FIRST-PERSON METHODS
Scope
Research methods and research methodology are at the heart of the human endeavors that produce knowledge. Research methods and research methodology are central aspects of the distinction between folk knowledge and the disciplined way in which disciplinary forms of knowledge are produced. However, in the teaching of research methods and methodology, there traditionally has been an abyss between descriptions of how to do research, descriptions of research practices, and the actual lived research praxis.

The purpose of this series is to encourage the publication of books that take a very practical and pragmatic approach to research methods. For any action in research, there are potentially many different alternative ways of how to go about enacting it. Experienced practitioners bring to these decisions a sort of scientific feel for the game that allows them to do what they do all the while expressing expertise. To transmit such a feel for the game requires teaching methods that are more like those in high-level sports or the arts. Teaching occurs not through first principles and general precepts but by means of practical suggestions in actual cases. The teacher of method thereby looks more like a coach. This series aims at publishing contributions that teach methods much in the way a coach would tell an athlete what to do next. That is, the books in this series aim at praxis of method, that is, teaching the feel of the game of social science research.
First-Person Methods

Toward an Empirical Phenomenology of Experience

By

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Preface

For many years, I have recorded the unfolding of critical problem-solving events in my life, paying particular attention to avoiding after-the-fact rationalizations while describing and explaining events as these were giving themselves to me. The purpose of these recordings has been to capture – to the extent that this is possible – the first-time-through nature of problem solving and, particularly, the perceptual processes involved. An important instant in my career, when I produced an extended database of first-hand experiences, was a three-month fellowship at the *Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg* / Hanse Institute for Advanced Study (Delmenhorst, Germany) that allowed me to record my own perceptual processes during ‘experiments’ and during the data analysis of tapes recorded in a tenth-grade physics classroom. As I analyzed the physics tapes, it became evident to me that students faced some fundamental questions, ‘What is it that I am supposed to see?’ and ‘Do I see what I am supposed to see?’ To better understand the students’ experiences of learning about static electricity while producing unfamiliar events, I conducted several ‘experiments’ to reproduce the effect of perceiving something for the first time (i.e., something unfamiliar). Many of the experiences I recorded relate to events while riding my bicycle to and from the university, a 25-km trip, or during trips in the surrounding environment. I also designed an experiment, where I would take the same 25-km trip every day for 20 days, recording what I remembered and learned. During and after each daily bicycle trip into the countryside surrounding the *Institute*, I recorded perceptions, salient entities, and striking realizations that appeared into my mind, that is, anything that appeared to pertain to perceptual phenomena. At some point during this stay I realized that much of the research that I conduct from a third-person perspective – as a researcher interested in the learning of mathematics and science – was not possible without my intimate understanding of cognition that I developed through analyses based on a first-person perspective. Most recently, I used this approach to expose the centrality of *passibility* to human experience and knowledge and, in the course, exhibit the limits of the constructivist metaphor so prevalent in the study of learning. These limits can be seen precisely in those aspects of our lives where we clearly do not engage in
‘construction’ and ‘interpretation’ (Roth 2011). These analyses allowed me to show where constructivism is consistent with metaphysics, that is, with a philosophy that splits the human experience into two, one associated with the visceral body, the other with the mind.

In the history of psychology, first-person methods, such as introspection, have come into disrepute in favor of the experimental approach. Yet Francisco Varela, a well-known scholar writing on embodiment and ethics, was a neuroscientist who practiced first-person methods to generate data that the experimental methods had to be able to account of to be recognized as valid. Jean-Luc Nancy, one of the most eminent French philosophers of the 20th and early 21st centuries, also practices first-person methods. In fact, both produced gripping accounts of learning about the human existence that arose from the analyses of the organ transplantations they underwent, the latter of a heart, the former of a liver (Nancy 2000; Varela 2001). Both came to understand, while reflecting on this other organ, the ultimate otherness of the self as fundamental condition of human experience even without or prior to any organ transplant. This understanding of the inherently self-other nature of everything we know to be human runs counter to constructivist ideas, where, because the individual constructs its own mental structure, the mind could only find itself and therefore its self-identity.

First-person methods are interesting in the light of the fact that a little over a decade ago, the researchers who discovered the mirror neurons and their functions suggested in a *Science* publication (Rizzolatti et al. 1997) that the phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty had correctly described, in the 1940s, the way the brain functions simply based on his first-person analysis of how humans perceive — for example, a cube as a series of two-dimensional perspectives that reveal themselves when the object that we know as a cube is rotated. Rather than having a representation of a cube somewhere in the mind — six square sides, eight corners, 12 edges, all 90° angles, and so on — we know a cube through its feel, its changing aspects when rotated, which always reveals something while hiding other things about the object denoted by the word ‘cube’.¹ That is, in the cognitive neurosciences, there is acknowledgement of the value of having rigorous first-person accounts and explanations of experiences that can even serve as test beds for the most rigorous of sciences.

I started my research career as a physicist and then began to study cognition from a Piagetian and neo-Piagetian (short-term memory and information processing) point of view. But I have also been a teacher. What bugged me about all the research on cognition and cognitive development was that it never described the person’s view: Descriptions of teaching had very little to do with the way in which I experienced teaching and descriptions of learning had very little to do with the way in which I experience learning. Yet in our lives, we do not do what we do because some outside force or intrinsic factor determines us: We do what we do because of reasons that we can explain to others. I organize my life according to

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¹ The object actually is not a cube, as mathematicians understand it, because no real (material) object has precisely those properties that a geometer’s ‘cube’ as. Historically, the idealization emerged from continual refinements of real objects until, at some point in Greek history, the idealizations arose as projected limit objects (Husserl 1939).
those things that are available to me in and to my consciousness. Yet much re-
search on learning does not deal in consciousness: Theories, such as individual and
social constructivism, are about the rational construction of mental structures rather
than about consciousness. Because we can explain what we do to others, what I
think and do inherently can be shared. Any action is not singularly mine but de-
scriptively available to others. Thus, my research interests have included returning
reason to the person, especially in the case where research attributed non-reason or
misconceptions to him/her. For me, it therefore has become a challenge to study
how the world really looks to different people and what we can learn from it about
the underlying dimensions that allow them to have the different experiences that
they have. For a scientist, asking different people about their experiences – as does
phenomenography – constitutes a confounding of experience and the history of the
people. What I want is to generate different forms of living and lived experience
while everything else remains the same. Some time in my career as a researcher, I
began to realize that I could do such research: when I did it from a first-person
perspective. If I was to consciously bring about variations in the experiences of a
particular situation, I could study the conditions under which I would have one
versus another experience. Then I would find out more about what makes me have
this or that experience. That is, I began to be very little interested in merely sam-
pling descriptions of experiences. The analyses of such descriptions, precisely be-
cause they are descriptions, tell us more about language and less about the person
in flesh and blood to whom something happens and who renders these happenings
in some form of account.

For nearly two decades, I have used first-person methods as an integral part of
my research. Even though not all of this work was directly reported in journals –
many of which are very conservative and aligned with traditional psychology and
its perspective on method – it has helped me in developing understandings that
informed and supported my third-person methods that I tend to report. The purpose
of this book is to assist readers in developing first-person methods as rigorous
means that go far beyond what we can find in the (science, mathematics) educa-
tional literature under the name of ‘phenomenology’, which frequently is little
more than a name for doing ‘woe-me’ studies. In this book, I articulate clear dis-
 distinctions between investigating, for example, discourse about emotion and investi-
gating emotions themselves.

This book is designed to assist researchers in the field of education to develop
their competencies in first-person methods. I provide concrete examples, which the
readers are invited to do on their own, and provide descriptions, precepts, and pos-
sible findings that guide them in their inquiries. Over the course of my career, I
have developed many such examples, which are suited for the present purposes
because they can easily be conducted without equipment (e.g., the stereoscopic
glasses that some experiences require). Surrounding the inquiries, I provide com-
mentaries, which assist readers to become reflexively aware of what they are doing
and thereby come to bring into discourse the methods they have used. That is, I
assist readers to experience methods first hand and then to become reflexively
aware of the method as method.

I sometimes draw on French and German texts. In this case, all translations are
mine; where available to me, I have checked my translation against the copyrighted
one that has been published in English. Throughout this book, I also draw on definitions; I consistently use the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2011) for this purpose. I also draw on the etymology of terms, for which I use the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Le Grand Robert de la langue française* (Rey 2011), and the *Proto-Indo-European Etymological Dictionary* (DHNGU 2007).

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