



Book Review

Existential-Phenomenological Psychology: A Brief Introduction

Eugen M. DeRobertis (2012). Charleston, South Carolina (SC): CreateSpace Publishing.

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by **Graham du Plessis**

Dr Eugene DeRobertis is an internationally renowned researcher and academic who describes his academic interests as existential-phenomenological, humanistic, hermeneutic, personalistic, dialogal and somewhat neo-Thomistic. An author of numerous papers and books, Dr DeRobertis' work reflects his overarching academic concern with the increasing legitimisation of holistic perspectives in psychology. In his work, *Existential-Phenomenological Psychology: A Brief Introduction*, he facilitates a concise outline of existential-phenomenological psychology designed to serve as an initial acquaintance with the language and fundamental ideas of an existential-phenomenological approach to psychology.

Designed primarily to serve as a teaching aid that instructors may use for undergraduate students, this concise work is divided into seven chapters that introduce core ideas pertaining to phenomenology in general and existential-phenomenological psychology in particular. The conveying of these central concepts is well-facilitated through illustrative reviews of a number of topics core to the field of psychology, with the final three chapters explicitly enabling an existential-phenomenological engagement with the three long-standing concerns of anxiety, the nature nurture debate and the unconscious. Nattily presented the chapters serve as an effective guide or teaching aid for those new to phenomenology and existential-phenomenological psychology, as well as those who wish to revisit the core tenets and ideas of an approach to psychology emphasising the importance of an epistemological ontology that embodies a

reflective perspective on the experience of being-in-the-world.

Chapter 1: Why Phenomenology?

This chapter argues for the limitations of the dualism incumbent in the causal-empiricist and rationalist legacies that are inherent in the predominant philosophical-anthropological viewpoints in Western thought. These limitations are used as a means by which to advance the need for, and relevance of, phenomenological and existential perspectives. The relevance of a descriptive-interpretive approach to psychology that begins with a recognition of the fundamental unity of human existence is used to summarise the case for existential-phenomenological psychology.

Chapter 2: An Introduction to Phenomenological Methodology

The fundamental aspects of the phenomenological approach to data analysis are introduced and summarized in this chapter. Core features of the phenomenological perspective such as the technique of 'bracketing' and 'imaginative free variation' are introduced and illustrative research examples are given in such a manner as to effectively give the reader a good sense as to what the phenomenological approach entails in practice. This chapter serves to concisely summarize in a meaningful and accessible manner some complex ideas that embody a pragmatic introduction to phenomenological methods and thinking.

Chapter 3: An Existential-Phenomenological Perspective on the Human way of Being

Having contextualized the case for phenomenological perspectives and the core underpinnings of phenomenological methodology, Chapter 3 addresses the question of “‘human being’ in the fullness of psychological life” (p. 49). Outlining some of the primary constituents of the human life form, the chapter demonstrates how a descriptive-interpretive viewpoint like existential-phenomenology can be used to clarify the central object of psychological inquiry: human existence.

Chapter 4: What Phenomenology is Not

The first three chapters serve as an effective summary and introduction to the core tenets of existential-phenomenological psychology. In the fourth chapter, Dr DeRobertis facilitates a deeper understanding of phenomenology as he examines in detail the distinction between phenomenology and other schools of thought. This chapter is a particularly useful summary as to where phenomenology is positioned in relation to other schools of thought and serves as an effective clarification of fundamental precepts for those who have some familiarity with the subject.

Chapter 5: The Phenomenology of Anxiety: Anxiety as Existential, Psychological and Pathological

Chapter five details a phenomenological account of the meanings of anxiety. It serves as a useful demonstration of the phenomenological perspective on the subject and has good illustrative value for psychology students with clinical proclivities.

Chapter 6: Beyond Nature versus Nurture

As with Chapter 5, this chapter demonstrates how phenomenology can be applied to a central topic in the human sciences. More than simply an illustration of methodological employ or epistemological perspective, this chapter aptly demonstrates the distinct contribution and importance of a phenomenological perspective.

Referencing Format

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Chapter 7: On Beginning to Enter the Dialogue of “the Unconscious” Phenomenologically

A very interesting chapter that, as with chapters 5 and 6, serves to give a sound sense regarding the phenomenological method and perspective as it engages with a fundamental question of human experience.

Concluding Thoughts: Reviewing the Intentions of the Text

Dr DeRobertis’ (p. 4) intention to “provide a very brief introduction to existential-phenomenological psychology that instructors might use as a teaching tool for undergraduate or graduate students” is well met in this concise text. He makes a strong case for the need and relevance of phenomenology, introduces basic phenomenological methodology and develops a useful introductory depiction of the manner in which existential-phenomenology contributes to descriptive-interpretations of human existence.

The employ of the final three chapters for primarily illustrative purposes serves as an effective instructional and illustrative aid. These chapters do not so much contribute to the theoretical account of existential-phenomenology itself, but rather facilitate a sound sense of how existential-phenomenological notions are applied in practice. The illustrative topics chosen recommend this book to those in the social sciences, specifically students in fields such as psychology, anthropology or sociology.

The notions introduced in this book are complex and have been well summarized into a concise and accessible work. Such a concise summary does, however, necessitate the assumption of a certain familiarity with some ideas relevant to research epistemologies and philosophical ontologies. While there are certainly some undergraduate students who could benefit from this work, it is likely that graduate students and academics fresh to phenomenology, who have already enjoyed some exposure to the world of research, would gain far more from the text.

About the Author



Graham du Plessis is a practicing Clinical Psychologist and an academic in the Department of Psychology at the University of Johannesburg. In addition to his practical and theoretical interest in psychotherapy, he has extensive experience in psychometric design and research methodologies within the social sciences. His other areas of theoretical interest include positive psychology, clinical assessment and phenomenological inquiry.

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