

Some observations on the methodology of research in music education

ESTELLE R. JORGENSEN

Introduction

Research in music education has traditionally been modelled on the philosophy of logical positivism and its associated "scientific" methodologies commonly associated with the "hard" sciences. This may be demonstrated, for example, by an inspection of the research reported in the *Journal of Research in Music Education* or the dissertation abstracts in music education and related fields.

This espousal of positivism in music education research has led to the following state of affairs. First, there has been a proliferation of *ex post facto* micro-level studies which purport to be as purely experimental (in the tradition of the "hard" sciences) as possible, to the exclusion, very largely, of macro-level studies. Such macro-level studies offer the necessary function of evaluating traditional approaches at various points in time in the development of a discipline, of examining present positions, and of suggesting priorities and proposing various alternative routes for the future.

Second, there is wide disagreement among researchers as to appropriate definitions of various terms and methods of dealing with the empirical realities to which they refer. One case in point is the sheer volume of space devoted to an examination of problems of measurement and evaluation of various elements of musical experiences, aptitudes and abilities. Terms such as 'musicianship,' 'musical ability,' 'music appreciation' have been widely used and yet remain vague. The lack of clarity in conceptualization as well as the fundamental disagreement concerning various proposed definitions of concepts both contribute to and, in turn, result from the lack of a theoretical base in musical education. Further, this state of affairs leads to a proliferation of studies based upon varying conceptualizations of the variables in purview. Allowing that 'follow on' studies constitute numerous pyramids based on base line studies, then, presumably, if the conceptualizations in the emergent base line studies are questioned, the validity of the resultant 'follow on' studies must also be in question. It is clear, then, that this may lead to possible redundancy in music education research.

Third, studies have focussed on the biological/physiological and psychological integrative levels and have ignored the various other integrative levels of causal nexus, in particular, the social nexus. In view of the focus in music education generally upon group instruction,

it might be argued that the omission of studies which examine the operative social processes constitutes a major oversight. Positivistic approaches tend to ignore the contributions of intuition. As will be argued subsequently, intuition plays a corresponding and increasingly important role as one moves away from the bio-physiological and psychological nexus toward an examination of problems at the social nexus. In the past, therefore, the music education researcher has necessarily ignored a number of complex problems, viz., those inherent in the music symbol itself, e.g., those associated, say, with psychological (i.e., subjectively apprehended) time and space. Such factors have not been taken into account because, in the final analysis, they cannot be directly observed. To 'observe' them and/or take them into account violates the positivistic rule precluding 'subjective' data.

Recently there has begun to be some limited evidence of interest and concern for an alternative approach to research questions and issues (Pike, 1970). This new outlook has tended to gravitate toward an alternative focus presently gaining renewed acceptance in the broad realm of the social sciences under the general label of phenomenology.

Phenomenology, or, more precisely, "existential phenomenology," as it has been called by Tiryakian (1973), is currently being offered as a novel philosophy and, correspondingly, as a new approach to methodological questions with considerable promise in the social sciences.

Viewed from the standpoint of music education, then, these two alternative approaches to research and methodology invite a comparative exposition, analysis, and evaluation for, indeed, both orientations present themselves as complete and full-fledged "paradigms" or "world views." Accordingly, the major logical premises and/or assumptions upon which the two alternative points of view fundamentally rest will be reviewed. This analysis, as will become evident, shows that a number of constituent characteristics, a number of basic dimensions, are in the abstract common to both, while in concrete reality they will depict a radical divergence respecting them as between the two approaches.

The Two Positions

The positivist, on the one hand, tends to assume that all relevant causal forces are objective and external. He assumes that overt behaviour itself conveys and illustrates everything we need to know about man. There is no difference between what happens inside a person and what is evidenced in external behaviour. Exhibited in its most extreme manifestation in Pavlovian and Skinnerian techniques, we present a stimulus to a person and we monitor the resultant response in the individual's behaviour. This means that we may

evaluate the effect of certain manipulative treatments by examining only a person's overt behaviour.

The positivist typically makes the assumption of "external" causal *determinism*. A natural scientist presumably takes the "external" causes A, B, and C and relates them to given effects X, Y and Z under specified conditions. Certain hypotheses are characteristically and deductively formulated in advance of the investigation. These propose given relationships between the variables under observation. The researcher then assumes that having designated variable A as the independent variable and X as the dependent variable, the effects of A will be investigated only as they affect X. In this case *there are no additional unanticipated effects*. In assuming that those effects or consequences affecting X are the *only* effects of interest in the experiment, the investigator does not formally take account of numerous other possible variables present (D . . . N) which could also conceivably be affected, consequent upon the implementation of A.

The phenomenologist, on the other hand, is inclined to assume that all causal forces are subjective and *internal*. He argues that man is more than his observable overt behaviour, that his thoughts are held to be prior to his behaviour and may, in fact, be radically different from that behaviour. The phenomenologist, moreover, points to the difference between the "experiential knowledge" of eating an apple, for example, and "knowledge about" the eating of apples. Consciousness, to him, is not then "a given," but is seen rather as an important, albeit problematic, element of reality. He tends to hold that we cannot describe what we perceive "out there" without also and simultaneously describing our perceptions and consciousness of what is internal. Introspection thus becomes a key concern to the phenomenologist and his focus centres upon the subjective aspects of self rather than upon an examination of external or overt behaviour.

In phenomenology the existentially disciplined observer deliberately attempts to suspend judgement concerning the number and identity of variables and the structure of the relationships between them. Moreover, he attempts to maintain an open mind concerning possible changes in relationships between variables. As certain relationships or consequences impinge on his perception and his consciousness, he *inductively* formulates certain hypotheses concerning intuitively apprehended interrelationships. And these may turn out to be of quite variable temporal duration. This orientation necessitates the recognition of a multiplicity of possible consequences which are more or less simultaneous and which are of greater or lesser duration in a given situation (Zentner, 1973). It also necessitates the assumption of both anticipated and unanticipated effects being consequent upon the

presence of any given cause, and that there may be a veritable matrix of such causes and effects linked together and operating in a mutually inter-dependent and temporally simultaneous manner (MacIver, 1964: 190).

The assumption of rigid determinism accepted by the positivist is therefore rejected by the phenomenologist in favour of the principle of inter-subjective relativism. A basic theme in the Husserlian philosophy is that of the "relativization of knowledge." The form in which he takes up the problem of relativism is historical. If one argues that basic to the phenomenological attitude is not "the experience straightforwardly seized, but reflection on the experience" (Natanson, 1973: 54), then it follows that the phenomenologist is viewing the event in the context of a relative time and space as well as varying subjective predispositions.

The Issue

The question here is not a simple dichotomy between an additive approach to man in contra-distinction to a holistic or gestalt approach. There is a sense in which the parts of any thing in the physical realm are less than the sum. The question here revolves around the issue of whether in distinguishing the parts of any thing, the nature of those parts would remain constant. The phenomenologist must of logical necessity assume that the parts would alter so radically through time as to invalidate the positivist's zero-order time-based approach to research. Thus it is necessary for the phenomenologist to "intuit essences." In order to "intuit" the "essence" of a given situation, then, the investigator must become highly aware of a total situation in which an event is taking place in order to gain an adequate grasp of the phenomena. Presumably, then, no two investigators will necessarily intuit the same essence because of differing assumptive frames of reference. But various conventionalized logical and moral tests provide guidelines within which consensus in degree can be achieved.

The positivist makes the assumption that logic and reason are the only admissible forms of intellection. Intuition is only valuable, if at all, as it is refined and worked out by reason (Hitt, 1969: 655). The phenomenologist, on the other hand, engages in the process of *reduction*, whereby he 'brackets' the natural world, i.e., places it in abeyance or refrains "intentionally and systematically from all (*a priori*) judgements related directly or indirectly to the existence of the outer world" (Heap and Roth, 1973: 356). Intuition for him, moreover, becomes valuable of itself, inasmuch as it is logically necessary for the phenomenologist to "intuit essences," to creatively invest reality with meaning. He approaches the world, accordingly, with a sense of wonder and awe. Every day he attempts to rediscover and redefine the meaning of things he perceives out of the whole cloth, as it were.

The positivist makes the further assumption that it is possible to view man without bias and to examine him as a mere physical object would be examined and analyzed. The investigator, then, must adopt those procedures which minimize bias and which enable him to "objectively" study the effects of given causes. The phenomenologist, on the other hand, argues that it is never possible to objectively examine any phenomena. Indeed, the essence of an investigation must be subjective. Man comes up with unexpected actions. He generates ideas and values in his mind. He poses new questions which had previously not been investigated and posits new courses of action. He communicates in a variety of ways, both verbally and non-verbally. Or, using Langerian terminology, he uses discursive and non-discursive symbols.

This generation of communication necessitates, in the phenomenologist's view, an inference on the part of the other actors in the situation as well as on the part of the observer, as to the meaning of a given individual's action, or indeed, of a group action or response. An individual's action may be interpreted in a variety of ways, dependent upon the meaning each places upon a given communication. Tiryakian argues that we do not perceive social objects immediately but rather our perception is a "mediated" one, dependent on the meanings constituting the "assumptive frame of reference." This assumptive frame of reference may be different for a given individual at different times, or for various individuals at any given time.

Summary

It is apparent that logic and reason, on the one hand, and intuition, on the other, are valuable elements by which we can discover knowledge about man. Man evidences logic and reason as well as intuition. Researchers must then take account of *both* elements. To insist, as the phenomenologists do, that it is necessary constantly to rediscover the elements around one is to neglect the pattern and order which is clearly evident in the physical and social world. On the other hand, to neglect intuition, as the positivist must do at the extreme, is to substitute one limitation for another that is equally one-sided.

Certainly, in practise, a key consideration is the differential visibility of events. While the phenomenologist, on the basis of his intimate knowledge of events over an extended time period, perceives certain events and places given values upon them, the positivist, in the absence of certain confidential information not available to him, or in the context of a study with a short time-line, perceives the values of the same events differently, or may miss seeing them altogether. This intimate knowledge of the situation on the part of the phenomenologist constitutes a strong argument in favour of the *internal*

validity of phenomenology. This, despite the fact that it is not fully clear how, if at all, it is possible to measure and monitor events so as to *demonstrate* internal validity. It is therefore evident that matters bearing upon questions of validity and reliability are inherently problematic.

In conclusion, then, it is apparent that phenomenology can provide solutions to a variety of dilemmas presently facing the music education researcher; it provides a methodology by which hypotheses may be generated and concepts reformulated, and it enables the music education researcher to address a range of problems heretofore inaccessible through positivistic methodologies alone. Further, the music education researcher must be sensitive to both positivism and phenomenology as they each bear upon the kinds of questions which must be addressed.

The author, formerly teaching Music Education at Notre Dame University, Nelson, B.C., is now chairman of the Department of School Music at McGill.

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