), foundation of my training in phenomenology

and hermeneutics. Let us analyze, then, in more detail, this way of thinking and accomplishing psychology.

## Phenomenological psychology and phenomenological-hermeneutic psychology

How is it possible to construct a scientifically valid knowledge, that is, in a methodical, systematic, and rigorous way and, at the same time, in such a way to contemplate the specificity of the human being, understood as a symbolic, historical, and social being? This has been the question favorably discussed by Amedeo Giorgi.

For him, phenomenological psychology must not be confused neither with phenomenological philosophy nor with natural science, although it is at the same time scientific and phenomenological. It is scientific to the extent that it shares with science the requirement of methodological rigor in the production of knowledge, and it is phenomenological to the extent that it aims to perform an analysis of psychological meanings of phenomena such as the lived and experienced ones. Giorgi (1985, p. 40) makes the words of Merleau-Ponty (1962) his own – ‘The real is not to be constructed or explained, it is to be described’ – and he says to understand phenomenology according to the view of this author, as expressed in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945).

According to this philosophical orientation, the phenomenological method has the following characteristics: it is *descriptive*, i.e., it is applied to naive descriptions, without any analysis or categories or of previous explanations; it is *reductive*, i.e., it describes the experience such as it is presented to the investigator, and both the object of experience and the acts of conscience are reduced; it *seeks the essences* or to understand the *structure* of the lived relationships. In order to do this, *imaginary variation* is employed to discover which meanings of the experience must necessarily belong to the phenomenon under study; and it is based on the *concept of intentionality*, i.e., it understands that consciousness is always directed or targeted toward something other than consciousness itself (Giorgi, 1985, pp. 42-44).

However, although supported in the conception of the phenomenological method, inaugurated by Husserl and reformulated by Merleau-Ponty, the method proposed by Giorgi – and widely adopted by other researchers – required adjustments, in such a way to enable the performance of scientific researches.

Thus, in phenomenological psychology, *descriptions* of lived experience are provided by persons other than the very investigator, people who are not familiarized with the biases or theories of those who carry out the research. These descriptions are naive, constructed upon a *natural attitude*, that is, such as they are spontaneously presented to informants, obtained through questions guided only by the theme of the study and those related to the experiences of these subjects and regarding a specific

situation. Researchers, in turn, describe the structure of the experience lived by the subject and also presents their findings in a descriptive way. The *reduction* is partial, that is, the researchers break with the natural attitude (object’s pole), but admit assigning meaning to what is reported by the subjects searched, considering the theme of their research (subject’s pole). In addition, whereas in the phenomenological philosophy the reduction necessarily precedes descriptions, in the case of psychology phenomenologically oriented, the naive descriptions of subjects, elaborated according to the natural attitude, are accepted and only then examined through phenomenological reduction. The research of *psychological essences* or *structures* does not aspire to the universality pursued by the philosophical reflection, but this investigation is not restricted only to the level of empirical generalization either. The *imaginary variation* procedure is employed to apprehend the overall structure of the phenomenon which is investigated. According to Giorgi (1985): “Psychologists are more interested in essences or structures related to certain contexts, or that are relevant to typical situations or personalities” (p. 50), that is, they are more interested in general structures rather than universal ones. Regarding *intentionality*, it is considered to be more significant, in the context of psychology, to think of it in terms of behavior intentionality, since this is always directed to a situation and involves the body, not as a natural object, but as an object to be themed (pp. 50-51).

In practical terms, the methodological orientation arising from phenomenological psychology can be summarized in the following steps:

1. Data collection: obtainment of descriptions of the experiences of subjects, either written or through interviews;
2. Data analysis and interpretation: a) complete reading of descriptions to obtain their general sense; b) rereading for identification of units of meaning, which reveal the phenomenon under study; c) synthesis of units of meaning, or a consistent and enlightening report of the several levels of the subject’s experiences.

Referring to the phenomenological-hermeneutic psychology, Giorgi, Knowles and Smith (1979, pp. 179-181), in the presentation of illustrative studies on this methodological orientation, in *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology* (Vol. 3), clarify that the phenomenological-hermeneutic psychology, unlike the empirical phenomenological psychology, extends its data sources to literature, art, myths, and autobiographies, and from the methodological point of view, the interpretive act is given priority, although the paths to achieve such results are widely varied and not always sufficiently explained. Therefore, for these authors, differences regarding the source of the data and the nature of the procedures employed to achieve the interpretations distinguish these approaches.

Personally, I tend to believe that phenomenological psychology, when supported in a philosophical orientation that seeks to overcome the dissociation between subject and object of knowledge, uses interpretation as a mean of access to its object of study (the experience as lived and reported by subjects), since in the description there is already interpretation, i.e., considering that, according to the own phenomenological psychology, the description of a phenomenon is necessarily carried out from the perspective adopted by the researchers. However, the aim of this research orientation (the description of the general structure of experience) defines the very limit of their interpretive study. It is, apparently, an option through the process of understanding rather than the attempt to overcome the antinomy inaugurated by Dilthey between understanding and explaining (we will return to this point in the course of this study).

As for the difference mentioned by Giorgi, Knowles and Smith (1979) regarding the data source of phenomenological psychology – descriptive protocols – and of phenomenological-hermeneutic psychology – literature, art, myth, and autobiographies – maybe it was enough to mark a distinction at that moment, however, it is no longer the case today. Nowadays, written reports, field journal, operating and therapeutic groups are examples of other instruments adopted, although interview is still preferred in this research modality, both in Brazil and in the United States of America (DeCastro & Gomes, 2011).

But this is not what I want to emphasize. Considering the objectives of the present study, what is worth nothing is, whether obtained through interviews or not, in the case of empirical research of phenomenological character, descriptive protocols can be differently re-defined (understood/interpreted) if analyzed according to the phenomenological or phenomenological-hermeneutic psychology, such as perceived by Kvale (1983), in an article aimed to comparatively think these two methodological approaches in the field of psychology. Otherwise, let us observe.

### **The psychological interview on phenomenology and on hermeneutic-phenomenology**

What essentially distinguishes phenomenological psychology of the phenomenological-hermeneutic psychology is the importance attributed by the latter to the set of information, ideas, beliefs, and assumptions of the researchers in the orientation of their interpretive study (Kvale, 1983).

Taking as an object of analysis the interview technique widely employed in qualitative research of phenomenological character in psychology – “interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life-world of the respondents regarding the interpretation of the meaning of the phenomenon described” (p. 174) –, Kvale believed important to articulate the contributions coming from the

phenomenological philosophy and those from hermeneutics<sup>1</sup> to clarify the *way of understanding* involved in this research modality. He considers that such an undertaking is justified, since what can be regarded as methodological source of error, according to the positivistic philosophical tradition, is converted into the positive aspect of the method, in accordance with the theories of science arising from phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophy.

He refers to the conscience or to the world-life as an object of study of phenomenology and to the texts or to the discourse as a text as the object of analysis of hermeneutics. The texts produced through interviews thus maintain a mixed character of these philosophical orientations, to the extent that they materialize as texts and relate to the world-life of the respondents.

Therefore, according to these philosophical orientations, the interview situation is understood, by the author, as involving the following characteristics:

1. It is centered on the lived world of the respondent, however enabler of analysis, whether oriented toward the theme under study or toward the subject;
2. It aims to understand/interpret the meaning of the phenomenon under study. In order to do that, investigators act as interpreters already at the time of the interview: they register both what is said and what is not; they pay attention to the vocalizations, facial expressions, body postures; they verify their interpretations during the course of the interview etc.
3. It is qualitative: it aims to obtain nuances of descriptions of the experiments reported;
4. It is descriptive: it aims to obtain reports about what the subjects think, feel, and how they act;
5. It is specific: it describes delimited situations and not general opinions;
6. It requires the interviewers to be attentive and vigilant to the interference of their assumptions without, however, stop being curious and investigative;
7. It focuses on the theme under study in a deliberate, but not restrictive way, i.e., the interview is neither entirely “structured” nor entirely “non-directive”. The interviewer’s task is to

<sup>1</sup> Regarding hermeneutics, although the author does not refer specifically to the thought of Ricoeur, his considerations are particularly compatible with the thought of this author, which is why I believe them relevant to this study. As for the phenomenological psychology, the author refers specifically to the formulations of Amedeo Giorgi, as previously mentioned.

guide the respondent toward the theme and not toward certain opinions about the theme;

8. It seeks to clarify contradictions, ambiguities, inconsistencies, and ambivalence of the respondent during the very interview;
9. The researchers accept any changes and discoveries generated in the respondent as a result of the very interview; they gave up the requirement of replicability of the research situation, a condition much valued in other methodological orientations;
10. It recognizes that the sensitivity and knowledge of the researchers interfere with the nature of data obtained in the interview situation;
11. It understands the very dynamics of the meeting, both to promote the conduction of the interview in progress and to use such information as the data source for the research;
12. It recognizes that the interview can be a positive experience for the respondent and, in practice, it may often be hard to end it (pp. 174-179).

The information previously mentioned illustrates, in my view, the importance that is given to the investigator in the constitution of research data. I would say that investigators are assigned a role of concurrent commitment and independence. However, perhaps, more commitment than independence, if compared with the procedure of data retrieval most commonly used in the context of phenomenological psychology. In this case, the subjects of the research are requested to describe their experience regarding a certain theme or issue (Giorgi, 1985, p. 8); other approaches are also employed, undoubtedly, as well as sometimes new meetings are held between interviewer and respondent to elucidate vague, confusing, or obscure points of the descriptions. I emphasize here, however, a difference in terms of the degree of commitment previously assumed by the investigator in the case of the research instructed by a hermeneutic perspective. In this case, the interview, as described by Kvale, is in itself a phenomenological and hermeneutic undertaking, descriptive and interpretive, objective and subjective, from beginning to end.

Synthetically, it involves the following moments and levels of interpretation:

- 1<sup>st</sup>) World-life description: respondents describe in a spontaneous way what they do, think, or feel regarding the theme under study;
- 2<sup>nd</sup>) Respondents discover relationships from their own report;

3<sup>rd</sup>) The interviewer condenses and interprets the meaning of what the respondent describes, and communicates it or not to the respondent;

4<sup>th</sup>) Once completed the interview, the data obtained are interpreted by the interviewer or by another person. Here, we can distinguish three levels of interpretation: a) interviewers condense and formulate what the respondents themselves understand as the meaning of what they describe (self-realization of the respondent); b) they interpret what has been said, extending its meaning, through a reading between the lines, inserting what is said in a broader context than the perceived by the respondent; c) they interpret their findings theoretically, by one or more theories;

5<sup>th</sup>) Reinterview, in which the interviewer returns his interpretations for assessment of the respondents, who can comment about them and refine what they have previously said;

6<sup>th</sup>) The description and interpretation continuum is extended to the field of action, that is, the respondent starts to act according to new insights acquired during the interview. The interview-research approaches an interview-therapeutic or takes the form of research-action when such effects are extended to broader social sets (pp. 180-183).

Hence, the interview based in phenomenological and hermeneutic assumptions, as explained by the author under analysis, is a dialectical process of making senses explicit, through which the descriptive and interpretative rigor ensures the participation of the subject-researcher in the process of performing the research without, however, allowing little strict interpretations.

According to what has been exposed, it should be noted that, unlike the research conducted in phenomenological psychology, interpretation involves an additional achievement: the theoretical interpretation (level 4.c).

The introduction of this level of interpretation, I believe, does not conflict with the phenomenological requirement of *coming back to things themselves*, provided that such endeavor is carried out in the previous phases of the research. In addition, I believe that the purpose of this philosophical and methodological stance is to constitute a critical science, reason why it becomes mandatory the appropriation and use, on the part of the investigator, of the scientific knowledge available. Therefore, the introduction of the level of theoretical interpretation in research of this nature is of great importance for the permanent reconstruction of own psychology and is an enriching addition to phenomenological psychology.

However, on one hand we can think about the psychological interview of phenomenological orientation technique from a hermeneutic perspective; on the other hand,

we can think about the very phenomenological psychology as an undertaking coincident with the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. This is what we will expose now, based on the reflection of Titelman (1979) about the relevance and some implications resulting from inclusion of the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur to phenomenological psychology, interspersing it with clarifications concerning the theory of interpretation of the philosopher and author.

## **Inclusion of Ricoeur' hermeneutics to phenomenological psychology**

### *Language as discourse*

Qualitative research of phenomenological orientation in the field of psychology necessarily requires the experience and behavior investigated to be expressed in the form of discourse. Both in the occasion in which subjects regain their experience and in the occasion which is described, interpretation occurs: something is left out and something is selected. The experience cannot be directly and immediately communicated, it can only be retrieved through memory and communicated through language. Thus, the retrieve of the experience, as well as its description, necessarily involve a certain level of interpretation. The discourse, thus understood as a field of hermeneutics, is necessarily the horizon from which the phenomenological psychology becomes feasible. "For a phenomenological psychology informed by the hermeneutic thought, reflection and interpretation, in dialogue with the description, are paradigmatic modes for understanding the experience and behavior of the investigator and the investigated" (Titelman, 1979, p. 183).

In the introduction of this article I stated that, from an undertaking of technical nature, hermeneutics has become a philosophical undertaking, from the moment the meaning of an *understanding* of a text began to be questioned. That was the path followed by Ricoeur when formulating his philosophy of language or theory of interpretation, which includes three closely related theories: a *theory of discourse*, a *theory of text*, and a *theory of text reading*, which is why his philosophy falls within the field of linguistics or theories of language (Ricoeur, 1976, 1977b).

Historically, the origin of linguistics as a science is associated with the name of Saussure and with the distinction established by him between language and speech. According to this author, only language is liable to scientific research, given its character of a phenomenon carrier of general rules of composition. The speech (or discourse) consists in the particular, individual way of using language. Thus, speech is regarded, for him, as a phenomenon not suitable for the requirements made by science.

For Ricoeur (1976, 1977b), on the other hand, the discourse is an *event* or occurrence, to the extent that it is an achievement that occurs at a given time, by someone, about something, and for someone, but is simultaneously *meaning*.

In this respect, Ricoeur adopts the theory of "speech act" of Austin and Searle and understands that language consists of locutionary (what is said), illocutionary (what you do when saying), and perlocutionary (the effect that is produced when saying) acts. In addition, the discourse is always directed toward someone, it is a communication, and is referred to the world (referential function). Thus, according to the author, the discourse contains its own structure, which makes it suitable for scientific research.

Such definitions allow us to better understand the preliminary considerations of Titelman. They clarify what is the meaning of the object of study of phenomenological psychology – language as speech or discourse – and the existing, although partial, coincidence between this object and the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. They also allow us to understand that phenomenological psychology, based on a theory of language that in turn is based on phenomenology, though increased of discoveries made feasible by linguistics (the theory of discourse formulated by the philosopher), can also be enriched and better practiced. This becomes even more evident if we consider what happens when you go from speech to writing, changes which are made explicit in the theory of the text proposed by the author.

This is what Titelman achieves when analyzing the analogy existing between the properties of descriptive protocols used in phenomenological psychology and the properties of the text, according to Ricoeur.

What changes are these?

### *The discourse as text*

Fixing meanings, semantic autonomy, universalization of discourse, displaying inconspicuous references, transformation of language into discourse works are, all of these, changes that occur when the discourse is materialized in the form of text (Ricoeur, 1976, pp. 37-39).

According to Titelman, descriptive protocols of phenomenological psychology also *determine meanings*, to the extent that they are involved in the process of making the discourse timeless and objectified, since they are stable, liable to intersubjective analyses, as well as the properties of the text, according to Ricoeur. They are also carriers of *autonomy semantics*, since such protocols are not reducible to the dialogue situation; even in the case of occurrence of reinterviews, ultimately, the researchers are those who will translate the descriptions of their subjects according to the purpose of their research and the prospect of analysis adopted; here, there is also a gap, which imposes the need for interpretation. In addition, to understand the experience or the behavior described in a protocol it is necessary to consider the set of what was reported; the sense of the parts depends on the whole; it depends, therefore, on the apprehension of *inconspicuous references* and of all of the work, that is, the discourse is transformed into a *work of discourse*, according to Ricoeur (I will further return to this point). Finally, descriptive protocols also allow

multiple readings and interpretations, their meaning is never totaled, and, accordingly, such protocols are carriers of the *property of universalization*, characteristic of the texts that require interpretation.

Such correspondences between the characteristics of descriptive protocols employed in investigations produced in phenomenological psychology and the properties that characterize a text, as understood in the context of the hermeneutic conception of Ricoeur, lead Titelman to the conclusion that data of phenomenological psychology constitute “objects” that require interpretation. The consideration of these data and the treatment they require correspond to the “objective pole” of the hermeneutic cycle.

However, let us return to the notion of work of discourse – finite and closed totality, carrying a way of encoding or composition, and also a single configuration or style (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 49) – since this notion is of fundamental importance to understand the question made by the philosopher regarding the opposition often established between *understanding* and *explaining*.

Ricoeur (1976) disagrees with those that sustain the dichotomy between understanding and explanation, understanding them as distinct, relevant epistemological accomplishments to different areas of knowledge – understanding assigned to Humanities and explanation to the Sciences of Nature – and to different levels of reality, that is, spirit and nature.

For our author, in a different view, if the discourse is produced as an event and understood by others as meaning, as previously mentioned, it is liable not only to be understood, but also to be explained. When understanding, ‘we apprehend the chain of partial senses as a whole in a single act of synthesis’; when explaining, ‘we develop the scope of the propositions and meanings’ of the discourse.

We note that this notion of explanation differs from that adopted in the field of natural sciences, which assumes facts, hypotheses, theories, and subordination of empirical generalizations toward hypothetical-deductive procedures. The notion of explanation, formulated by Ricoeur, is based on a conception of causality understood as a relation between the parts and the whole, between object and context, or yet, it refers to the apprehension of the structure of a given phenomenon, the ‘discourse as a work’.

And it is in the current dialectics between understanding and explanation, already present in oral discourse, though exacerbated by the properties of the text, that interpretation occurs. In this sense, interpretation applies not only to ‘a particular case of understanding’ (as thought of in romantic hermeneutics, represented by Dilthey), that of ‘written expressions of life’, ‘but to the whole process that includes explanation and understanding’.

Considering this, for the author, the process of interpreting a discourse as a work involves ‘conjecture’ – which corresponds to the objective understanding or approach of the text – and ‘validation’ – which corresponds to the explanation or subjective approach of the text. (Melo, 2011, p. 54)

At this point it is important to add that it is considered, in a text, not only its sense as a whole or the discourse as a work, but also its secondary, metaphorical, and symbolic senses.

According to this perspective, a type of bridge is inserted between language sciences and other sciences, since the language of the symbol is understood as a ‘linked’ language, that is, a language ‘in which strength and form coincide’, in which they cross the possibility of a hermeneutic (logos) and energetic (bios) reading of the human meaning.

Therefore, the thought of Paul Ricoeur refers us to the possibility of thinking about discourse as a conscious manifestation of the man, but primarily as a field of multiple senses, conscious and unconscious or desirable. Here, there is the possibility of contribution of psychoanalysis to the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. (Melo, 2011, p. 56)

The aforementioned considerations in part presented already clarify the reflections of Titelman concerning the “subjective pole” of hermeneutic endeavor.

### *The hermeneutic circle*

In a phenomenological psychology oriented by hermeneutic perspective, according to Titelman, one is not dealing exactly with data, or better, there is no proper object, independent of the investigator: the subjective pole of the hermeneutic circle is permanently recognized. Researchers start their research with a pre-understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon they aim to understand and interpret, and they understand it as performed when they become able to clarify it. This corresponds to the so-called “hermeneutic circle”.

To accomplish this task, it is necessary to overcome the position of “disinterested spectator” and “to become actively and personally involved with the phenomenon that is being investigated” (p. 187). In this endeavor, access to the experience of others is provided by what investigators have as pre-understanding from their own personal experience – experience which is structured as analogous to its subjects, though distinct in its content, situation, or style.

This is also what Ricoeur tells us in *O Discurso da Ação* [The Discourse of Action] (1988), when he says that the actual phenomenological level of an analysis is reduction.

By reduction, arises a sense domain, an opinion to which the sense refers only to another sense and to conscience in order to make sense. ... If, indeed, the reduction is not the loss of anything, nor any subtraction, but the distance from which there is not only things, but signs, senses, meanings – the reduction marks the birth of the symbolic function in general; when doing so, it attributes a basis for operations arising from linguistic analysis. ... I would say that phenomenological analyses lie under the linguistic analyses. (p. 20)

Titelman (1979) emphasizes that the hermeneutic endeavor is distinguished from the “Husserlian epoché” and from the rational epoché of traditional experimental psychology. The hermeneutic aim is not to maintain “objectivity” through the suspension of personal experience, intuition, ideas, or ways of being historically and culturally situated; neither is to exercise a control on the biases of the experimenter regarding the phenomenon under study. Its aim is to find justifiable ways through which the experience and understanding of the researchers about the phenomenon under study may serve them as a means for accessing elucidation and interpretation of the meaning of the phenomenon, revealed through the experience of the other in the form of “data” of the descriptive protocol (p. 188).

The subjective pole of hermeneutic endeavor, however, does not exempt researchers from the intersubjectivity demand required by science, nor prevents them to reach it.

In the process of conjecture validation (in the hermeneutic circle, moment which corresponds to the explanation, according to Ricoeur), what is at stake is the demonstration that a particular interpretation is more likely, given the scientific knowledge available; validation has as a counterpart the possibility of also be invalidated; it is a matter of argumentative discipline; it involves a logic of uncertainty and qualitative probability. Ricoeur says: “Neither in literary criticism nor in social sciences there is what is the last word. Or, if there is, we call it violence” (Ricoeur, 1971, quoted by Titelman, 1979, p. 190).

Titelman’s study allows us to understand that the phenomenological psychology, illuminated by the thought of Paul Ricoeur – his theories of discourse, text, and text reading –, enables the performance of rigorous qualitative research, for radically assuming the subjectivity in the process of knowledge, which does not mean abdicating objectivity, but resignifying it, understanding it as a product of the intersubjective dialogue, constructed through language in all stages of the process, from the beginning to end of the investigation.

That is also what Maria Aparecida V. Bicudo (2000) tells us, when reflecting on the changes that have been operating in phenomenological research performed by researchers from Sociedade de Estudos e Pesquisas Qualitativas [Qualitative Research and Studies Society] (SE&PQ), research instructed by different philosophical

hermeneutics (Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur). According to the author:

... the way we understand the perception and the unveiling modalities that manifest it lead us to the intersubjective knowledge and to a possible objectivity, which are framed by a network of understanding and of manifestations expressed through language. (p. 73)

In this perspective, the phenomenological and hermeneutic research merge into one. Thus, Bicudo believes that seeking the pre-theoretical in the perceptual field, performing a structural phenomenology, or seeking the field of linguistic expression as a means of access to the original experience, performing a hermeneutic-phenomenology, is a matter of *choice of the researcher* (p. 80, emphasis added). Such position, however, does not eliminate the need to interrogate the specificity of these methodological approaches, especially when applied in scientific research. By the way, that is what the author has been doing, as can be seen in several of her publications (Bicudo and Esposito, 1994; Bicudo, 2000, 2011).

Finally, I think that the contributions of Kvale, Titelman, Ricoeur, and at last, reflections of Bicudo I have just illustrated, are sufficiently enlightening as to what it means to build a knowledge supported on a phenomenological-structural tradition or on a hermeneutic-phenomenology tradition and, more specifically, on the phenomenological-hermeneutic thought of Ricoeur.

## Some conclusions

Firstly, the path followed in this study leads me to conclude that, from the methodological point of view, what distinguishes phenomenological psychology from a psychology informed by the hermeneutic thought of Ricoeur is the notion of *understanding* underlying these philosophical-scientific orientations.

In the context of phenomenological psychology, *understanding* is synonymous with *interpretation*, but the latter is not considered in the sense of the understanding/explanation/understanding dialectics, as postulated by Ricoeur, but refers only to the objective pole of the hermeneutic circle (first movement of the hermeneutic circle).

A second distinction, related to the previous one, consists in the importance assigned to the intertheoretic dialogue in the case of research directed by the hermeneutic thought and, especially, in research based on hermeneutics or on the theory of interpretation by Ricoeur.

Such valorization corroborates the thesis that the knowledge process, as designed according to this methodological approach, necessarily involves, and at all levels, a movement toward the apprehension of the object (objective pole) and a movement toward the construction of this object by the researcher (subjective pole). Thus, a psychology instructed by the hermeneutic thought is not restricted



to unveiling the structure of the experience of the subjects investigated. Clearly, the structure of the experience under analysis, once identified, shall be treated as a conjecture, subjected to validation or invalidation, by the confrontation with other theories concerning the phenomenon under study.

This procedure, if on one hand reveals a construction process of the researcher (subjective pole of the hermeneutic circle), on the other hand reveals the endeavor toward the apprehension of the phenomenon, in increasingly refined and objective levels (objective pole of the hermeneutic circle). Having said this, I am led to conclude that it is the radical acceptance of the interpretation (understood as a result of the understanding/explanation/understanding dialectics, according to Ricoeur) that assures us a greater access to objectivity in the process of knowledge.

Thus, the concerns arising from my praxis as a researcher – the impossibility of dissociating subject from object, understanding from interpretation, conscious and unconscious senses/meanings in the discourse, as well as the need to better understand the distinction between understanding and explaining, in the course of a research process – are in the context of a broader philosophical issue. In the relation between the philosophy/theory of language adopted – whether based or not on the event/significance dialectics – these polarities are differently addressed.

From a hermeneutic perspective, both at the stage of data collection as Kvale mentions, and in other stages of the research, as demonstrated by Titelman, the event/meaning dialectics is at stake, that is to say that, at different levels, including in the spoken and written language, it is also at stake the understanding/explanation and the sense/reference dialectics.

Thus, the inclusion of hermeneutics to phenomenological psychology that have been produced not only

respond better to questions that originated to this study, but also lead me to think that such inclusion contributes to the improvement of the empirical phenomenological psychology, since it can assure greater coherence, consistency, depth, and range.

Greater *coherence* because, without abdicating the basic demand of phenomenology of *going to things themselves*, allows the researcher to radically assume an idea that, on the basis of all and any knowledge, there are subjects marked by their beliefs, values, projects – condition which the hermeneutics of Ricoeur takes to the last consequences, when recognizing the polysemy of language and the polysemous character of symbols, which is why the hermeneutic endeavor is a condition for understanding the lived world.

Greater *consistency*, to the extent that the hermeneutic circle proposed by Ricoeur admits that there is not *an interpretation*, but *different interpretations*, which is not to say that any interpretation has the same legitimacy or real value; on the contrary, the proposed interpretation must be sufficiently vigorous and consistent to surpass the conflict of competing interpretations.

And greater *depth* and *range*, to the extent that the hermeneutic circle proposed by Ricoeur allows you to extend the process of interpretation of a text in terms of preconscious and unconscious meanings. In this case, psychoanalysis is a possible ally of interpreters in their interpretation process. However, not only psychoanalysis, but all and any discipline and/or theory promoting criticism instead of to illusions of consciousness, whether of unconscious, political, or ideological nature. In this sense, the hermeneutic-phenomenology proposed by Ricoeur assumes the permanent exercise of a way of thinking and to producing knowledge of critical, reflective, and necessarily interdisciplinary nature.

### **Contribuições da hermenêutica de Paul Ricoeur à pesquisa fenomenológica em psicologia**

**Resumo:** O trabalho objetiva apreender a especificidade e refletir sobre possíveis contribuições do método fenomenológico-hermenêutico de Paul Ricoeur à pesquisa fenomenológica em psicologia. Os resultados revelam que, na psicologia fenomenológica empírica, compreensão é sinônimo de interpretação e significa apreensão direta da estrutura do vivido (polo objetivo do círculo hermenêutico), ao passo que, na perspectiva hermenêutica de Ricoeur, é a aceitação radical da interpretação – entendida como resultado da dialética compreensão/explicação – atuante no decorrer de toda a investigação, o que assegura o reconhecimento da presença inalienável da subjetividade e o atendimento às exigências de rigor científico. Conclui-se que a hermenêutica de Ricoeur contribui para o aperfeiçoamento da psicologia fenomenológica empírica, uma vez que lhe oferece condições de maior coerência, consistência, profundidade e abrangência.

**Palavras-chave:** psicologia fenomenológica, pesquisa qualitativa, Paul Ricoeur, métodos de pesquisa – psicologia.

### **Contributions de l'herméneutique de Paul Ricoeur à la recherche phénoménologique en psychologie**

**Résumé:** Cet article vise à saisir la spécificité de la méthode phénoménologique-herméneutique de Paul Ricoeur et à réfléchir sur ses possibles contributions à la recherche en psychologie phénoménologique. Les résultats montrent que, dans la psychologie phénoménologique empirique, la compréhension en tant que synonyme d'interprétation signifie le moyen d'apprehension directe de la structure du vécu (pôle objectif du cercle herméneutique), tandis que dans la perspective herméneutique de Ricoeur, c'est l'acceptation radicale de l'interprétation – comprise comme le résultat de la dialectique compréhension/explication –,

laquelle agisse au cours de toute l'enquête, qui assure la reconnaissance de la présence inaliénable de la subjectivité et le respect aux exigences de la rigueur scientifique. En conclusion, on peut dire que l'herméneutique de Ricoeur contribue à l'amélioration de la psychologie phénoménologique empirique, car elle l'offre des conditions pour une plus grande cohérence, consistance, profondeur et largeur.

**Mots-clés:** psychologie phénoménologique, recherche qualitative, Paul Ricoeur, méthodes de recherche – psychology.

### **Aportes de la hermenéutica de Paul Ricoeur a la investigación fenomenológica en psicología**

**Resumen:** Este artículo tiene el objetivo de evaluar la especificidad y de reflexionar sobre las posibles contribuciones del método fenomenológico-hermenéutico de Paul Ricoeur a la investigación fenomenológica en psicología. Los resultados muestran que, en la psicología fenomenológica empírica, la comprensión y la interpretación son sinónimos de medios de aprehensión directa de la estructura de la experiencia vivida (punto objetivo del círculo hermenéutico), mientras que, en la perspectiva hermenéutica de Ricoeur, es la aceptación de la interpretación radical –entendida como resultado de la dialéctica comprensión/explicación– actuando en el curso de toda la investigación, lo que le asegura el reconocimiento de la presencia inalienable de la subjetividad y el cumplimiento de los requisitos de rigor científico. Se concluye que la hermenéutica de Ricoeur contribuye a la mejora de la psicología fenomenológica empírica, ya que le proporciona las condiciones para una coherencia, consistencia, profundidad y amplitud más amplias.

**Palabras clave:** psicología fenomenológica, investigación cualitativa, Paul Ricoeur, métodos de investigación-psicología.

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