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Beyond Abstraction: Philosophy as a Practical Qualitative Research Method

Eric Sheffield

Southwest Missouri State University, eds565f@smsu.edu

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Abstract

In this paper, I take up a discussion of what philosophic method is, and why it should be viewed as an important qualitative research method. After clarifying the nature of philosophic method within the larger framework of social practices, I argue that philosophy is important to both practice and research, and I suggest that philosophers work in concert with other qualitative researchers. I argue that recently (relatively speaking) philosophy has been viewed with some understandable disdain among both practitioners and researchers as an enjoyable but abstract (and therefore useless) social practice. That perception can be fixed but only if philosophical research becomes once again explicitly relevant to practice (particularly educational practice). Finally, I provide a brief example of how philosophy can indeed be relevant to practice from a recent symposium that I participated in on reflection in service-learning education.

Keywords

Philosophy, Qualitative Research, Research Method, John Dewey, Social Practice, Service-Learning, Educational Research, and History of Philosophy

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Beyond Abstraction: Philosophy as a Practical Qualitative Research Method

Eric Sheffield

Southwest Missouri State University, Springfield Missouri

In this paper, I take up a discussion of what philosophic method is, and why it should be viewed as an important qualitative research method. After clarifying the nature of philosophic method within the larger framework of social practices, I argue that philosophy is important to both practice and research, and I suggest that philosophers work in concert with other qualitative researchers. I argue that recently (relatively speaking) philosophy has been viewed with some understandable disdain among both practitioners and researchers as an enjoyable but abstract (and therefore useless) social practice. That perception can be fixed but only if philosophical research becomes once again explicitly relevant to practice (particularly educational practice). Finally, I provide a brief example of how philosophy can indeed be relevant to practice from a recent symposium that I participated in on reflection in service-learning education. Key Words: Philosophy, Qualitative Research, Research Method, John Dewey, Social Practice, Service-Learning, Educational Research, and History of Philosophy

Unfortunately, it was some time *after* the oral defense of my written qualifying examination that it hit me. Actually, John Dewey (and, yes, I did picture him cantankerously crawling from the grave to do so) hit me with it: “*abstract.*” That is what I should have said, and that is exactly what would have explained my “take” on philosophical “speculation” as a qualitative research methodology. Dr. Newman’s challenge to my written examination response (wherein I “dismissed” speculation as a tool for philosophical work) set my *heart* to racing as I “defended” my position. The ensuing rescue by another, more sympathetic, committee member set my *mind* to working. My rescuer (and committee chair) was, I slowly realized, completely right: speculation *is* a valuable philosophical activity. It is, rather, the abstract, disconnected, “aloof,” purely analytical, “other-worldly” philosophical inquiry that I find troublesome and that gives philosophers a bad name. As Dewey (1958) so clearly put it, abstraction practiced “in a bad sense to designate something which exclusively occupies a realm of its own without contact with the things of ordinary experience” (p. 6) is what allows other researchers to (understandably) tell us philosophers, “you can keep a knockin’, but you can’t come in.” Speculation, on the other hand, remains vital to the conception and practice of philosophy. It is, in fact, an important part of what Dewey called the “mediation” of experience; the stepping back from a problematic situation to hypothesize as to its solution. All successful research (and good thinking generally) has a valuable speculative aspect and philosophy is no exception.

I left that examination room with an uneasy feeling-- the gnawing feeling that I really did *not* understand philosophical research method--and this after years of study

into the matter! The artificial, contrived, disingenuous problem of explaining to my doctoral committee how philosophy is indeed a useful research method immediately became a genuinely felt problem-to-be-solved. The purpose of this paper is to answer the troubling questions that arose from that examination: What exactly are philosophy's methodological tools and subject matter? And, why should philosophical work be understood, at least in part, as a viable research method? Until I could fully answer these questions, the gnawing dissatisfaction would remain and my academic life would be at a standstill.

Philosophy as a Social Practice

As with all enduring human enterprises, philosophical endeavors are a part of the social experience that exists when one is born and that will continue on when one dies. Philosophy is, in this regard, an important social practice and further examination of it as such can guide, at least in part, an assessment of its structure and value as a research method. As Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) argues, a social practice is

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (p. 187)

This understanding makes clear what does and what does not count as a social practice. As an example, plopping a tomato plant into the ground is not a social practice, but the larger work of gardening certainly is. Relevant to the present problem of clarifying philosophical method, mere speculation is not a social practice; it is, rather, one tool that might be used as part of the social practice called philosophizing. In this way, all research methods fit the definition of a social practice and thereby have a specific type of structure to their work.

As MacIntyre (1984) explains, any social practice “involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods” (p. 190). That is, social practices (such as research paradigms) take their cues from an established tradition to create a vision of what is desired for the future. In this, MacIntyre provides a framework for discussing whether, and then how, philosophy is structured similarly to other more widely accepted and validated methods of research. Philosophy, as a general social practice, is not dissimilar in basic structure to the practice of gardening. As a gardener, I accept the procedures that have been shown to be successful from the gardening tradition and I accept the traditional goals of producing good vegetables and developing a closer relationship with the soil. I also adjust and make use of the tradition as it relates to my particular gardening situation, making changes as problems arise and in so doing improve the practice as it relates to my needs. Ethnography, as an example of a widely accepted and validated research method, has a particular set of tools that are used for understanding a particular type of experience. It is a social practice that comfortably fits into the research method category. In the same way, philosophy must be shown to operate in a fashion that is similar (if not identical) in structure to other research methods if its place as a viable method is to be comfortably secured.

Endless numbers of professional philosophers have attempted to explain exactly what it is that philosophers do and exactly what it is that philosophers study and to what end. This has been particularly true in the last hundred years or so as more and more disciplines have “graduated” out of philosophy (psychology, for example) to operate in their own realms leaving philosophers, in the opinion of some, with little or nothing to do. As Lewis Feuer (1969) said it, “not only have we had an end of ideology in America and an end of God in theology, but we have also witnessed evidently an end of philosophy” (p. 35).

In explaining what philosophy is and what philosophers do, scholars such as Feuer (1969) are at the same time trying to return this essential social practice to its place as a qualitatively relevant enterprise. Some of these qualifying attempts came early in the continuing struggle. William Hocking (1929), for example, defined philosophy as operating on two different levels. First, philosophy can be understood simply as “the sum of our beliefs” (p. 3). This definition might be described as the “lay” definition: Most humans, if not all of us, do make decisions and take action based on a set of beliefs. However, as a social practice and research methodology, philosophy is much more than this. Hocking explains

When we speak of philosophy as a science, however, we mean the examination of belief--thinking one’s way to a well-grounded set of beliefs. Philosophy holds that we cannot, as human beings, remain satisfied with dumb tenacity in holding our beliefs.(p. 10)

Other philosophers of merit have slightly different descriptions of philosophy’s process and purpose. Sydney Hook (1969), for example, describes philosophy as having three major aims: (1) helping to understand “the history and nature of our civilization”; (2) making “explicit our allegiances to the ideals in behalf of which we are prepared to live, to fight, sometimes even to die”; and (3) achieving “awareness and self-consciousness” through the use of logical analysis (p. 52). Harold Titus (1969) writes that, “in a general sense, a person’s philosophy is the sum of his fundamental beliefs and convictions” (p. 24). He fleshes out his definition by listing five specific views of philosophy that include philosophy as a personal attitude toward life, a method of reflective thinking, an attempt to gain a view of the whole, logical analysis of language and clarifying of ideas, and a group of specific problems. Giarelli and Chambliss (1988), on the other hand, organize their definition of philosophy around the goals of clarity (logical accuracy and focus), context (the building and understanding of the entire qualitative situation under investigation), and consciousness (a grasping of the problem and the need for problem-solving action).

Though these four views use somewhat different language and have a somewhat different focus, they represent, generally, the essence of philosophic work. That essence is captured clearly and succinctly in the following “working definition” of philosophic method: “the analysis, clarification, and criticism of the language, concepts, and logic of the ends and means of human experience” (Sherman, 1995, p. 2). This definition characterizes the “what” and the “how” of philosophic method; the conceptual and qualitative nature of philosophical research method.

The Philosopher's Toolbox

The first three terms of the above working definition indicate the tools or instruments or the doings of philosophy. That is, philosophers “analyze,” “clarify,” and “criticize.” In analysis, one reduces complex ideas or explicates human situations into understandable, relational concepts. Through analysis, essential concepts that drive practice are extracted from the “boom and buzz” of experience so that they may be more easily understood and debated. Closely related to analysis is clarification. All too often we simply take for granted or assume that humans have common experiences that lead to commonly held understandings of what we communicate to each other. We are, after all, thrown into the same world with many already established, taken for granted ideas of what is entailed in human experience. One responsibility philosophers have is to challenge and ultimately clarify those constructs we use to make sense of the world; constructs often taken for granted rather than clarified and truly understood. The final tool found in the traditional philosophical toolbox is criticism. Criticism means making judgments as to value. Philosophers judge the instrumental/practical value of those concepts (do they work, and if not, how can we improve them?) for driving practice and in that critical, interpretive mode build new and better conceptual understandings. (It is well to note here that speculation might very well be the impetus for this better understanding; clearly it is a tool for building better conceptual understanding). The philosopher's tools allow him or her to investigate and then “mediate” experience and thereby formulate solutions to problems; problems of a specific type. It is also clear that in “extracting” conceptual constructs that drive actual practice (rather than from some imagined practice), philosophy is a very qualitative, experiential method.

The Philosopher's Garden

Just as any type of researcher applies their specific tools to particular types of problems, the philosopher-as-social-practitioner has his or her own set of objects on which the above tools are used. The second part of our working definition clearly indicates the philosopher's objects of inquiry. Philosophers apply their traditional tools to the “language” (how we write and talk about human experience), the “concepts” (the ideas), and the “logic” (the relationships between the way we think, write, and talk) of human experience. In applying the traditional philosophical tools to these important aspects of lived experience, philosophers provide insights into what, why, and how ideology directs our decision making process. A philosopher, when doing good work, provides a reasonable understanding of how language, logic and concepts are used and how they might be improved to create a more just and humane society.

Finally, our working definition concludes with the words “means” and “ends” of human experience. That is, philosophy attempts to make clear the way we think about human experience so that reasonable action (means) might evolve which can lead us to just and good socially established goals (ends) within the human experience. We do, after all, hope to make decisions and take action based on sound conceptual understanding. Philosophers investigate real problems that might be alleviated through further conceptual understanding. It is, in this regard, a social practice that is very qualitative in nature and one, as a social practice, on par with other, more widely accepted, research practices.

So . . . What's All the Fuss?

It all sounds quite simple. One must wonder why there has been so much fuss over the perceived “death of philosophy.” Surely, seen in the right light, philosophy is meaning making, all-encompassing, visionary, open-ended, and therefore, a useful, relevant research method for understanding experience. However, the fuss remains and has some historical merit: philosophical research is, and has been for nearly one hundred years, perceived as irrelevant. As long as philosophers stray from human experience and operate solely in the realm of internal philosophical means and ends (means and ends that are relevant only to the study of philosophy itself), philosophical research will continue to be viewed (and accurately so) as irrelevant and impractical. As long as philosophers refuse to test their findings in experience, we will continue to be viewed as cloud-bound practitioners with very little to say about the “boom and buzz” of life as other research methods clearly do. This question of relevance, in fact, goes to the heart of our second question: *why* should philosophy be accepted into the qualitative research method community?

“Abstract” is the term I should have used in the examination, and it is the concept upon which the question of why philosophy should be seen as a viable method turns. To answer that question is to show that philosophy not only has a methodological structure similar (if not identical) to other research, but to also show its relevance to experience generally and its relationship to other forms of research specifically. In other words, why do philosophical research? John Dewey understood the importance of this question and spent much of his career dealing with it.

In his introduction to *Experience and Nature*, Dewey (1958) explains that philosophy is a research method grounded in human experience. Following a discussion framing the question of experience as it relates to science, he states the present problem, the perceived irrelevance of philosophy, in the following way: “The charge that is brought against non-empirical methods of philosophizing is not that it depends upon theorizing, but that it fails to use refined, secondary products as a path pointing and leading back to something in primary experience” (p. 6). That is, philosophers do indeed get their initial research material from lived experience; yet, they often refuse to make their findings relevant by explaining how new insights gained through philosophic research make any difference to actual practice. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (in which he advocates a new view of philosophy as a scientific, experimental, method), Dewey (1920) makes the point even more powerfully:

This change of human disposition toward the world does not mean that man ceases to have ideals, or ceases to be primarily a creature of the imagination. But it does signify a radical change in the character and function of the ideal realm which man shapes for himself. In the classic philosophy, the ideal world is essentially a haven in which man finds rest from the storms of life; it is an asylum in which he takes refuge from the troubles of existence with the calm assurance that it alone is supremely real. When the belief that knowledge is active and operative takes hold of men, the ideal realm is no longer something aloof and separate; it is rather that collection of imagined possibilities that stimulates men to new efforts

and realizations. It still remains true that the troubles which men undergo are the forces that lead them to project pictures of a better state of things. But the picture of the better is shaped so that it may become an instrumentality of action, while in the classic view the Idea belongs ready-made in a noumenal world. Hence, it is only an object of personal aspiration or consolation, while to the modern, an idea is a suggestion of something to be done or of a way of doing. (p. 118)

That is, the concepts, language, and logic that philosophers take as their subjects of study, are in fact relevant life qualities and the philosopher's tools are practical instruments for making life better. It is in the analysis, modification and application of these subjects (concepts, language, and logic) as they work in qualitative living that makes philosophy relevant and explains why it is so important to view philosophy as a viable research method.

Philosophic Method as a Relevant Mode of Research: the Specifics

The specific relevance philosophical method has for me is in the investigation of public education. I am, in practice, an assistant professor of education (yes, I managed to not only survive the qualifying examination but the dissertation process as well!) and it is with educational thinking that I must be particularly concerned when it comes to understanding philosophic method. To get at its special relevance to public education, one need only to replace the phrase "human experience" in our working definition with the more limiting phrase "education" to see exactly what philosophy's role in education should be. As the questioners, protectors, and adjusters of educational thinking, philosophers play a very practical role in bringing to light and then addressing basic ideological conflicts; and, more importantly, because it is in education that broad social ideological questions appear, are debated, and ultimately passed on or jettisoned, philosophy is especially essential to educational endeavors. That is why Dewey (1916) argued that philosophy is, when understood correctly, the general theory of education. Philosophy is, indeed, relevant to educational practice.

As to philosophic method's relevance to other forms of research, I believe there exists (or should exist) an especially important and cozy relationship between philosophy and other research--one that is often forgotten or even resisted on the part of both philosophers and other researchers. (That is, in fact, the reason I have submitted this discussion to a journal dedicated to qualitative research, rather than to one dedicated to philosophy.) Philosophers have the particularly important chore of clarifying our thinking as to constructs that both clarify experience and direct practice. That methodological purpose is important not simply as a means for philosophers to understand concepts, language, and logic as they operate in real, lived, experience, but it provides a necessary discussion that can become the bases for other kinds of research. It is difficult to imagine successful research that is not based on clear philosophical understanding. It is equally difficult to imagine successful philosophizing that isn't, at least sometimes, put to the test by researchers and practitioners using other research methodologies. The two simply must go hand-in-hand if we are to improve educational practices.

A Relevant Research Example in Education

An example of how I think philosophy can meet the demands of relevancy in educational research might help to clarify the position outlined here. A few days after beginning work at Southwest Missouri State University, I was asked to present at a symposium on “Best Practices in Service-Learning.” The reason that I was asked is simple: my dissertation study was a philosophical clarification of service-learning education and there remains among practitioners substantial conceptual confusion about some components of service-learning. My dissertation work on service-learning was the result of several years of running a service-learning program at a high school in central Florida and my own confusion as to why it only “sort of” worked.

As I reflected on possible reasons why my program was not as successful as it should have been, it slowly dawned on me that I truly did not understand the different concepts entailed in the service-learning approach to teaching and learning. As I researched further, I found that there was very little in the way of conceptual support within the service-learning “community.” One component of service-learning that is a continual conceptual bugaboo for practitioners is reflection. The fact of the matter is that many (probably most) teachers working under the service-learning pedagogy assume that reflection is a simple matter of “looking back” that people of all ages, backgrounds, and ability, by nature, simply “do.” That assumption is clearly a mistake.

Reflection is essential to success with the service-learning pedagogy and not understanding its complicated conceptual structure (as well as some other, equally complex components) can lead to poorly run service-learning projects and can result in poorly run service-learning research. How, for example, can you investigate whether students are learning to reflect better through service-learning if it is unclear how reflection is to be understood in the particular context of teaching and learning? Clearly this is precisely the type of question that calls for philosophic research method as it is described here. The research to be done is to clarify reflection and its relationship to other components of service-learning and then to put that understanding to the test by using it to design and implement a service-learning project. The symposium provided me the opportunity to clarify the concept of reflection and explain its “place” in the service-learning pedagogy. More importantly, it will begin a debate about reflection and (hopefully) other concepts that drive service-learning; a debate that can only improve practice. For my talk to have met the demands of relevancy outlined here, it must provide a conceptual structure that is helpful for building successful reflection into existing and future service-learning projects. It must be tested in a service-learning experience and then be further investigated through other research methods as well as philosophic method to see if the new and improved conceptual understanding has indeed improved its practice. In this example can be seen all the methodological characteristics described above: it is a conceptual analysis that comes out of real practice and its findings will provide clarity that is important to both further research (of the same and other types) and to improvements in that practice. It is, in this way, a vital qualitative research method.

My Felt Problem Solved

The question of what philosophical method entails is one that is far from dead. One only has to read Richard Rorty's (1982) article "Philosophy in America Today," or Kenneth Seeskin's (1980) "Never Speculate, Never Explain" to get a feel for the meta-philosophical "discussion" that began decades ago and continues to this day. In the end, however, there is the hope that philosophy can once again be the vibrant research activity that John Dewey described it to be. Stephen Toulmin (1988), in "The Recovery of Practical Philosophy," not only clearly traces the history of philosophy relative to the charge of irrelevancy, but also calls for a return to a before-1630 vision of what philosophical inquiry should be. In the article, Toulmin (1988) calls for a philosophy which again takes into account the "oral," the "particular," the "local," and the "timely." This is neither the time nor the place to explicate his entire discussion of the plight of philosophical inquiry. It is, however, important to note that Toulmin's argument is a call to return philosophy to its birthplace as a practical method grounded in the qualitative human experience.

It must be made clear that philosophical research, as a social practice, does include an important meta-philosophical component. Clearly MacIntyre's (1984) conception of a social practice includes a responsibility to ensure the soundness of the practice (philosophy) itself. That is, as a social practice, philosophy must engage in meta-philosophy if it is to be viable and grow in its own right. However, to get philosophy's proper place back as an essential qualitative, foundational research method, emphasis on its external relevance rather than internal workings must become the focus of philosophical inquiry. Jonas Soltis (1988) has argued for just such a view of philosophic method particularly on the part of educational philosophers:

We [philosophers of education] need substantive contact with educational researchers, professional educators of educators and practitioners to keep our minds open to potentially relevant philosophical problems, issues, or ideas. In fact, relevance of what we do to education must be the *sine qua non* of our professional commitment. It cannot be otherwise if we are honestly to call ourselves philosophers of education. (p. 12)

Unfortunately, this is not a universally (or even widely) accepted sentiment.¹

In the final analysis, philosophy is a very human enterprise with very real, human consequences. It was from within the human experience that philosophy was born and it is into the human experience that philosophy must always return if it is to remain a vital and relevant social practice. William James (1975) described philosophy as "prospective" (p. 53). Indeed it is, for without conceptual clarity we can neither see where we want to go nor how to get there. I think John Dewey (1920) best expressed the relevance of philosophy as a practical qualitative research method when he summed up his thoughts in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*:

¹ One such argument against Soltis' comes from Harvey Siegel (1988) who writes, "I have already suggested that it is a mistake for philosophers of education to strive to be relevant, even if they wish their work to eventuate in the improvement of practice" (p. 15).

When it is acknowledged that under disguise of dealing with ultimate reality, philosophy has been occupied with the precious values embedded in social traditions, that it has sprung from a clash of social ends and from a conflict of inherited institutions with incompatible contemporary tendencies, it will be seen that the task of future philosophy is to clarify men's ideas as to the social and moral strife of their own day. Its aim is to become so far as is humanly possible an organ for dealing with these conflicts. That which may be pretentiously unreal when it is formulated in metaphysical distinctions becomes intensely significant when connected with the drama of the struggle of social beliefs and ideals. Philosophy which surrenders its somewhat barren monopoly of dealings with Ultimate and Absolute Reality will find a compensation in enlightening the moral forces which move mankind and in contributing to the aspirations of men to attain to more ordered and intelligent happiness. (p. 94)

I now rest easy in knowing that philosophy *is* a viable, practical, qualitative method of educational research.

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Author Note

Eric Sheffield recently (May, 2003) received his PhD from the Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Foundations at the University of Florida in Gainesville. His area of concentration was in foundations of education with particular emphasis on philosophy of education. His dissertation was written to clarify the philosophical bases of service-learning education. Previous to receiving his doctorate, he taught high school English for fourteen years in Putnam County Florida where he also ran several service-learning projects. Currently, Eric teaches educational foundations and general methods in the School of Teacher Education at Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield Missouri.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Eric C. Sheffield, PhD, Southwest Missouri State University, School of Teacher Education, 901 S. National, Springfield, MO 65804; Telephone: (417) 836-6062; E-mail: eds565f@smsu.edu

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