

Phenomenological Approaches to the Temporality of Reading Experience

Don Kuiken and David S. Miall

University of Alberta

Entering any domain of research requires consideration of the mode of analysis, the approach, methods, or procedures, by which the phenomenon of interest will be examined. That problem acquires distinctive complexity when the research enterprise is interdisciplinary: interdisciplinary efforts are put in jeopardy when the presuppositions of one of the interacting disciplines determine the mode of analysis. Nonetheless, in the past, the discipline endorsing a seemingly “objective” mode of analysis has usually provided the “common denominator” enabling the enterprise to proceed. In empirical studies of the arts, for example, the call to empiricism has often been understood as dictating a mode of analysis compatible with the methodological imperatives that prevail in the social sciences. The rhetoric of operational definitions, construct validation, etc., prevailed unilaterally.

More recently there *seems* to be renewed respect for the contrasting methodological presuppositions of interdisciplinary partners in empirical studies of the arts. The rhetoric of this seeming respect is prevalent in the discourse advocating the complementarity of qualitative and quantitative methods. One rationale for such complementarity is that qualitative methods enable the discovery and articulation of previously unobserved phenomena. And, it is noted, sometimes the qualitative methods that provide these discoveries facilitate development of the quantitative measures that are traditionally deemed a hallmark of scientific endeavours (cf. Loos, 1995). Although this rationale for complementarity gives credit to the intellectual accomplishments evident in

efforts to disembed subtle phenomena from the flux of human affairs, its logic implicitly construes qualitative research as exploratory, as an adventure of discovery, that is merely a stepping-stone toward more rigorous and quantitative objectives.

Another rationale for complementarity supports methodological “triangulation” between quantitative and qualitative research outcomes. From this perspective, the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of findings in qualitative studies partly depends upon their convergence with results obtained using quantitative methods that are not subject to the same sources of imprecision (Morse, 1991). The emphasis on convergence (and, when appropriate, divergence) of qualitative and quantitative findings appropriately gives epistemic priority to evidential coherence, but it should be noted that Lincoln and Guba’s original account of the relevant coherence criteria was grounded in an analogy with the technical criteria for psychometric construct validation (Cronbach, 1971). Echoes of the logic driving operational definitions in the social sciences could still be heard. Let me try to amplify that echo slightly.

Within the social sciences, it is usually argued that “operational definitions” enable the identification of a particular phenomenon by any investigator with the requisite motivation and means. Such democratized definitional practice seemingly helps to ensure “objectivity.” However, a sketch of the history of this definitional prescription reveals its problems. First, there was an early realization that concepts have surplus meaning and that more than one “operational definition” can be used to assess any given concept. Second, since not every operation reflects a new concept, theory was required to relate the numerous procedures by which a concept might be assessed—as well as to anticipate new assessment procedures. Third, a sophisticated technology was devised to

determine whether any particular “operational definition” was valid (Campbell and Fisk, 1959; Jackson, 1984), i.e., whether it converged with or diverged from other operational definitions in the theoretically expected manner. The convergence and divergence among the purported “indices” of a particular construct, supplemented by assessment of whether those indices are useful in establishing lawful relationships, became the criteria for evaluating definitional efforts.

The rhetoric of construct validation allowed the technological validation of indices to displace full-scale definitional efforts. However unintentionally, this displacement has actually impeded empirical efforts to attain definitional precision. A couple of overly simple examples may underline the problem. Whereas gold might be *defined* by reference to its atomic weight, its presence among rock samples can be *indicated* by its distinctive colour. Whereas aesthetic interest might be *defined* as being captured by an evocative passage in a literary text, its presence can be *indicated* by prolonged reading time. The result is, as we have argued elsewhere (Kuiken & Miall, 2001), an inherent laxity in the definitional praxis within the confines of operationism.

It would be very unfortunate to import that same laxity—and the related imprecision—into discussions of the complementarity of quantitative and qualitative methods. Qualitative research efforts already come in a variety of more and less astute forms; it would be a mistake to justify imprecision in qualitative research by promising—or even providing—convergence with quantitative indices of the phenomena that we are trying to understand. We recommend caution about interdisciplinary marriages that depend upon vows to “triangulate” methods.

The alternative, we suggest, is to articulate more fully the distinctive *definitional* objectives that are associated with qualitative research—or at least some forms of qualitative research. Within operationism, there is no motivation actually to define empirically the phenomenon of interest, provided that there is a “useful” index available. For example, there is no need to define empirically aesthetic interest, except in a speculative “conceptual” definition, provided that reading time will suffice as a concrete index of its presence. However, the development of such indices can be contrasted with the development of full-blooded definitions that depend upon numerous defining properties cohering across different levels of individuation as, for example, in the biological taxonomist’s definition of a species. To avoid the limitations of stipulated and overly simple class concepts, empirical studies of literature should include efforts to identify and define comparably precise, rich, and coherent classes.

In our judgment, empirical phenomenological methods undertake that task quite systematically. Within what is actually a family of methods, we (Kuiken & Miall, 2001; Kuiken, Schopflocher, & Wild, 1989) have developed a form of numerically aided phenomenological investigation that is designed to bring categories of experience inductively to greater distinctiveness, richness, and coherence through the quantitative systematization of categorical thought. In a comparative reading of a set of experiential narratives (e.g., reader comments on reading experience), recurrent meaning expressions are identified and paraphrased. Then judgments about their presence or absence are used to create matrices representing the profiles of meanings expressed in each narrative. Finally, cluster analytic algorithms are used to group these narratives according to the similarities in their profiles of meaning expressions. In this way, categories of similar

narratives—and their distinctive attributes—can be identified. Rather than an essentialist conception of the qualities defining classes, in numerically aided phenomenology classes are defined by more-or-less invariant attributes, i.e., classes are formed such that members share a large number of expressed meanings, although no single meaning (or set thereof) is necessary or sufficient for class membership. Before providing a critique of these methods, let me describe them a little more fully.

Thematizing description

A consistent feature of phenomenological methods, including numerically aided ones, is the identification and explication of recurrent themes within a set of experiential narratives. For example, in one of our recent studies of reading experience, one reader said about the protagonist in Katherine Mansfield's story entitled "The Wrong House":

"I feel a great compassion for her. I would like to know what makes her sigh."

Another person reported:

"I sympathized with her, like I felt for her, I guess, when she started to panic."

The phenomenological task is to identify and explicate the similarities in meaning among such recurrent expressions. A paraphrase of those similarities is then portrayed in statements, called constituents, such as the following:

"I felt sympathy for her in her anguish."

We deliberately avoid the development of constituents according to some pre-established conception of the kind of experience that we might find, e.g., story-driven reading. Presuming to know these categories in advance may even distort constituent descriptions. Instead, careful and concrete comparative work provides constituents that, because they are theoretically unconstrained, enable the identification of unanticipated categories of

experience. In this approach, careful comparison displaces theoretical expectations.

Similarities, classes, and distinctive constituents

When a constituent has been identified, each narrative within the available set is systematically re-read to determine the presence or absence of that expressed meaning. Gradually an array of such constituents is identified, and when a full array of constituents is available, similarities between each pair of narratives are determined by calculating similarity coefficients (e.g., Euclidean distances). Then cluster analysis is used to group narratives according to the similarities in their profiles of constituents, and the resulting clusters are usually visually discernable in figures called dendrograms (see slide). In general, cluster analysis (cf. Bailey, 1994) is a group of numeric algorithms that groups such profiles so that the degree of similarity between members of the same cluster is maximized and the degree of similarity between members of different clusters is minimized. Each cluster identified in this way represents a class of similarly lived experiences. Comparison of the prevalence of each constituent across clusters enables determination of those constituents that are prototypic of each category. Numerical procedures can be invoked here, too, to provide a disciplined characterization of those constituents that differentiate and define each category.

A Critique

Using these methods, we have articulated one kind of reading experience that we have called expressive enactment. For example, in a phenomenological study of responses to Coleridge's poem, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, one category of experiences was marked by a complex array of constituents that can be summarized as: (1) the emergence of feelings in response to striking poetic description, as well in response to

narrative events in the poem; (2) blurred boundaries between self and other, suggestive of reader identification with characters in the poem; and (3) active and iterative modification of an emergent affective theme. Our particular fascination with expressive enactment is that it seems to be the source of self-modifying feelings in reading experience. But, rather than detail that argument here, I would like to discuss how our examination of the active and iterative modification of an affective theme, which is characteristic of this category of reading experience, has challenged the assumptions guiding the form of analysis just described. In a phrase, time has become a problem.

Our approach is grounded in Husserlian phenomenology, and perhaps it is appropriate that our concerns about its efficacy reflect Husserl's discussion of philosophical phenomenological methods. The evolution of Husserl's understanding of phenomenological method occurred in three phases, which he called static, genetic, and generative phenomenology (Steinbock, 1995). *Static* phenomenology is a description of the properties, and their structure, by virtue of which a phenomenon is the kind that it is; the structured co-occurrence of properties constitutes the phenomenon in experience. Numerically aided phenomenology (Kuiken & Miall, 2001) is a static phenomenology in this sense. However, it is questionable whether it adequately addresses the question of structure, perhaps especially temporal structure. Although useful in the identification of different types of reading experience, it does not effectively articulate the temporality of that experience.

Consider again the manner in which constituents are identified. The expression of sympathy with the protagonist's anguish is, in one sense, timeless: it is not located temporally in relation to the other comments that our readers make. So, consider what

happens when the same readers say elsewhere within their comments that they themselves have experienced such anguish. Like the expression of sympathy, this empathic comparison is temporally unmarked in our procedures. Does sympathy precede or follow this empathic comparison? Since the numerical algorithms of cluster analysis simply assess the co-occurrence of constituents, the problem of temporal relations among constituents is not effectively addressed.

To develop, in Husserl's terms, a *genetic* phenomenology, the procedures of numerically aided phenomenology require adjustments that more effectively reveal how a present impression emerges from prior experience. Whereas for some this might be occasion for examining the reader's character or socio-cultural history, our primary objective is to define types of reading experience. So, we are especially interested in the genesis of impressions *within* the reading experience per se. This requirement becomes particularly salient in our attempts to refine our articulation of readers' active and iterative modification of an emergent affective theme in expressive enactment. Here is an example of this progression, taken from our ongoing studies of the experience of reading Mansfield's "The Wrong House." In response to a passage identified as particularly striking, one reader says:

Passage #1: "It seemed dusk already; dusk came floating into the room, heavy, powdery dusk settling on the furniture, filming over the mirror."

Comment #1: The description of dusk being more like a powdery film of dust is really an uncomfortable description. It makes me feel, like, unwanted and very, very wrong almost. It makes me feel, like, I really want to get rid of the darkness and light every light that you can and just get rid of it. *There's a feeling of being old and of a place being unkempt and abandoned and just ignored by everybody so that it's become decrepit and covered with age and just been left to ruin.*

Later in response to a different passage, she says:

Passage #2: “No!,’ she groaned. But yes, the blow fell, and for the moment it struck her down. She gasped, a great cold shiver went through her, and stayed in her hands and knees.”

Comment #2: When the woman sees the funeral procession stopped outside her house it strikes her with more of a, to me, a superstitious fear that it’s her that they’ve come for. *And it just makes you realize that...your own age and your own mortality is something that can make you be unable to think clearly and instead of realizing an error had been made by somebody else that perhaps you’re the one that is in error and while you think you still are alive and well and able to take care of yourself and help others that somebody else has decided that you can’t.*

The theme re-articulated in this commentary can be roughly characterized as concern with decrepitude and abandonment. This theme repeated despite the fact that its first expression is related to a setting description and the second to a narrative event. Until recently we were merely identifying when these variations on a theme occurred—and making theme re-articulation a constituent in its own right. The effect of this step was only to move slightly beyond examination of the probabilistic co-occurrence of two expressions to examination of their exact coincidence. But coincidence analysis fails to capture the sense of genesis with which Husserl was concerned. A more faithful examination of genesis requires not simply coincidence or even the temporal succession of two coincidental expressions. Instead it requires examination of the *transformation* of one expression into the other; it requires examination of *how* readers vary the themes that they rearticulate.

Consider again our example. Between commentary 1 and commentary 2 there is a shift from being “covered with age” to the “realization of your own mortality,” from the relative decrepitude of aging to the ultimate decrepitude of death. We find this existential turn in the commentaries of a number of readers—and we have used it as the basis for the following constituent.

From one expression of a theme to another, the reader moves from articulation of a relative human limitation to articulation of an absolute human limitation.

Another transformation that we find repeated among our readers led to development of the following constituent:

From one expression of a theme to another, the reader moves from explicit comparison with to metaphoric appropriation of a story element.

For example, in an initial articulation of a theme concerning a thought or idea that forcibly penetrates consciousness, one reader of the Mansfield story said:

Passage #1: “Like an old song, like a song that she had sung so often that only to breathe was to sing it, she murmured the knitting pattern.”

Comment #1: I’ve often found myself going over experiences that I’ve had or that are just incredibly familiar to me, and just being awake and being conscious, I have no choice but to think about them. Some things, like my family, my friends, stuff like that. So, when it said in the story, “like an old song, like a song that she had sung so often that only to breathe was to sing it,” it seemed a very good way to describe that idea of just almost living an idea that you have.

There seems to be an intra-textual (“that passage”) and extra-textual (“everyone”) comparison in that comment, but in a subsequent articulation of the same theme, she expresses this theme in a rather different manner:

Passage #2: No! she groaned, and stumbling, catching hold of things, she managed to get to the door before the blow fell again. She opened it, her chin trembled, her teeth clacked; somehow or other she brought out, “The wrong house!”

Comment #2: When you do realize that person has died, your initial reaction is always, “the wrong house.” It can’t be that person, and you try to deny it ever happened. And I thought that really hit close to home with me, *the wrong house*, because I remember saying [something like] that several times when I found out that a loved one had died.

In this articulation of the theme, the reader uses the protagonist's utterance from the story to metaphorically capture the vehement denial to which she had more literally referred in the preceding comparison.

In our studies, readers sometimes re-articulate the same theme 3, 4, or 5 times, each time in relation to a different story passage. In ways that are not yet clear, this suggests that we are approaching what the later Husserl would begin call generative phenomenology. He was attempting to describe the *telos*, the purposiveness, that seems to reside within the structure of intentionality in general. And, within our far more limited analyses, there seems to be a certain *telos* in readers' iterative expression of themes that are both carried forward by their reading and that guide their anticipations within it. Perhaps this generativity is not simply indicative but rather definitive of the type of reading experience that we have called expressive enactment.

References

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