# REALIZING EMANCIPATORY IDEALS IN PHENOMENOLOGICAL IS RESEARCH

## ATINGINDO IDEAIS EMANCIPATÓRIOS NA PESQUISA FENOMENOLÓGICA EM SISTEMAS DE INFORMAÇÃO

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### ABSTRACT

*Since the development of the phenomenological method by Husserl, a variety of thinkers and researchers have contributed to an intense debate regarding the ontological and epistemological bases of Phenomenology, as well as its applicability to the inquiry of the human condition. This dialogue has spun an area of phenomenological research known as existential-phenomenological psychology, which has been systematically explored by a number of researchers in different fields, in the last decades. The present paper furthers an earlier argument for the use of phenomenological methods, and in particular, those of existential-phenomenological psychology, to study IS-related phenomena. It discusses how such methods can be approached from a critical standpoint, in contrast with a pure hermeneutical one, thus allowing for the realization of emancipatory ideals in often unanticipated ways. An example from a study of IT-driven radical change is used to illustrate the argument.*

*Key-words: phenomenology; critical social theory; research methodology; organizational change.*

### RESUMO

Desde o desenvolvimento do método fenomenológico por Husserl, inúmeros pensadores e pesquisadores contribuíram para um intenso debate a respeito das suas bases ontológicas e epistemoógicas, assim como sobre a sua aplicabilidade para analisar a condição humana. Este diálogo resultou emu ma area da pesquisa fenomenológica conhecida como psicologia fenomenológica existencial, que tem sido explorada sistematicamente por diversos pesquisadores de diferentes campos nas últimas décadas. Este artigo procura aprofundar-se em um argumento antigo a favor do uso de métodos fenomenológicos e, em particular, da psicologia fenomenológica existencial para estudar fenômenos relativos à área de Sistemas de Informação. Discute-se como tais métodos podem ser utilizados a partir de uma perspectiva crítica, em contraste a um uso puramente hermenêutico, assim possibilitando o atingimento de ideais emancipatórios de formas normalmente não antecipadas. Um exemplo de estudo de uma mudança radical pela introdução de TI é utilizado para ilustrar a argumentação proposta.

Palavras-chave: fenomenologia; teoriacrítica; metodologia de pesquisa; mudança organizacional.

# 1 INTRODUÇÃO

Edmund Husserl (1960, 1967, 1970) introduced transcendental phenomenology as a science of human experience in the beginning of the last century. He believed that philosophy must provide the basic knowledge upon which all other sciences may be built. According to Husserl, the natural sciences accept the world as we perceive it, attributing to it objective characteristics that make it independent of our acts of perception and deduction, i.e., of our consciousness. Husserl contended that the assumptions that are implicit in natural sciences in fact needed to be examined. Phenomenology would then supply the means to investigate the validity of such presuppositions, requiring, thereby, "a radicalism of foundation, a reduction to absolute presuppositionlessness [sic], a fundamental method through which the philosopher at the beginning secures an absolute foundation for himself" (KOCKELMANS, 1967, p. 29). As illustrated in Husserl's investigations (e.g., 1967), the ideal of presuppositionlessness actually translates into an encompassing examination of all types of assumptions. Congruently, it requires that there be no metaphysical or existential postulation unless there is a special reason for explicitly positing it. Moreover, it implies the rejection of all prejudgments (FARBER, 1967).

From the previous paragraph, one could naturally assume an intrinsic connection between the phenomenological thought and Critical Social Theory (CST). As one of the leading expressions of the neohumanist paradigm (as defined in HIRSCHHEIM & KLEIN, 1994; HIRSCHHEIM, KLEIN & LYYTINEN, 1995), CST is primarily concerned with the critical examination of the implicit validity claims inherent to all social activity, and the emancipation of individuals from socio-historical conditions whose bases are found on the oppression and distortion of free, comprehensive, logically coherent exchanges of ideas. Nevertheless, transcendental phenomenology and its later developments have led mainly to the establishment of interpretive, hermeneutical research traditions that lack the critical perspective and the transformative interest and potential that are a fundamental characteristic of the neohumanist school. This is especially true in the phenomenological works developed by researchers of Information Systems (IS) and organizational phenomena.

Although most interpretivist research methods are informed by phenomenological thought (e.g., BOLAND, 1985; KLEIN & MYERS, 1999), the use of traditional phenomenological methods in studies of organizational and IS-related processes is actually relatively recent. One of the first advocates of their application in the IS field was Richard Boland. In a synthesis of his early work, Boland (1985) argued that the study of the design, implementation, and use of information systems is essentially a hermeneutic task, in which designers and users attempt to interpret each other's intentions, as well as the socially constructed organizational reality where their interactions take place. Based on these ideas, he maintained that phenomenology is the preferred method to study such phenomena, since it "accepts meaning as the central problem on which all other knowledge of the social world will depend" (p. 196).

More recently, Chikudate (1999) adopted a framework based on phenomenology and the sociology of knowledge to study the experiences of Japanese managers in change processes. He was able to identify several socio-historical processes that contribute to the maintenance of the *status quo* in Japanese companies, and thereby, to the high rate of failure of organizational change efforts in that country. He concluded that the only way of revitalizing Japanese businesses is "to drastically deconstruct the structure of institutionalized obstructs that have been oppressing the self-confrontation within Japanese business communities" (p. 84). In this way, Chikudate's study demonstrates the usefulness of the phenomenological method to unveil the interconnections between phenomena that take place at the individual level, and the broader structures that are prevalent in society at a particular time. It is important to note, therefore, that, even though the research methodology that guided the inquiry was clearly phenomenological, both conceptually and in structure, it led to conclusions that at least imply the critical, socio-historical standpoint that is characteristic in the CST school.

The present paper sets forth the argument that phenomenological research methods are based on assumptions that, not only are fully compatible with the principles of CST and the neohumanist paradigm, but also, when developed to their fullest potential, are conducive to the unveiling of unwarranted assumptions in a socio-historical context. In this way, it fully supports Boland's position, hoping to encourage and provide initial guidance to IS researchers, as far as the application of phenomenological methods is concerned. The paper starts with a brief presentation of the principles of neohumanism and Critical Social Theory. This is followed by summary of the fundamental concepts of phenomenology and existential-phenomenological research, one of the later developments of Husserl's ideas. It concludes with a discussion of the synergies between the two schools of thought, illustrated with a brief example from a study of IT-driven radical organizational change (MORENO, 2001).

## 2 CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY (CST)

Developed by the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse) and later by Jürgen Habermas, Critical Social Theory (CST) has been treated in the literature as a major expression of the neohumanist paradigm (e.g., ALVESSON & WILLMOTT, 1992; HIRSCHHEIM & KLEIN, 1994; HIRSCHHEIM *et al.*, 1995; NGWENYAMA, 1991). The main ideal in neohumanism is the emancipation of individuals from all physical, psychological and social constraints that prevent them from fully developing their inherent potentialities (HIRSCHHEIM & KLEIN, 1994; HIRSCHHEIM *et al.*, 1995). Radical change, based on rational, ample, and unrestricted critique of the *status quo*, is the fundamental means to the realization of such objective (HABERMAS, 1985a, 1985b). Congruent with the neohumanist principles, CST asserts that the acquisition of knowledge about social reality requires the achievement of consensus through a rational discourse, i.e., through an undistorted debate among equally well-

informed peers. Its major value is the transformation of historically constituted social reality to allow for the maximal realization of human needs and potentials. Emancipation in CST refers essentially to processes "through which individuals and groups become freed from repressive social and ideological conditions, in particular those that place socially unnecessary restrictions upon the development and articulation of human consciousness" (ALVESSON & WILLMOTT, 1992, p. 432). The underlying idea here is that social arrangements must not be reified (i.e., perceived as a given objects of an external reality), but rather understood as resulting from (and constraining) human activity.

The main ontological assumption that guides the neohumanist perspective, as defined by Hirschheim *et al.* (1995), is that the individual's consciousness and the external social world are expressions of a same reality, and coexist in an ongoing state of interaction, each unavoidably and permanently influencing the other. Furthermore, the outer social context is assumed to have a dual nature, encompassing objective and subjective elements, such as physical artifacts and social conventions, respectively. Nevertheless, despite their inherent interconnectedness, individuals' consciousness and social reality may be separated by different types of barriers (e.g., barriers of time and space, psychological compulsions, communication distortions, and ideology). These essential ideas underlay the critique set forth in CST of the traditional positivist scientific methods, especially as they are applied to the investigation of the social world. Critical theorists dispute the presumed detachment of positivist research from its socio-historical context; that is, they reject the separation of value and inquiry, knowledge and action, and challenge the unity of the positivist scientific method with regard to social affairs (NGWENYAMA, 1991, p. 268). CST adopts pluralistic methods of inquiry supported by interpretivism to understand the meanings associated with social activity "from within the social context and life worlds of [ human, or more specifically, organizational] actors" (NGWENYAMA & LEE, 1997, p. 151). At the same time, it addresses the conflictual nature of social interactions, and the possibility of the intentional introduction of distortions in people's conceptualizations of reality as a means to favor groups' or individuals' interests. In his Theory of Communicative Action, Habermas (1985a, 1985b) associates such distortions with communicative acts that are false, incomplete, insincere, or unwarranted. These characteristics imply Habermas' view of individuals as intelligent human actors, capable of critically evaluating the different validity claims that are embedded in their communicative acts, i.e., contextually grounded verbal or extra-verbal social interactions directed at establishing interpersonal relations (HABERMAS, 1985a).

The Theory of Communicative Action defines four basic types of intentional behaviors or social actions (HABERMAS, 1985a):

- *instrumental*: behavior oriented to achieving rational objectives; other people are seen by the actor as objects (resources) amenable to manipulation; involves validity claims associated with appropriateness (in a given context), efficiency and effectiveness;

- *communicative*: action related to achieving and maintaining mutual understanding; depends on a common language and shared understanding about the context in which the action takes place; involves validity claims of clarity, completeness, contextuality, and truthfulness;

- *discursive*: action oriented toward achieving or restoring agreement and redeeming validity claims, based on a common medium of communication, shared protocols of interaction, and *a priori* knowledge of the ground rules of discourse; evokes validity claims of clarity, contextuality, and sometimes, truthfulness and sincerity;

- *strategic*: action associated with influencing and changing the behaviors of others so as to make them compatible with one's interests; participants see each other as persons capable of intelligent action; involves validity claims of contextuality.

Independently of the type of research methods employed (positivist or interpretivist), the development of scientific knowledge about the social world necessarily evolves through a series of social actions. Therefore, it is intrinsically connected to a number of validity claims that must be continually vindicated. A critical perspective requires the assessment process to involve not only the scientific community that "generates" scientific knowledge, but also non-scientists to whom such knowledge is related. In fact, Harbermas understands Science and its project of improving the human condition as a collaborative effort between those two communities. In his view, true knowledge can only be created when validity claims are evaluated through critical reflection in *ideal discourse* situations, where consensus is achieved by force of better argument, rather than by imposition, manipulation or distortion of information (HABERMAS, 1985a, 1985b). Accordingly, CST sees communication as a key factor for successful knowledge building.

Ngwenyama (1991, pp. 272-273) translated the essential elements of Critical Social Theory into five requirements to which any critical research methodology must comply:

1. methods must be practice oriented focusing on change;

2. they must support inquiry into the organizational process and its social context;

3. they must be sensitive to individual as well as organizational needs;

4. they must be collaborative, supporting free and open participants;

5. they must be critically self-reflective.

The emancipatory ideal of neohumanism is not explicit in these exigencies. Nevertheless, the requirements should be taken in the context of CST, where they can be meaningfully connected to the ultimate objective of emancipation. For instance, the call for practice and change reflects the active pursue for freedom inherent to the neohumanist paradigm. The claims for free collaboration and critical reflection manifest the ideal discourse condition, indispensable for the acquisition of the

knowledge necessary to the emancipation process. Finally, the demands for the consideration of individual, organizational and broader social elements mirror the ontological assumptions of neohumanism, as well as the three types of interest defined by Habermas. Hence, when considered in the light of CST, the above set of requirements seems to cover adequately the essential principles that must be salient in any neohumanist research methodology.

## 3   EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Husserl (1960, 1967) believed the investigation of claims about reality is ultimately related to the intuitive way in which the world reveals itself in our consciousness. Accordingly, the starting point of phenomenology is the immediately given, essential impressions of the world in consciousness, which are referred to as *phenomena*. The term *essence*, as used by Husserl, refers to "that which is common or universal, the condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is" (MOUSTAKAS, 1994, p. 100). Phenomena are necessarily embedded in a web of meanings, which are related to previous experiences, to things we have learned and deduced, to intuition and imagination. Their essences are concealed by layers of relations and meanings that usually prevent us from getting in touch with those original, pure representations. Therefore, in order to build true knowledge about the "external" reality, we must first remove those layers: we must go back "to the things themselves".

Husserl's original ideas were further developed not only by himself, over the period of his life, but also by several other philosophers in the last century (see SPIEGELBERG, 1971). This long debate generated different approaches to phenomenology, with somewhat different ontological and epistemological assumptions. One of the most prolific streams of phenomenological research has its bases on Heiddeger's views and the existentialist movement. It is often referred to as phenomenological psychology or existential-phenomenological psychology (e.g., VON ECKARTSBERG, 1998), and has been evolving through the contributions of thinkers such as Scheler, Heidegger, Sartre, Schutz, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, and Ricoeur (SPIEGELBERG, 1971; VON ECKARTSBERG, 1998).

Existential-phenomenological psychology is concerned with the study of meaningful human experiences, as they unfold in relation to and within a particular socio-historical context. Its emphasis is on "how we read, enact, and understand our life-involvements" (VON ECKARTSBERG, 1998, p. 3). The inherent interconnection between consciousness, intentionality, the individual and his/her physical body, and the natural, social and historical environment where our experiences take place motivates and guides research within this stream of phenomenology. The acknowledgment and embrace of this interrelationship emerges from the appropriation of different ideas, such as Heidegger's concepts of *being-in-the-world*, Sartre's *fundamental project* and the maxim that "existence precedes essence", and Merlau-Ponty's denial of the possibility of a total presuppositionless vantage point and his concept of *embodied subjectivity*.

In existential-phenomenological research, the duality between individual and external reality gives place to a fundamental relationship of co-constitution, in which body and consciousness are inseparably engaged in the meaning creation process. This relationship is not one of determination, but rather of alternatives and choices uniquely perceived, defined, and exploited by each individual, consciously, rationally, or not, as s/he moves along the flow of her/his life's specific situations.

The fundamental goal of empirical existential-phenomenological research is to arrive at an essential general meaning structure of a phenomenon in terms of a synchronic formulation of essential constituents, as well as at a process structure of the phenomenon that delineates its diachronic unfolding in terms of essential stages aligned sequentially (VON ECKARTSBERG, 1998). Although slightly different research methods have been used in the literature (e.g., VAN KAAN, 1966; GIORGI, 1985, 1997), all of them seem to follow the same basic structure, which is described by von Eckartsberg (1968b) as follows:

1. Problem and question formulation: the researcher delineates the focus of investigation, naming the phenomenon of interest in such a way that it is understandable to others.

2. Data-gathering situation: descriptive narratives provided by the participants about their experiences are collected as textual format, written by the participants themselves, transcribed from interviews, or both. All accounts of the phenomenon should be considered in this pre-reflective collection of information, least important textural characteristics of the phenomenon are overlooked.

3. Data analysis: the analysis aims at unveiling the structure, meaning configuration, principle of coherence, and circumstances of occurrence and clustering of participants' experiences. Implicit meanings are brought out by means of systematic reflection upon participants' life-texts or memories. Throughout this process, the researcher retains the focus on the phenomenon of interest, attempting to uncover the connections between the narrated experiences and the situated and essential general structure of the phenomenon. An important element of this process is the use of *imaginative variation*, described by Moustakas (1994) as follows:

> The task of Imaginative Variation is to seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, positions, roles or functions. The aim is to arrive at structural description of an experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced; in other words, the "how" that speaks to conditions that illuminate the "what" of experience. How did the experience of the phenomenon come to be what it is? (pp. 97-98)

4. Presentation of results: the findings are formulated and expressed in public form for sharing and criticism. They are synthesized in an account of the "essential constituents" of the phenomenon (what

was experienced), as well as their internal relations with one another (how it was experienced).

It is important that existential-phenomenological researchers adopt the *phenomenological attitude* when approaching a research project (e.g., GIORGI, 1997; VON ECKARTSBERG, 1998). This attitude is attained through *Epokhé*, a process of deep self-examination, whose ultimate goal is the identification and inhibition of all commitments associated with the "natural attitude", the biases of everyday knowledge, as a basis for truth and reality. The focus of the phenomenological research must be "placed in brackets" (*bracketing*), i.e., everything else should be set aside so that the entire research process is rooted exclusively on the topic and question of interest. Although, as argued by Merlaeu-Ponty, a state of total presuppositionless is unachievable, the attempt to reach such goal can still be extremely fruitful, for: (1) it helps us develop a better understanding of the phenomenon under consideration; and (2) it opens us to new interpretations and perspectives that may emerge from the dialogue with the participants, and the reflection upon the accounts of their situated experiences.

## 4    CRITICAL EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Critical social theory and existential-phenomenological research appear to share similar ontological assumptions. In both traditions, reality is multifaceted, aggregating, in a mutually influencing way, natural and social elements. Their epistemological positions also seem to be compatible. The main interest in existential-phenomenological research is the situated human experience and its associated meanings. Its research methods, based on the interpretation of participants' subjective accounts of their experiences, were conceived, therefore, to help us acquire knowledge about the meaning creation process. CST, on the other hand, has broader horizons, for it also contemplates inquiries motivated by the technical interest. At first, it would seem, then, that existential-phenomenological research is closer to pursuits associated with CST's practical interest. Nevertheless, its conceptual base is also conducive to inquiries related to the emancipatory interest, although, in practice, it is difficult to find examples of the conduction of phenomenological research in this way.

The emancipatory potential of existential-phenomenological research becomes evident when three of its fundamental elements are considered in tandem: the phenomenological attitude, imaginative variation, and the search for a structural account of a given phenomenon. A structural description focuses on the relationships between the various essential elements of an experience. It tries to unveil causal connections and interdependencies that explain why the experience unfolded in a certain way. It is important to highlight that those elements are interconnected in webs of meaning that are themselves inherently linked to meanings shared at a social or societal level. At a minimum, the common language shared by researchers and participants works to bind the constitution and interpretation of experiences within the limits of a certain web of socially

shared meanings. Nevertheless, the shared meanings can also have their roots in prevalent ideologies, purposefully distorted information, cultural traditions, and so on. In any case, life experiences and the meaning-attribution process are inevitably connected, for, if on the one hand, living informs expression (language and thinking), on the other hand, thinking-language-expression reciprocally inform and give a recognizable shaped awareness to living (VON ECKARTSBERG, 1998, p. 15).

It is, therefore, in the search for interdependencies among the essences of an experience that overarching socially shared meanings can be identified and related to the meanings originally associated with the individual's experience. This possibility entails the identification of webs of meaning that support illegitimate, but often reified social arrangements. Here lies, then, the transformative capacity of existential-phenomenological research: by defining the individual in terms of Sartre's fundamental project, and calling attention to the inexorable interconnection of meaning, consciousness, body, and socio-historical context, it requires researchers *and* participants to acknowledge the choices *and* alternatives, as well as the meanings to which they are linked, that underlay participants' present life situations and their experiences of the phenomena under consideration. This, however, may not happen, if the researcher fails to adopt a phenomenological stance, for s/he is also influenced by a web of meanings that is itself connected to broader, socially shared meanings. If these remain veiled and unexamined, aspects of the participants' experiences that are also connected to those shared meanings can be reified and assume an unwarranted obvious, natural status. Once the researcher understands her/his own biases (as much as possible) and opens her/himself to the horizons of participants' experiences (the phenomenological attitude), the meaningful essences of such experiences lose their once natural standing, and become object of deep interest and careful examination. This occurs somewhat naturally, as the researcher strives to describe the "how" and "why" of the experience of the phenomenon. As explained before, imaginative variation plays a fundamental role in this process. As the researcher modifies the frames of reference in her/his analysis, essential constituents of an experience may become "lose", i.e., their formerly natural reason for being now requires explanation. Some of them may be grounded on webs of meaning associated with ideologies, distorted communication, and unjustified beliefs that perpetuate unfavorable life situations and social arrangements. The existential-phenomenological research method nudges both researcher and participants toward the acknowledgement of this state of affairs. This is the first, but necessary, step to the realization of the emancipatory ideals of CST.

In short, there does not seem to be any impediments to the conduction of existential-phenomenological research from a critical standpoint. When its methods are checked against the requirements established by Ngwenyama (1991, pp. 272-273) for a critical research methodology, we notice that only the first one ("methods must be practice oriented focusing on change") does not seem to be immediately fulfilled. However, as

explained above, it does not conflict with the fundamental principles of the existential-phenomenological tradition, but finds there a fertile ground upon which it can thrive.

To illustrate the preceding argument, I will briefly describe my experience in a study of IT-driven radical organizational change (MORENO, 2001). The research used an existential-phenomenological method to understand how individuals experienced the major transformation of their work lives occasioned by the redesign of business processes and the introduction of new IS in their organizations (BPR projects were used as the context of the study). Over 60 long, semi-structured, interviews were conducted, over a period of one year. Before I started the research project, I had a mostly negative view of reengineering and other related techniques, due to my previous professional experiences and background. Based on the news about BPR project failures that were quickly spreading at the time, I expected to find the same type of attitude among the participants of the study. Surprisingly, many of them did not share my views. Some, even after going through traumatic events in their companies, still maintained a positive attitude toward BPR and their own organizations. My first impulse was to reject this dissonance and attribute it to some problem of interpretation (mine or the participants'). In time, I practiced and adopted the phenomenological attitude, acknowledging, but setting aside, my own biases against BPR. As I opened myself to participants' narratives, I was moved by a deep interest in understanding the process of their experiences, i.e., how their different aspects related to each other, and why they occurred in that particular way. This reflection transpired during the interviews as I continued to ask participants to detail their answers and dig into the reasons behind their attitudes and feelings. In my struggle to make sense of their experiences, I tried to adopt different perspectives and connect the elements of their narratives in different ways, but always returning to the participants themselves to validate my interpretations. During this process, both the interviewer and the interviewees were induced to reflect about their own prejudgments and beliefs (Habermas's *self-reflection*). Some of the latter started questioning previously unacknowledged validity claims that were embedded in their interpretations of their experiences, and previous choices and positions regarding their jobs, their organizations, and even society in general. This "expanding" questioning took place when participants, in their attempts to vindicate those claims, were able to reconstruct and reconnect the webs of meaning associated with one sphere or level of their lives (e.g., their jobs) with overarching webs of meaning associated with broader social contexts (e.g., their companies, work in general, the capitalist society). In some cases, I noticed significant changes in the participant's views of work, organizations and society (akin to Habermas' *rational reconstruction*), during the course of the interview process (sometimes, they were distributed over a period of several months). For example, in my first interview with Louis, who was a director in a large hospital when the BPR project started, he had a positive opinion of reengineering, very much aligned with the discourse of efficiency and the technological imperative, even though he

had just lost his job. At that time, his work had precedence over the personal aspects of his life. During the interview process, Louis and I engaged in a deep reflection about his experiences and related beliefs, unveiling contradictions that had formerly been unchecked. In our last interview, six months later, Louis told me he had decided to become a full-time teacher, and started coaching a T-ball team: "It was a real eye-opener [ …] I don't want another job like that again. That's where [ …] the whole thing ended."

## 5    CONCLUSION

From the preceding exposition, it is clear then that the CST perspective differs fundamentally from most interpretive or hermeneutical approaches because it "requires the researcher to attend not only to the matter of mutual understanding, but also to the matter of the emancipation of organizational actors from false or unwarranted beliefs, assumptions, and constraints" (NGWENYAMA & LEE, 1997, p. 10). Critical theory addresses the conflictual nature of social interactions, and the possibility of the intentional introduction of distortions in people's conceptualizations of reality as a means to favor groups or individuals' interests. Such distortions are reflected on communicative acts that are false, incomplete, insincere, or unwarranted. Examples of recent research with such focus include Yetim's (2006) paper on how meta-communication processes guided by discursive-ethical principles can promote a rational and legitimate definition, design and structuring of genres, and Varey, Wood-Harper and Wood's (2002) analysis of political and ethical shortcomings related inherently to management and IS praxis, based on a critical communications theory. Insofar as hermeneutical inquiry is based on the merging of researchers' and research participants' "horizons" or webs of meaning, but does not critically examine these horizons in regards to their intrinsic validity claims, it cannot be considered a critical research method.

Although it has been usually conducted from a hermeneutical standpoint, existential-phenomenological research is based on ontological an epistemological principles that are attuned to those of the neohumanist paradigm and CST. Moreover, its methodology is conducive to the realization of emancipatory ideals and the transformation of unwarranted social arrangements. In times where Information Technology, in its different flavors (e.g., the Internet, enterprise-wide systems, wireless and mobile technology, etc.), has assumed a strategic role in organizations, being often associated with profound changes in work, companies, and markets around the world, existential-phenomenological research methods can make a distinct contribution to the development of IS research. First, it can help the IS community to critically examine some of the basic assumptions, mostly derived from the natural sciences, that have guided inquiries in our field. Such assumptions – about the nature of information systems, the "effects" they have on organizations, how and why they are developed and adopted, and so on – may be shared not only by researchers, but also by participants, who have been consistently exposed to the discourse of technical rationality over the last decades. The deep,

encompassing examination of IS-related phenomena, at the individual level, supported by existential-phenomenological methods, may reveal new or even overlooked essential aspects of these phenomena, including their interrelationships with overarching social structures. Second, but not less important, insofar as they are applied with a critical orientation, existential-phenomenological research methods can be instrumental to the realization of emancipatory ideals in the context of IS-related and organizational phenomena. This is especially important in face of the prevalent "knowledge imperative" discourse, the transformation of labor arrangements, and the intrusion of work in other spheres of life.

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