
The Phenomenological Perspective on the Study of the Self: A Critical Review

Seleshi Zeleke *

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to give an evaluative judgment on the theoretical and methodological contributions of the phenomenological approach to the study of the self. Because many scholars from different disciplines have adopted the phenomenological approach, and it is difficult to evaluate the contributions of all these as one and the same approach, the writer has chosen Rogers' personality theory (sometimes called a self-theory) for examination. For Rogers, unlike empiricists, the self is of paramount importance and deserves to be the center of psychological research. In his theoretical orientation, Rogers, differs from both psychoanalysts and behaviorists. Whereas psychoanalysts emphasize the role of unconscious motives, Rogers places the importance on conscious experience. While behaviorists discard the self as something that could not be objectively studied, Rogers believed that it could be studied using methods other than those adopted by empiricists. Methodologically, Rogers chose to study lived experience and he thought that this is more valuable than laboratory experiments, the results of which have little relevance to real life. Rogerian theory is not without shortcoming, however. Relying solely on self-reports and focusing only on conscious experience are among the limitations of this perspective. This paper concludes that though Rogers has challenged his predecessors and offered an alternative approach to studying the self, the theory is not comprehensive enough to answer all questions.

* Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Addis Ababa University

The Phenomenological Approach: An Overview

Phenomenology, an approach to knowledge construction initiated by Edmund Husserl, represents one of the influential figures of thought in the twentieth century. This approach views the task of social science as the reconstruction of the way people in daily life interpret their own world. The phenomenologist seeks to understand social reality in terms of the meaning that the individual's act has for himself or herself (Vander Zanden, 1977). This perspective is concerned with describing the structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness, without recourse to theory, deduction, or assumptions from other disciplines such as the natural sciences. In other words, phenomenologists subscribe to Husserl's slogan 'to the things themselves' although they differ among themselves on several points. Phenomenologists emphasize the individual's frame of reference, the person's subjective view of reality, not the objective perspective of the observer analyzing that person. This view is also one of the 'here and now,' the present as perceived by the person. Past influences are important only to the extent that they have brought the person to the present situation (Zimbardo, 1985).

One important point on which the phenomenological approach differs from empiricism is in relation to facts and values. That is, Empiricists see facts and values as different things that should be separated. According to positivists, researchers must avoid their values so that the results of their studies become free of their biases or values. Unlike this contention of empiricists, phenomenologists emphasize the idea that social scientific research is something quite different from a study in natural science. In social scientific study, which is conducted in an open and complex system, the fact that the objects of analyses are often people makes the subject a part of the object. For this reason, whether we like it or not, the values and biases of the researcher influence the study or the analysis of social objects.

The second point concerns the subject-object relationship. The empiricists' assumption regarding the subject-object relation emanates from the idea that social scientific study should proceed like natural science research. This means that researchers can study social objects (e.g., people) the same way they investigate physical objects (e.g., rocks) regardless of the difficulties in studying people as compared to studying natural objects. The two basic assumptions of this model are noteworthy: the first is that the researcher and the object of analysis are definitely separate things while the other is that both the object and the subject are simple entities, with no internal complexity. Acknowledging the difference between studying people in complex open systems and studying natural things, phenomenologists reject the empiricists' idea of detached social science. For phenomenologists, scientific detachment results in imposition. That is, scientists impose their conception of social processes and their operation upon their objects of analysis (Smith, 1998). Instead, they argue for an attempt, on the part of social scientists, to bridge the gap between social scientific knowledge and everyday lived experience.

The objective of this paper is to examine the contributions of the phenomenological approach in offering an effective framework for studying the self. Nonetheless, because this approach is a critical response to empiricism, references are made to the latter approach as well.

How do Phenomenologists Define/Describe the Self?

We have explored the general assumptions of the phenomenological approach; let us return to the main theme of the paper: the self. We begin this discussion by focusing, first, on how the approach defines or describes the self. In examining the views and concerns of the phenomenological approach in relation to the self, Carl Rogers' theory of personality has been chosen for two reasons. First and foremost,

Rogers has adopted the phenomenological approach and he has remained a phenomenologist throughout his life. Secondly, he is among those prominent psychologists who have extensively studied the self. The self is a key structural concept in Rogerian client-centered theory. For this reason, the theory itself is sometimes referred to as a self-theory (Bischof, 1970; Pervin and John, 1997; Shertzer and Stone, 1980).

Rogers' theory of personality is an outgrowth of his theory of therapy. His phenomenological approach emphasizes perceptions, feelings, subjective self-report, self-actualization, and the process of change. According to Rogers, the individual perceives external objects, and experiences and attaches meanings to them. The total system of perceptions and meanings make up the individual's phenomenal field. Those parts of the phenomenal field seen by the individual as 'me' or 'I' make up the self. The self, thus, represents an organized and consistent pattern of perceptions. Rogers stresses the idea that the self, though it changes, always retains this integrated, organized quality (Pervin & John, 1997).

Some points are noteworthy in relation to Rogers' concept of the self. First, unlike Freud's ego that is supposed to control the 'irrational id,' the individual in Rogerian theory does not have a self that controls behavior. Rather, the self represents an organized set of perceptions. In other words, Rogers considers the self as a perceived object in a phenomenal field (Shertzer and Stone, 1980). Second, the pattern of experiences and perceptions known as the self, in general, is available to awareness; it can be made conscious. Although individuals do have conscious and unconscious experiences, the self is primarily conscious. This again represents a major departure from Freud's psychoanalytic theory in that the latter emphasizes unconscious drives. Rogers believes that such a definition of the self is accurate and a necessary one for research. Thirdly, as a main device through which a counselor can study an individual's

adjustment, Rogers has suggested an index which in essence is the discrepancy between self and experience (Pervin & John, 1997). Briefly, while in healthy individuals there is congruence between self and experience as well as openness to the latter, the neurotic individual's self-concept has become structured in ways that do not fit experience. That is, incongruence of self and experience characterizes the neurotic or pathological individual.

It is also important to note what phenomenologists say regarding the following questions.

- **Do we have multiple selves or a unified self?**

For psychologists who adopt the phenomenological approach, the psychologically adjusted individual has a coherent and integrated self (Osborne, 1991). For example, Carl Rogers (cited in Pervin and John, 1997) theorized that variability in the self can be detrimental for the individual's mental health because it is indicative of fragmentation and lack of integrated core self. According to Rogers, the higher the variability in one's self, the less healthy and less adjusted the individual would be. In other words, a lack of integrated core self, according to Rogers, is pathological. Thus, in Rogerian theory, one of the greatest strivings of the personality is for self-consistency.

- **Is the self embedded in one's own subjective world or in society and culture?**

Rogers neither clearly acknowledges nor rejects the influence of the society on the self. His theory, nevertheless, places the primary importance upon the uniqueness of a single human being and regards the individual as determinant to the self. Phenomenologists see the person as embedded in his or her own personal and subjective world. Thus, for them, it is difficult to maintain direct contact with the objective world (Gurney, 1988). According to this approach, all perceptions are likely to be

distorted by personal meanings to a degree: the perceptions that are admitted are likely to be consonant with the self-concept rather than discrepant from it. Phenomenologists argue that our behavior is also an attempt to confirm this picture of the self, maintaining its integrity.

- **Is the self a legitimate subject for study?**

Positivists do not regard the self as a legitimate subject for study since it is not observable and cannot be objectively measured. In contrast, phenomenologists do not make such restrictions on their object of study. They give a special place to the study of the self in particular. In addition, they reject the idea of positivists that social objects can be studied using methods of the natural sciences. They, instead, aim at studying lived experience.

How Did Rogers Study the Self?

Because of its emphasis on observation and measurement, empiricism tends to ignore the inner world of the person. Thoughts and feelings are difficult to measure and therefore are not favorite topics for research as they are more readily available observable behaviors. In the same way, behaviorists unconditionally reject the self and associated constructs. Phenomenologists are anti-positivist in their general outlook regarding what social scientists should study as well as how they should proceed in studying social objects.

Phenomenology pays special attention to individuals' reports of how they experience their world even though these subjective reports would be judged unreliable according to the standards of empiricism. For phenomenologists, descriptive methods are useful for understanding a person's daily, lived experience. Rather than testing ideas we may already hold about why people behave in certain ways, the proponents argue, we can gather descriptions of human experience from the individuals who are having the experiences or

from observers and then try to understand how individuals are experiencing their world. As Stevens (1996:151) states, "Phenomenological accounts are often in the first person- the writer reports on his or her own experiences; but they can be third person as well, as in novels and clinical reports."

Like other phenomenologists, Rogers used self-reports as data sources. More specifically, in the early years of his career, his work focused on analyzing interviews recorded during therapy sessions by categorizing all words that referred to the self. Evidence indicates, however, that Rogers later began to use other methods as well in studying the self. These include Q-sort, adjective checklist, semantic differential, and autobiography (Pervin and John, 1997). While some of these (e.g., autobiography and perhaps adjective checklist as well) basically require qualitative analysis, the data gathered through some of the methods (e.g., Q-sort and semantic differential) need statistical analysis. Rogers was criticized by other qualitative researchers for using Q-sorts inappropriately or in a way different from what it was initially meant for by Stephenson, the one who devised it (e.g., Stainton Rogers, 1995). Indicating that a Q-methodology has its origin in the qualitative tradition, Stainton Rogers attacked Carl Rogers for misusing it as a test, which essentially ends up in quantitative data. Semantic differential is also a structured technique for gathering data suitable for statistical analysis.

As can be observed from the above paragraph, Rogers appeared to employ both qualitative and quantitative methods in studying the self. Nonetheless, in the later part of his life, Rogers tended to confide exclusively in personal, phenomenological types of studies (Pervin and John, 1997). Contrasting the two methodologies, Rogers had the following to say:

To my way of thinking, this personal, phenomenological type of study - especially when one reads the responses - is far more valuable than the traditional 'hard headed' empirical approach. This kind of study, often scorned by psychologists as being 'merely self-reports,' actually gives the deepest insight into what the experience has meant. (Rogers, 1970, p. 133, cited in Pervin and John, 1997, p. 208).

In sum, though Rogers employed different research methods, some of which were deemed inappropriate for studying the self via people's lived experiences, he remained essentially a phenomenologist all his life. Later in his career, however, he admittedly preferred the qualitative research tradition for providing valuable information on lived experiences.

Evaluative Judgments on the Contributions of the Phenomenological Approach

In this section, both theoretical and methodological contributions and limitations associated with the perspective will be assessed. In evaluating the theoretical contributions, attention will be drawn to whether the theory of self developed by the proponents of the approach, promotes the knowledge about self in a way that is different from or 'better' than other theoretical orientations. In examining the limitations, emphasis will be given to two points. First, the approach will be evaluated for comprehensiveness. Second, a theoretical perspective may challenge approaches to knowledge construction that preceded it. But the important point is providing a better alternative. Whether this approach offers such an alternative will be assessed.

Then, contributions and limitations of the methodology employed by phenomenologists will be appraised. On the one hand, the relative

methodological advances in the study of the self, if any, that have been made because of phenomenology will be assessed. On the other hand, an attempt will be made to review critically the shortcomings of the research methods. Of particular interest in this regard is the examination of the harmony of theory and method.

Theoretical Contributions and Limitations

The concept of the self has a long history in psychology though not a smooth one. During some periods, it has received major attention while it has virtually disappeared from the literature during other periods. Even though William James, giving special attention to the self, provided a relatively comprehensive coverage in his book more than a century ago, the self was out of focus and neglected during the days of behaviorism for it could not be measured or observed. The major contribution of Rogers is his success in renewing psychological interest in the concept of the self and in bringing the self to a focal point in research as well as in theory. For Rogers and his followers, in particular, the self was a central point in theory, research, and clinical work.

In his psychotherapy, Rogers has also shown a major departure from the medical model in his attitude toward the client. Rather than focusing on an illness model of abnormal behavior and a medical model of a doctor treating a patient, Rogers emphasized the individual's potential to be a healthy and self-actualized person (Pervin and John, 1997). Another contribution made by Rogers concerns the way he understood psychopathology. Unlike other approaches in psychology, pathology was understood as a discrepancy or incongruence between self and experience.

This means, according to Rogers, that psychopathology occurs when the relation between self-concept and actual experience is disturbed. At the time, psychopathology was seen either as something caused

by some unconscious conflicts, thoughts, and drives (according to Freudian theory) or some environmental variables (in the case of behaviorists). While lay men and others did not easily understand these cause-effect relationships, Rogers', particularly, attempt to explain psychopathology phenomenologically was appealing to many. It has also encouraged further work at understanding the self in other circles. For instance, the coining of phrases such as ideal self, actual self, actual self-ideal self discrepancy, and self-experience discrepancy stimulated others to explore various forms of selves such as feared self and ought self (Pervin and John, 1997).

Nevertheless, Rogerian theory has its own limitations. One shortcoming of this phenomenological theory is the idea that the individual has a free will, choice, and autonomy. Actually, individuals may be viewed as independent and autonomous to a limited degree. Because of social influences coming from one's family, friends, and the society at large, it is not possible to be completely autonomous. Influences in the form of societal norms, rules, and regulations are inevitable when living in a society. To a greater extent, therefore, our independence and autonomy are simply artificial.

Rogerian theory emphasizes the individual as determinant to the self. Understandably, some portion of our personality may be limited to ourselves and hence may not be passed on to others. Nonetheless, as indicated above, it is inevitable that our personality including the self is influenced by social interactions. In other words, our relations with others continuously shape us. To be exact, there is no direct evidence to indicate Rogers' rejection of the influence of the society. That is, Rogers was not explicit in acknowledging this influence.

Another problem of Rogerian theory concerns the status of the concept of self over time and across situations. Rogerian theory sees the concept of self as constant in both over time and across situations. This implies that the self is neither emergent nor in process

of changing and developing. Some psychologists maintain that the self is continuously changing depending upon our interactions and relations with others. Which one of the above views is then correct: Rogers' or the latter? If perhaps both are correct, isn't there any contradiction in viewing the self as constant and changing at the same time? Research evidences are divided into the two views. That is, while some research supports the idea that the self is fairly stable overtime and across situations (Coopersmith, 1967), other studies (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Gergen, 1991) uphold the opposite view.

Indicating that a multifaceted view of the self does not necessarily contradict Rogers' view of the unified self, Pervin and John (1997:218) write, "Rogers' conception emphasized coherence, not simplicity; having a self with the multiple components that are integrated with one another is consistent with Rogers' view of the self." Although this seems to resolve the problem, others Gergen (1991), and Wetherell and Maybin (1996), still suggest that the multiple selves could sometimes be contradictory. And this calls into question the possibility of integrating the variable selves for it is difficult, if not impossible, to integrate contradictory selves. One can, therefore, see that the two views are not consistent. If so, how could we explain this inconsistency in research outcomes as well as in views?

One possibility is that the view of the self varies across cultures as suggested by Morris (1994). For example, the way the self is understood in Eastern countries and Western culture, according to some writers (Moghaddam, 1998; Morris, 1994), is different. Whereas the self, in the former culture, is viewed as interdependent, it is regarded as independent in the latter. Even within the same country like the US, minority groups' representation of the self tends to differ significantly from that of the white majority. Minority groups tend to have a view of the person that emphasizes interdependence rather

than independence. This shows that cultural differences should be taken into account in studying the self.

A second possibility is the idea that what constitutes a self may be determined by the specific historical period. In other words, an individual's view of the constituents of herself or himself, for instance, fifty years ago may differ from her or his current perception for several reasons including, among others, changes in the social order, interactions, and social progress. All told, if these suppositions are true, we can say that the self is culturally and historically located as some psychologists have suggested.

Methodological Advances and Limitations

Methodologically, phenomenology may be thought of as a form of real world research. It seeks to study lived experience and it belongs to the qualitative research tradition. In addition, phenomenologists are dedicated to studying the individual in preference to the group. Consequently, in their study of the self, they employ idiographic approaches rather than homothetic ones. Phenomenologists are anti-positivist in that they oppose studying variables rather than people. They also attack laboratory experiments on several grounds. Because the setting under which the experiment is conducted is artificial and also because of the researchers' various manipulations, they argue that the outcomes of these experiments do have little relevance to real life.

For Rogers, on the other hand, the best vantage point for understanding the self is from the internal frame of reference of the individual himself or herself. Thus, self-reports are primarily used in data collection. That is, the individual herself or himself is asked to describe her or his experience first hand. Studying the subjective experience of the person characterizes Rogers' method and it represents a major departure from positivist methods. While

positivists consider self-reports as lacking objectivity, Rogers think that first-person descriptions are more valuable than the information we get from other observers of the person. Viewed from this perspective, Rogers' justification for using self-reports was a challenge for behaviorists and this may be regarded as strength of his methodology. But several questions still remain.

For instance, is it possible to secure the individual's experience through self-reports and even through other methods that Rogers employed? Do persons report their entire experience even if disclosing some part of that experience is harmful to the self? Rogers himself stated that psychopathology is a result of the disturbance of incongruence between self and experience. In addition, the individual is defensive to experiences inconsistent with the self. If so, it is unlikely that the person will include such experience in his or her description. In short, self-reports may be one means of gaining valuable information from participants but could not be the only one if a researcher seeks to gather comprehensive data in the study of the self.

Another problem with Rogers' methodology is that some of the methods do not go hand-in-hand with the theory. While the theory primarily acknowledges the importance of subjective experience, some of the methods he employed did not require participants to describe their experience but to choose, for example, among preconceived alternative ideas. This imposition of his own preconceived ideas on participants appears to be incompatible with his phenomenological theory.

Rogers, however, is known for combining clinical flexibility with scientific rigor. The subjective experience of the person recorded in therapy sessions will undergo analysis using quantitative methods. Thus, Rogers has tried to combine subjectivity with objectivity in his work. While subjectivity and flexibility characterize his data collection procedure, he employed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis,

though, as indicated above, he preferred qualitative methods to quantitative ones in his later works.

A final comment on Rogers' methodology concerns his focus on conscious experiences and his disregard for unconscious ones. Generally speaking, this may be regarded as a shortcoming and as strength of the methodology at the same time. Psychoanalysts consider this view a serious shortcoming because for them the fundamental basis for human behavior is the unconscious part of personality. While this idea is controversial, one can easily see that both theoretical perspectives, by neglecting one aspect or the other, lack comprehensiveness in representing the self. But viewed from another angle, focusing on conscious experiences should be regarded as strength of Rogers' approach for it not only marked a serious departure from his predecessors, especially, psychoanalysts but also challenged their position. If studying conscious experiences could not be legitimate, how could unconscious ones be? Accordingly, his approach was a feasible alternative to studying the self at the time and even now.

Conclusion

This paper sought to give evaluative judgments on both the theoretical and methodological impact the phenomenological approach has had on the study of the self. The phenomenological approach to knowledge construction presents strong challenges to the positions of positivists and differs from the latter in both theory and method. In their theoretical orientation, the proponents of phenomenology reject the behaviorists' idea that the self could not be objectively studied. They maintain that the self as well as other social objects could be studied in other ways even if these methods are considered inappropriate by positivist standards. Methodologically, the approach once again departs from traditional perspectives in that their focus is lived reality or experience, not measurement or objectivity. Here also, they put forward alternative methodologies in studying the self.

In conclusion, a more comprehensive view of the self may be gained not only by studying the individual through his or her self-report, but also by focusing on his or her social interactions. This essentially means studying both social interactions and the individual's subjective experience at the same time. To put it differently, the 'private self' may be studied by centering attention on the individual (and by examining her or his subjective experience) rather than her or his social interactions. The 'public self,' on the other hand, may be investigated by carefully examining the individual's social interactions. The self could, thus, be considered as a product of social interactions as well as the unique experience of the person. Such a position views the individual and the social environment in their proper perspectives. While this will provide a reasonably comprehensive approach to the study of the self, any theoretical position that focuses either only on the individual or only on his/her social interactions will not be free from criticism in one way or another.

Implications

In general, the article argues for all-round information as a basic vehicle to understanding people or their behaviors. The article has, hence, some practical implications for counseling and research. One implication for counseling is that it is important to gather data on the client from different angles. As a matter of fact, a good insight could be gained by interviewing the client. But there is no guarantee especially in some circumstances that the counselee provides all the data the counselor needs. In other words, there is some fear if this source provides insufficient data. The review suggests that the counselor should complement the insight he/she gets from the client by studying his/her relations or interactions with important people such as family members and peers.

The same is true for research. In studying an individual or his behavior, the individual could be an important source of data.

However, obtaining a comprehensive view of the individual requires more than an interview with the person. It is, therefore, important to obtain additional data from as many important people in the individual's life as possible.

The review generally suggests that a deepest insight into a problem (either as a researcher or as a counselor) could not be gained by subscribing to one theory or another. Subscribing to a theory may rather limit one's views, one's understanding and effectiveness in many respects. This piece of work indicates that an eclectic position could benefit counselors most. The implication for research, on the other hand, is that a researcher may deal with problems in a better way if he/she can employ both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis.

References

- Bischof, L. J. (1970). **Interpreting Personality Theories** (2nd ed.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Coopersmith, S. (1967). **The Antecedents of Self-esteem**. San Francisco: Freeman.
- Gergen, K. J. (1991). **The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life**. New York: Basic Books.
- Gurney, P. W. (1988). **Self-esteem in Children with Special Educational Needs**. New York: Routledge.
- Markus, H. and Nurius, P. (1986). *Possible Selves*. **American Psychologist**, 41, 954–969.
- Moghaddam, F. M. (1998). **Social psychology: Exploring Universals across Cultures**. New York: W. H. Freeman.

-
- Morris, B. (1994). **Anthropology of the Self: The Individual in Cultural Perspective**. London: Pluto Press.
- Osborne, J. W. (1991). *Humanistic Learning and Teaching*. In R. H. Short, L. L. Stewin, & S. J. H. McCann (Eds.), **Educational Psychology: Canadian Perspectives**. Toronto: Copp Clark
- Pervin, L. A. & John, O. P. (1997). **Personality: Theory and Research** (7th ed.). New York: John Wiley.
- Shertzer, B. & Stone, S. C. (1980). **Fundamentals of Counseling** (3rd ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Smith, M. J. (1998). **Social Science in Question**. London: Sage.
- Stainton Rogers, R. (1995). *Q Methodology*. In J. A. Smith, R. Harre, and L. Van Langenhove (Eds.), **Rethinking Methods in Psychology** (pp.178-92). London: Sage.
- Stevens, R. (1996). *The Reflexive Self: An Experiential Perspective*. In R. Stevens (Ed.), **Understanding the Self** (pp. 147-218). London: Sage.
- Vander Zanden, J. W. (1977). **Social Psychology**. New York: Random House.
- Wetherell, M. & Maybin, J. (1996). *The Distributed Self: A Social Constructionist Perspective*. In R. Stevens (Ed.), **Understanding the Self** (pp. 219-280). London: Sage.
- Zimbardo, P. G. (1985). **Psychology and Life** (11th ed.). Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman.