The Possibility of a Descriptive Orientation to Psycho-social Work: Towards the Conceptual Origins

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Identifying the experiential reality of individuals is an important objective of psycho-social work. Its importance is based on the assumption that this reality is always true for each individual. Phenomenology and its hermeneutic variant present complementary, not contradictory views of the basic quality of psycho-social work. Based on a conceptual analysis of preunderstanding, preinterpretation, interpretation and description, it is concluded that the most appropriate orientation to psycho-social work is a descriptive one.

INTRODUCTION

My goal is to clarify the phenomenon which is, in the broadest sense, the core question for all psychologists and social workers, namely psycho-social work itself. The profundity of the question is founded in my conviction that we must return to the origins, preconditions, precon-
ceptions, and – in phenomenological terms – to the things themselves, to the essence of the phenomena we are studying. Without knowing the basic quality of the phenomenon as a whole, it is impossible to know any specific aspects of it. My desire to return to the origins is not new or unique in the human sciences. The demand for the analysis of the philosophical presuppositions of psycho-social work has deep roots in phenomenological, humanistic and existential traditions (e.g., Giorgi, 1970; Maslow, 1965; May, 1965).

By psycho-social work I refer here to the process of identifying the experiential reality of another person. It is not the whole truth of psycho-social work, but from the phenomenological perspective, it presents itself as one of its main objectives. In order to reach my goal, I have to find answers to the following questions. What are the work orientations psycho-social workers can adopt in order to identify the experiential reality of another person? In a more narrow sense, can we characterize this kind of psycho-social work as descriptive or interpretative? Further, what do we mean by the concepts description and interpretation? Are they in some way interrelated or perhaps rather mutually exclusive concepts? Answering these points also presupposes considering the role of theory in psycho-social work. Giorgi’s (1992) discussion provides a thought-provoking starting point to my endeavour.

The following analysis relies on a synthesis, not on a compromise, between descriptive and interpretative phenomenology. I believe that this philosophical combination as presented in the following can contribute something to the general understanding of psycho-social work. I am quite convinced that the interconnectedness of these two phenomenological ways of thinking – despite (or perhaps because of) their differences – can facilitate a broader understanding of the core of psycho-social work. I want to stress that I am not going to make any philosophical claims or analyse their mutual relations in their own right. I will only bring up those ideas from these two perspectives that I regard as clarifying from the viewpoint of psycho-social work.
I am quite aware that especially within the tradition of philosophical hermeneutical phenomenology there is an ever-intensifying philosophical debate concerning triadic (experience–text–reader) relations (e.g., Gadamer, 1975; Ricoeur, 1995). I found the debate very interesting, but in this article my attention focuses on psycho-social work. My assumption is that people have experiences at the psychological level. This means that a person is living in and through his/her experiential reality. It is the starting point from which the relevance of the following argument will hold. My main question is: how can the psycho-social worker perceive and organize this experiential reality of another person in his/her everyday work? In this context the philosophical character of a text is not of primary interest.

Fortunately, descriptive and interpretative phenomenology are not committed to any empirical science. They are traditions whose aim is to analyse, from the philosophical perspective, the nature of a human being, the nature of knowledge, and the pure question of knowing. This non-committedness at a theoretical level does not mean that the phenomenological perspectives presented here are not interested in the basic structure of human experiential reality. It does not mean either that they would be indifferent to claims made about the experiential reality of research practices. It is also interesting to note that these two different phenomenological traditions form the basis for both the human science research practices and therapeutic or consulting work. Regarding the latter, the questions I will be dealing with concern the possibility of a unified core of therapeutic or consulting practice, irrespective of theoretical orientation.

The analysis of description and interpretation may at first seem to be a confusing task, due to the quite opposite views of two seminal phenomenologists, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. For Husserl, interpretation is description; for Heidegger, description is interpretation (Giorgi, 1992). In the case of Husserl it is reasonable to speak about descriptive and in the case of Heidegger about interpretative, or hermeneutic, phenomenology. I shall first turn to the conceptual analysis given to these concepts within both traditions.
THE DESCRIPTIVE STANCE

The idea of descriptive phenomenology is to describe the phenomenon exactly as it presents itself (Gurwitsch, 1979; Juntunen, 1986; Kockelmans, 1987, 1994; Natanson, 1973; Spiegelberg, 1975). In his classic book, Heidegger (1962, 58) defines phenomenology in a somewhat more complex way: „Thus phenomenology means to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself.“ Any additions to or removals from the immediately given are not accepted. Description is the clarification of the meaning of the objects of experience exactly as experienced (Giorgi, 1992). The qualities of rigor, necessity and certainty belong to description. However, these qualities do not include the ideas of absoluteness, universality or unambiguousness.

The goals of certainty and rigor connected with description have their bases in the intentionality of consciousness. Intentionality refers to the endogenous propensity of consciousness to be always directed to something (Brooke, 1991; Karlsson, 1990; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). All participants of psycho-social work are evidently directed at least to each other, and to themselves in the way determined by consciousness. Intentionality is regarded as an origin, or the basic structure, of psycho-social work. Without intentionality, a human being would not have consciousness, experiences or any psychic reality.

Descriptive phenomenology does not analyse objects or consciousness per se, but rather the reality that is given to consciousness through intentionality (Juntunen, 1986). With this definition it is possible to conclude that descriptive phenomenology focuses our attention on the experiential meaning-character of psycho-social work. Meanings are for consciousness, because consciousness is always in a relation to both outer and inner reality. The continuous construction of meanings is inevitable. A human being cannot avoid it, even if (s)he might wish to do so for some reason.

The concept of evidence is crucial in descriptive phenomenology. By evidence is meant how clearly intentional objects present themselves. Some intentional objects, or more concretely experiential meanings,
are given in consciousness more clearly than others. In any case, if one follows Husserlian descriptive ideals, intentional objects are described exactly as they show themselves. This is the core of description. For example, if you find the meanings that another person connects to him/herself contradictory or disorganized, your job is to describe this contradiction or disorganization. Description always aims at coherence in relation to the evidence.

It is also necessary to define the meaning of interpretation within the descriptive perspective. The core of interpretation is deviation from the evidently given (Giorgi, 1992). Why would a psycho-social worker deviate from this? Practical work demands, the adoption of certain theoretical stances, and individual presuppositions offer themselves as some explanations. In all these cases the psycho-social worker does not adhere to the evidently given in trying to identify the meanings of another person. If we want to evaluate the psycho-social worker’s work from the descriptive perspective, we would say that adhering to the evidently given is the best criterion for better or worse description, and for better and worse psycho-social work respectively. In addition, it also provides the basis for scientific credibility.

Descriptive phenomenology does not search for any concealed truth. No kind of concealed truth is supposed to exist; there is nothing outside or beyond the evidently given. The truth lies on the surface which is given for consciousness. A very similar idea can be found in the Wittgensteinian view that „nothing is hidden“. Nevertheless, these are not identical ideas, because for descriptive phenomenology the surface is what is given to consciousness and for Wittgensteinian thinkers the surface is what lies in the ways of using language, in the so-called language games. For descriptive phenomenology the reliance on the surface means an obligation to take every experiential reality as truth. Every person is right from his/her own perspective. One cannot find arguments against the existence of this experiential reality because of the intentionality of consciousness. Although the experiential reality of a person seems to be true, it doesn’t have to be objective in the sense of stability or as an existence outside consciousness. It also seems to be in continuous change. It is worth emphasizing
that despite the continuous change of experiences, they are always present in certain configurations. The presentness of experiential reality is one of the most important starting points of psycho-social work from the viewpoint of descriptive phenomenology.

The intuitive process of experience is also a part of description. A person’s expression is descriptive if it can be reduced to his/her intuitive experience. From another perspective, one can describe only those meanings that one has experienced intuitively. Intuition is the givenness of objects to a person (Mohanty, 1989). With the help of the concept of intuition, it is possible to specify the concept of description. Description is the expression of meanings for consciousness as they are given through intuitive evidence (Giorgi, 1992). However, this givenness of meanings does not necessarily mean a clarity or fullness of meanings. Furthermore, intuitive experience does not make reflective thinking unnecessary.

Because descriptive research bases its arguments on the nature of consciousness, it avoids the theoretical and conceptual systems of particular sciences, like psychology or social work. Giorgi (1992) formulates this argument by stating that a theoretical attitude toward phenomena is plausible but uncertain. With a theoretical attitude it is possible to capture possible meanings, but not the necessity of the evidently given. Adopting a theoretical framework of any kind includes the risk of estranging oneself from the phenomenon under consideration. From the descriptive point of view, the psycho-social worker is assumed not to be interested in verifying hypotheses or theories. The core of a psycho-social worker’s interest should be in the experiential ways persons live their lives.

A work orientation without theories and personal presuppositions, and one which stays within the framework of what is intuitive and evidently given, presupposes the method of phenomenological reduction (Bullington, Karlsson; 1984; Juntunen, 1986; Natanson, 1973; Ricoeur, 1995; Spiegelberg, 1978). In our everyday work as psycho-social workers, it means the aim of bracketing the natural and everyday way of perceiving reality. In a psychological sense, bracketing means that the psycho-social worker aims to set aside his/her natural way of
understanding reality. Bracketing presupposes the use of reflection. From my perspective, a psycho-social worker’s natural attitude includes (1) the theoretical way of thinking adopted during professional training and (2) the common-sense way of experiencing the outer world and oneself as a part of it. In a psycho-social worker’s natural attitude, theoretical and untheoretical ways of perceiving the world are not separable. I call this kind of process phenomenological-psychological bracketing, because – unlike the original philosophical concept – phenomenological-psychological bracketing concerns only the meanings of the researcher, the psychotherapist or the psycho-social worker, not the meanings of the research participant or the client. In the case of psycho-social worker, the aim of phenomenological-psychological bracketing is simply to maximize their possibilities of staying in the evidently given.

The above-presented view of the phenomenological reduction should not be identified with the traditional understanding of the process of reduction. In a traditional sense, reduction means reducing a phenomenon into its causal elements – for example, reducing consciousness to neural processes. The phenomenological reduction, on the other hand in either a scientific or philosophical sense, does not attempt this. Its goal is quite the opposite; that is, to describe the phenomenon according to its quality precisely the way in which it authentically manifests itself.

In addition to bracketing, the phenomenological reduction includes the process of imaginative variation (e.g., Bullington, Karlsson, 1984). In philosophical terms, this means the variation of all possible combinations of meanings (Juntunen, 1986). From my point of view, in psycho-social work with imaginative variation it is reasonable to talk about the systematic variation of the experiential meanings of another person. It is carried out in order to perceive the meaning network of the experiential phenomenon in psycho-social work. According to this definition, in the case of the human science research the meaning network refers to the entirety of an experiential phenomenon under empirical study. Meaning networks are the core contents of the experiences which are the objects of the phenomenologically oriented
empirical human science research. They are constructed along with intentionality, and they will also direct the ways in which a person relates to the world and to him/herself (Perttula, 1995, 1998). In psycho-social work the whole idea of imaginative variation is to identify the necessary and sufficient contents of the experiential world of another person. Therefore, the aim of descriptive work is to describe the core and essentials of experiential meanings, not their variety.

THE INTERPRETIVE STANCE

From the conceptual framework of hermeneutical phenomenology, research concerning the psychic reality of a human being is always interpretive in character (Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). It is the clear reason why hermeneutical phenomenology is called interpretative phenomenology (Packer, 1985, 1989; Ricoeur, 1976). If hermeneutics is regarded as a philosophy of science, it involves the process of clarifying the basic structure of human understanding. Its aim is to reveal the meaning of the meanings (Rauhala, 1990). The concepts of interpretation and preinterpretation (or pre-intentional interpretation), are distinguished in the structure of human understanding. In this article this distinction is important.

Hermeneutical phenomenology shows particular interest in the existence of a human being. The nature of this existence being the first and most important question for consideration. The possibilities and conditions of human existence, thus, constitute the starting point of hermeneutical analysis (Dreyfus, 1991; Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Human existence always and necessarily entails the process of preunderstanding. If one is a human being, one is by definition an interpretive being. Preunderstanding is not human understanding at the level of consciousness. For a human being, it is impossible to understand anything without preunderstanding (Rauhala, 1993). Situatedness is one mode of being for a human being. What a person is like and where and when (s)he was born set the absolute boundaries to human conscious understanding. For example, a man can never understand motherhood, any more than a modern European human being can
understand life in the Middle Ages. Human conscious understanding therefore never begins from the initial stage of understanding, due to the mode of situatedness or the structure of preunderstanding.

Preunderstanding, which is based solely on human existence, or on the possibility of being human, is followed by preinterpretation. If preunderstanding belongs to human existence, preinterpretation is its counterpart at the level of consciousness. Although preinterpretation occurs in consciousness, it does not take place at the self-reflective level. Preinterpretation is spontaneous and automatic. It does not require any reflective or self-reflective processes. The process of preinterpretation is impossible to follow by means of reason or thinking. It simply happens and flows like a continuous stream. Preinterpretation is part of the basic structure of a human being. It happens all the time. Preinterpretation is synonymous with ready-to-hand understanding (Heidegger, 1962; Packer, 1985).

Because every person is uniquely situated in the world, preunderstanding and consequently human understanding is unique as well. If one applies rigorous logic to this idea, one ends up with the view that nobody can ever fully understand another person. The situatedness of each individual is unique and sets the boundaries within which understanding operates. However, this does not mean that a person cannot understand another person at all. Understanding is limited only in the sense that along with preunderstanding, or the situatedness of a person, it always operates within preinterpretation. The important conclusion from the preceding claims connected with hermeneutical phenomenology is that it is impossible to describe the experiential reality of another person. A psycho-social worker can approach the experiential reality of another person only through understanding that is based on his/her own preunderstanding. A psycho-social worker can do nothing but to think and to experience within his/her own situatedness. The psycho-social worker’s work always unfolds within his/her life-world. Put simply, psycho-social work is always part of the worker’s everyday life. It cannot be raised to a higher or qualitatively different level.

Interpretation, as against preinterpretation, encompasses human acti-
vity and reflecting ability. Interpretation is possible because a human being realizes itself also in the basic structure of consciousness. Within this framework, a human being is seen as capable of reflecting on his/her own experiences. A human being can make his/her experiences objects of consciousness. At the conceptual level it is reasonable to distinguish between the psychic and the self-reflective, or spiritual, mode of consciousness (Rauhala, 1992). In this context interpretation is possible only in the self-reflective mode of consciousness. The psychic mode refers to the flowing, preconceptual meaning-forming nature of consciousness. It is crucial to note that, from the hermeneutic perspective, the process of interpretation is often called the hermeneutic circle. It is a circular method which advances as a chain of new interpretations (Packer, 1989). The preunderstanding of a human being as such is entry to these spirals of interpretations.

The hermeneutic circle is based on two main principles. First, a human being can understand other human beings only within his/her horizon of understanding. In a Husserlian sense, such a horizon has a twofold meaning, an inner and an outer one. From the outer perspective, this means that an object is always given in its belongingness to an environment. From the inner point of view, it refers to the fact that there is always something which determines this givenness (Mohanty, 1976). In this case I use the word in the latter meaning. The horizon of understanding refers here to the pre-existing broader meanings which lay the ground to the ways in which a person experiences and understands the world s/he inhabits. It means that human understanding is always in a relation to the pre-existing totality of understanding.

The horizons of understanding are in continuous change. Consequently, a change in these horizons is inevitably followed by a change in the way of understanding another human being. The hermeneutic circle forms a spiral in which human understanding is thought to go deeper and deeper in order to reach a better understanding. This means that depth is the most important criterion in distinguishing between good and bad understanding.

From the hermeneutical-phenomenological perspective, a psycho-social worker cannot avoid the hermeneutic circle in his/her work. In
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the ideal case, the hermeneutic circle does not unfold spontaneously, but requires ever deepening reflection concerning the experiential world of the other person and of the psycho-social worker him/herself. When the hermeneutic circle goes further, it will uncover even more clearly (1) the meanings of the phenomenon under examination and (2) the experiential reality of the psycho-social worker. This twofold nature of the hermeneutic circle is important in all kinds of psycho-social work. So far it has been given broader attention only in therapeutic or consulting work.

The basic character of the hermeneutic circle can be crystallized into the following principles. (1) What the individual aims to understand belongs to the life-world of another person. (2) The foundation of interpretation is the coherence of meanings. (3) The only possibility to interpret and understand another person is within one’s own ongoing life-world. (4) The researcher (e.g., psycho-social worker) should understand that the interpretations made are his/her own, so that it is possible to distinguish the phenomenon under examination and the psycho-social worker’s way of thematizing the phenomenon (Varto, 1992, 59–63). These principles are highly practical in analyzing the general character of psycho-social work. We will perceive later that they also include the ideas that make up the joint foundation for hermeneutical and descriptive phenomenology.

If we take a closer look at description and interpretation, the last-mentioned principle seems to have great importance. It presents the hermeneutic circle as a process in which the phenomenon under examination and the psycho-social worker’s reference to it become gradually differentiated. During the hermeneutic circle, the psycho-social worker becomes more fully aware of him/herself and the presuppositions he/she has concerning the particular phenomenon. It can be said that the hermeneutic circle reduces the presentness of psycho-social work and points toward the phenomenon under investigation (Varto, 1992). It is worth noting that the hermeneutic circle progresses toward its aims without the possibility of reaching them absolutely. This is because a psycho-social worker can never differentiate fully between his/her own experiences and those of another person.
I find the similarity between the hermeneutic circle and the process of phenomenological reduction very clear. The goal of both procedures is to gradually gain a clearer and deeper understanding of originally unorganized and unclear meanings. To reach this aim, hermeneutical phenomenology uses the hermeneutic circle, while descriptive phenomenology uses phenomenological reduction. Just like the hermeneutic circle, phenomenological reduction is a process that is never completed (Giorgi, 1992, 1994; Mohanty, 1989; Wertz, 1988).

From the viewpoint of descriptive phenomenology, the truth is included in the expressions people give to their experiences. The truth is not beyond or outside experiential reality. The experiential reality of another person is real, and it should be the focus of psycho-social work.

Quite a different idea is expressed by the interactive prerequisites of psycho-social work, which concern the psycho-social worker as a researcher and as a clinician. The psycho-social worker ought to have the ability to form the kinds of relationships that make it possible for a person to describe their experiences in multiple ways and as fully as possible. The psycho-social worker does not have the permission to go beyond those experiences which the particular interaction makes possible.

In psycho-social work, both the hermeneutic circle and phenomenological reduction are procedures which aim to clarify the psycho-social worker’s and another person’s experiences by differentiating between them. Differentiation of individual meanings is a crucial characteristic of psycho-social work. Typical of both procedures is the need to avoid working methods that transform, distort, or reduce the basic structure of the phenomenon under examination.

WHAT SHOULD A PSYCHO-SOCIAL WORKER KNOW ABOUT A HUMAN BEING?

The preceding analysis reveals that psycho-social work based on descriptive and hermeneutical phenomenology has the same characteristics. With this conclusion in mind, it may seem even more difficult to understand why the definitions given to interpretation and description by them are so radically contradictory. What may lie
behind the idea that the former regards interpretation as description and the latter description as interpretation? One answer can be found from their different levels of analyses. The argument is that descriptive phenomenological analysis takes place at the epistemological level and hermeneutical phenomenological analysis at the ontological level (Rauhala, 1995; Ricoeur, 1995).

At the epistemological level of analysis, the existence of consciousness is not the object of human reflection. The basic epistemological question is how the intentional object given for consciousness can be mediated to another person in the most authentic way. Answering this question presupposes knowledge about the basic structure and processes of consciousness. One must know the principles according to which consciousness works. It can be stated that the history of the descriptive phenomenological tradition, and also its transcendental form, is an attempt to solve this mystery at an extremely abstract level (e.g., Natanson, 1973). However, it is interesting that the conceptual distinction between essence and meaning can also be found in Husserl’s thinking. Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology is a kind of naively ontological view, although meanings are tied to epistemological analysis through their intentional character (Mohanty, 1976).

The core of the answer to the epistemological question lies in the intentionality of consciousness. The epistemological answer to the problem of the mediation of the intentional object between people is that whilst it is possible to describe the intentional object that is given in one’s consciousness, it is the task of other people (such as psycho-social workers) to redescribe it in a more organized and sophisticated way. One task of descriptive phenomenology is to trace all human action back to its origin in pre-predicative experience (Mohanty, 1976). The intentional quality of consciousness constitutes the basis for the valid and truthful study of experiential meanings.

Hermeneutical phenomenology on the other hand is connected with a truly ontological level of analysis. It concerns the fundamental preconditions of the creature known as a human being. In this sense, human existence refers to the possibility of a human being, not to a realized human being. One of the basic concepts therefore of herme-
neutical phenomenology is the conception of human being. The simple but at the same time extremely difficult question is: what is a human being? When dealing with consciousness, ontological analysis searches for its existential conditions (Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Rauhala, 1993).

Hermeneutical phenomenology tries to incorporate epistemology into ontology. This is why the epistemological conditions of knowing can be analysed only after knowing the essential conditions of human existence. In its simplest form this means that in psycho-social work, the worker should know what kinds of creatures (s)he and his/her clients are to be able to understand their experiential reality.

Unlike in hermeneutical phenomenology, the distinction between epistemological and ontological analysis is perceived as possible – even as necessary – in descriptive phenomenology (Giorgi, 1988, 1992; Mohanty, 1986, 1989). From the epistemological point of view, the status of ontological analysis is that of a speculative interpretation which does not stay in that which is evidently given for consciousness. No matter how logical or argumentative the ontological analysis may be, it always remains at the speculative level from the perspective of descriptive phenomenology. It goes beyond the evidence. From the descriptive phenomenological perspective, the psycho-social worker does not need to deliberate the question of the basic nature of a human being. The psycho-social worker does not have to ask the question: „What is a human being?“

Descriptive phenomenology does not deny the meaning-producing character of a human being nor the constitution of consciousness through developing horizons of understanding. However, the interpretations people give to their experiences are not interpreted, but described, by the psycho-social worker. In this framework, the method of the hermeneutic circle does not necessarily include any interpretation. It only reveals the unorganized meanings and the interpretations people give to their experiences (Mohanty, 1989). In this sense, the interpretation could be a description. The similarity between the hermeneutic circle and phenomenological reduction can be understood therefore as supporting the goal of description.
Despite the similarities between these two procedures, their different ideas about the role of ontological analysis have important implications for the understanding of the demands of psycho-social work. If the psycho-social worker adopts the perspective of descriptive phenomenology, (s)he tries to reach independence at both ontological and scientific levels. This kind of idea is represented clearly, for example, in Giorgi’s notable works (1970, 1979, 1983, 1988, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2000a,b). Independence does not mean that the psycho-social worker lives without any ideas about human nature or without any theory-laden scientific explanations. It only means that the primary goal of the psycho-social worker is to work without the restricting influence of these presuppositions.

If one prefers hermeneutical phenomenology, then one is analyzing one’s existing meanings connected with the phenomenon under examination before the beginning of psycho-social work. In the hermeneutical phenomenological tradition, it is thought that the understanding of the ontological status of the phenomenon under examination is manifested in the working procedures and theoretical frame of reference selected by the psycho-social worker. The benefit the psycho-social worker can obtain from an advanced ontological analysis is the possibility to choose the kinds of working procedures that maximize the possibility to capture the phenomenon under examination in accordance with its hypothesized basic structure. This relationship between the basic structure of the phenomenon and methodological procedures has been referred to by the concepts of adequacy (Rauhala, 1990) and ontological relevance (Perttula, 1993, 1998). They can be seen as the prerequisites of valid and meaningful psycho-social work.

It needs to be emphasized that, in hermeneutical phenomenology, it is impossible to verify any conception of a human being in the traditional scientific sense of the verb. Any conception of a human being holds only a relative truth. Ontological analysis is not connected with truth, but with the coherence and justification of psycho-social work – in other words, with the congruence between ontological presuppositions and practical working procedures.
IS A DESCRIPTIVE ORIENTATION POSSIBLE IN PSYCHO-SOCIAL WORK?

The analysis so far shows that it is unnecessary to perceive description and interpretation as opposed to each other. Instead, we need the conceptual clarity that will help psycho-social workers’ mutual communication about the nature of their work. It is important to be able to set meaningful goals to one’s own work without the fear of decisive conceptual confusion. I will now turn to my proposal for the conceptual meanings of description, preinterpretation and interpretation. My somewhat ambitious goal is to provide constructive ideas for a better understanding of the essence of psycho-social work. The proposal will rely on a combination of descriptive and hermeneutical modes of phenomenology without trying to take into account every detail. I will be attempting a synthesis, not a compromise. Mohanty’s (1989) discussion concerning the revised form of descriptive phenomenology is of great assistance in this enterprise.

If a psycho-social worker adopts any phenomenological perspective as the starting point of his/her work, the aim is never to base this work on any kind of theory-laden thinking. Instead, the origin and core of this psycho-social work will lie at the experiential level. Individual experiential realities are always separate from each other. Within this context it is possible in psycho-social work to create a spirally advancing understanding of the experiential reality of another person. The important conceptual formulation is that interpretation does not refer to any kind of theory-based understanding of experiential reality. It concerns all modes of phenomenological thinking.

The concept of description should include the idea that the psycho-social worker can never completely withdraw from his/her horizons of understanding or from the everyday way of perceiving the world. Description always includes preunderstanding, in the sense of the ontological situatedness of human existence, and preinterpretation, in the sense of epistemological consciousness-based understanding according to the spontaneous and involuntary constitution of meanings in consciousness.

In the above-presented framework, interpretation refers only to the
working process where experiential reality is approached from whatever starting point outside that particular experiential reality. This accords with the definition given by Giorgi (1992). If a psycho-social worker tries to consciously reach the experiential reality of another person from a certain theoretical perspective or through his/her unrecognizable everyday positions, he/she would be involved in interpretation. Using this definition, it is possible to distinguish between purposeful and non-purposeful interpretation.

The label purposeful interpretation can be given when a psycho-social worker attempts to understand the experience of another person from a theory-based conceptual perspective. In this sense the major part of therapy and research education leads psycho-social workers to adopt an interpretative stance in their work. Within the scientific mainstream, a theory-based thinking has been regarded as an opening for human understanding.

Despite calling into question all presuppositions, the phenomenological tradition does not evaluate the adopting of a theoretical conceptual framework as unnecessary or harmful per se. The phenomenological perspective is in itself, of course, also a conceptual framework in the strict sense. Theoretical frameworks also form a part of the horizons of human understanding, which are the necessary conditions of confronting the world and doing psycho-social work. From the phenomenological perspective however, theoretical frameworks can become harmful if the psycho-social worker does not perceive their most salient character; that is, the quality of limiting the apprehensible area of reality. Harmfulness reaches its extreme if the psycho-social worker prefers theories and their conceptual interrelations to the experiential realities themselves.

Imperfect self-consciousness on the part of the psycho-social worker is connected with non-purposeful interpretation. In therapeutic or consulting settings, attempts are made to maximize non-purposeful interpretation by including work guidance and personal therapy in the education of psychotherapists. In this sense, a descriptive orientation is the goal of therapy education, whereas research education supports above all the interpretative orientation.
We now have enough arguments to make a claim concerning the definition of interpretation. Psycho-social work is transformed into interpretative work if the psycho-social worker’s presuppositions of the phenomenon under examination remain unreflective and unbracketing. Theoretical meanings cannot be separated from everyday meanings. The experiential reality always operates as a totality. That is why interpretation must be applied to the influence of both theoretical and atheoretical meanings in the process of understanding the experiential reality of another person.

The preinterpretative quality of consciousness already makes psycho-social work interpretative in the above-presented sense. Preinterpretation is included in both description and interpretation. According to the definitions given earlier, description is always partly interpretative: the possibilities to reflect on and set aside the presupposed meanings about the phenomenon under examination are always limited. That is why it is more relevant to speak about a descriptive orientation as an aim rather than as an achieved goal.

Psycho-social work is more descriptive, the better the psycho-social worker masters the phenomenological reduction or the hermeneutic circle. In other words, the better the psycho-social worker can be open to his/her own the experiential world and to that of another person, the more descriptive his/her work is. The aim of this descriptive attitude includes respect for authentic experience. In this way, in the divergence of the definitions of authenticity, there is one common element: a need to live through one’s own unique experiential reality and to give the same opportunity to others as well (Bugenthal, 1965; Taylor, 1991; Rahilly, 1993). This need fits into phenomenologically based psycho-social work as well.

Based on the previous argument, I perceive it as possible to make a general, but quite bold statement concerning the connection between descriptiveness and the „goodness“ of psycho-social work: from all phenomenological traditions, psycho-social work which aims to understand the experiential reality of another person is the more successful, the more descriptive and the less interpretative it is. The argument is based on the observation that in addition to phenomeno-
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nological reduction, the hermeneutic circle also leads toward maximum description and minimum interpretation. However, this does not mean that interpretation would not be needed in psycho-social work. Instead, interpretation is, and always will be, part of the basic nature of psycho-social work. Of course, interpretation does not necessarily become visible if the analysis remains at the epistemological-philosophical level.

So far it has become only partially clear how important I consider it is, for the sake of understanding psycho-social work, to make a distinction between the philosophical and scientific level of analysis. The core of the difference lies in their original goals. The ultimate goal of phenomenological philosophy is to provide a foundation for all sciences (Burch, 1990, 1991; Mohanty, 1989; Ricoeur, 1995). If the object of phenomenological philosophy is the structure and the possibility of a human being (Heidegger, 1962), the goal of scientific inquiry is the contentual aspects of a human being. From the scientific perspective, a human being is always present and real. This difference concerns phenomenological psychology as well. Qualities such as absoluteness, objectivity and certainty are traditionally attributed to research in particular. It is the reason why any goal which is known as impossible to attain may be difficult to perceive as relevant. In saying this I refer to impossibility in an absolute sense. Descriptiveness is just this kind of goal. It is emphasized in disciplines like psychology and social work, where the main attention focuses on the lives of real and actual human beings.

In considering the basic quality of psycho-social work, I perceive description as a relevant goal, especially in psycho-social research. The main principles of description also fit into therapeutic or consulting work. The arguments presented thus far show how partial the realization of description is. The arguments do not, however, imply the senselessness of the descriptive goal, but only the realistic boundaries to that enterprise. These boundaries lie in the joint basic structure of all the participants of psycho-social work. The basic structure includes the preinterpretative nature of consciousness and the impossibility to reflect on and bracket one’s own experience in an
absolute way. The goal of psycho-social work would be unrealistic if the worker believed in an ability to reach the experiential reality of another person in an authentic way. In psycho-social work it would be misleading if the worker thought that it is possible to return, in Husserlian terms, „to the things themselves“.

The reason I think that a descriptive orientation fits better into research than into therapeutic or consultive settings lies simply in the partially different demands of these domains. The goal of describing phenomenon only according to that which is evidently given in consciousness is not always relevant in relation to the demands of therapeutic or consulting work. It may contradict the demands of time, practical solutions and the activity of the therapist. Demands can also emerge from within the work setting, as well as from the outside. Inner demand is one example. The experiential reality of another person may present itself as so complex and unattainable that the psycho-social worker evaluates a descriptive work orientation as inadequate in trying to start and to promote the therapeutic process.

Unlike therapeutic or consulting work, the basic quality of the human science research is in harmony with all the main principles of a descriptive work orientation. It is easy to understand that it is not always relevant or possible to wait for the deepening of description in therapeutic or consulting settings. However, it may be the psycho-social worker’s duty to act and to be present in all therapeutic or consulting situations in ways which will produce more evidence and fulfil the hermeneutic circle. It may be justified to say that a descriptive work orientation uncovers some essential aspects from the basic quality of therapeutic or consulting work, too. It is interesting that this idea comes quite close to Roger’s (1959, 1961) classic view of the prerequisites of a good therapist: authenticity, empathy, and unconditional positive regard.

The fruitfulness of a descriptive work orientation accords with the demands of a wide variety of therapeutic or consulting settings. This may be especially so on all occasions where the aim of therapeutic or consulting work is not to solve a certain problem in a solution-oriented spirit. Also besides the human science research, a descriptive
work orientation may suit psycho-social work whose focus is to help people in clarifying and promoting their self-knowledge and ability to live. Theoretically based models of thinking do not seem to be the primary prerequisites of descriptively oriented psycho-social work.

FROM THE DESCRIPTIVE ORIENTATION TO THE ETHICS OF PSYCHO-SOCIAL WORK

In this epilogue I will try to provide some tentative answers to the original questions posed. The question, what is the basic quality of psycho-social work which strives to perceive the experiential reality of another person, now has to be asked with a descriptively aimed work orientation in mind. The ethics of psycho-social work is intimately connected with this question.

When the psycho-social worker works as a researcher, the purpose is quite clear: to create the circumstances which guarantee the opportunity of another person to describe the situated experiential meanings which express the phenomenon the researcher is interested in. The description of these experiential meanings constitutes the working material for the psycho-social worker. In order to analyse the working material, the psycho-social worker is obliged to use a kind of methodological procedure which maximizes the possibility to reach these meanings presented in the work situation. In the human science research this methodological procedure is called the phenomenological-psychological method (e.g., Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1988; Ihde, 1978; Karlsson, 1993; Moustakas, 1994; Perttula, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1989; Spinelli, 1989). In an ideal case, the psycho-social work situation resembles the everyday situations of the individual.

It has been clearly stated that working with the experience of another person requires that one is familiar with one’s own experience. As the working process unfolds, the aim is to perceive more and more clearly what is the content of the experience of the other person and of oneself. Psycho-social work is a continuous process which never attains its goal. The goal of research and therapeutic or consulting psycho-social work is basically the same in this respect.
If a psycho-social worker adopts a descriptive work orientation to therapeutic or consulting work, his/her task is to play such a part in the client's life situation that helps the construction of experiential reality (intentional objects) in a more satisfactory way. This evaluative aspect of satisfaction must be extended to the context of the entire life course. In therapeutic or consulting settings, expertise refers to the ability to adjust one’s own being and action to the advantage of the ongoing differentiation process of the participants’ experiences.

The ethics of psycho-social work stem from a descriptive work orientation. The core of the ethics of psycho-social work is the trueness of the experiential reality of another person. The psycho-social worker has an ethical duty to perceive the experience of another person as originally true. If the psycho-social worker is doing research work, the aim is to describe that experience. If the mode of psycho-social work is therapy or consultation, the worker’s task is to provide such conditions for being and acting that the experiential change toward well-being and satisfaction is possible for the other person. An idea worth noting is that research and therapeutic or consulting work have a common ethical basis. If this unity is accepted, it is appropriate to formulate psycho-social work settings which operate with aims connected with both research and therapeutic or consulting psycho-social work. Research and therapeutic modes would no longer be perceived as separate, but as combined goals of psycho-social work, and the limits of the human science research would be significantly widened.

If one agrees with the view presented above, the basis of a less appropriate orientation to psycho-social work is easy to see. Its core is the process of explaining. More specifically, it is not appropriate to explain experiences, their interrelations or relations to modes of behavior (1) before the particular experience has presented itself or (2) from outside of that experience. I call this kind of psycho-social work orientation a theoretical work orientation.

Its main idea is to perceive the experience of another person as an example of a theorized experience, not as an experience in and of itself. The psycho-social worker’s process of understanding is then
guides by a purposeful interpretation. Control and mastery are the characteristics of a theoretical work orientation. This kind of view of the ideal psycho-social work orientation includes the same properties which are the requirements of a proper philosophical understanding in descriptive phenomenology, that is, that all sciences are types of transformations of the human life-world and that philosophical understanding should consider its inseparable connection with experience (Husserl, 1982; Kockelkans, 1986; Mohanty, 1976). Contrary to a theoretical orientation, the psycho-social worker with a descriptive orientation confronts the experiences of another person passively but vigilantly, and consciously within the life-world. This orientation represents an open, presuppositionless, and naive phenomenological attitude; a readiness to listen, or the art of listening (e.g., May, 1965).

I should admit that a theoretical attitude usually makes psycho-social work much easier, because of the rational control it can offer. Unfortunately, from the phenomenological perspective, the ease and the ability to control are poor characteristics of psycho-social work. Psycho-social work can honestly be described as difficult and hard.

I think that the main reason for its difficulty and hardness lie in the original demands of psycho-social work: that the psychologist or social worker may not take his/her own everyday experiences as the starting point of work. The psycho-social worker’s everyday experience is valid and true in every life-situation except the work setting. In psycho-social work settings, everyday thinking is allowed only to research participants and clients.

From the phenomenological perspective, the psycho-social worker’s primary task is not to express his/her own everyday thinking to others, but to understand the experiential world of another person. It creates the demands of self-reflection, bracketing and setting aside pre-existing ways of understanding by the psycho-social worker. This way also include theoretical thinking learned during his/her professional education. Failing to do so and becoming estranged from the original difficulty and hardness of psycho-social work is not therefore meaningful from the viewpoint of its goals.

Despite its inherent difficulty, a descriptively oriented work orien-
tation can provide astonishing insights. If one’s presence is passive and vigilant, it is possible to rid oneself of everyday ways of perceiving the world and to obtain glimpses into the reality behind shared conceptual frameworks. These astonishing moments may include the psycho-social worker’s intuition that the experience of another person is something other than the conventional conceptualization of it. In such cases we are talking about non-conceptualized experiences which present themselves for consciousness directly and without lingual mediation. However, the presence of non-lingual experiences does not mean that the psycho-social worker can transcend his/her own preunderstanding, or go beyond preinterpretation in an epistemological sense.

To sum up, the preinterpretation of the psycho-social worker does not include a theoretical work orientation. Instead, the theoretical attitude is a matter of purposeful learning. If we look at scientific theories from the viewpoints of preunderstanding and preinterpretation, they are all of equal value. Preunderstanding is not directed to any particular theoretical work orientation. From the phenomenological perspective, a theoretical, purposeful interpretation is not a necessary characteristic of psycho-social work.

The ideas presented in this text highlight the particular connection between a descriptive work orientation and the ethics of psycho-social work. The core of the connection is specified in the principle which states that therapeutic or consulting work is easier to carry out on a firm ethical foundation than research work. The reason lies in the different modes of experience discussed above. I assume that only a small part of experiential reality and human interaction is constructed linguistically.

In this important sense, the psycho-social worker can reach the experience of another person more fully in therapeutic or consulting than in research work. In research work one is obliged to use words; in the scientific enterprise, nothing is communicated without words. To put it scientifically, nothing happens if the researcher does not report his/her findings. In therapeutic or consulting settings, there are no lingual obligations of this kind. In principle, the psycho-social
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worker can reach the goal of therapeutic or consulting work without uttering a word. I would say that the human science research is in the closest possible connection with its ethical foundation when the concepts used are as expressible and transparent as possible vis-à-vis the essential experiences of another person.

Bearing this in mind, it is meaningful for the psycho-social worker, even qua researcher, to remain as vigilant as possible to the aim of a descriptive work orientation. This is an adequate ideal, although it can never be attained totally. Although there is no passable bridge between authentic experience and human understanding, there is the ethical demand for the psycho-social worker to be in the process of trying.

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