

A ROLE FOR FIRST-PERSON SCIENCE IN RECREATION RESEARCH

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Abstract.—Most if not all recreation researchers are also recreationists. This paper explores the possibility that recreation researchers could use their own recreation experiences as a source of insight into the phenomena they are trying to understand. Such a strategy of “first-person science” is embraced by practitioners of phenomenological psychology, experiential psychology, action research, heuristic research, and others. Phenomenological and experiential methods could be used to develop what I call experiential theories in the field of recreation and leisure research. I illustrate these ideas using the example of an experiential theory of being on vacation.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience (Thoreau, 1989, p. 107).

Most if not all recreation researchers are also recreationists. Many of us who do recreation research enjoy participating in the same activities and visiting the same kinds of places that we study in our research. Our research may in fact have been motivated by how important these activities and places are to us personally. This raises an interesting question: What role does our own personal experience of the activities,

environments, and issues that we study play in our research?

A positivist scientist might say that a researcher should keep their personal experiences separate from their research to avoid bias and maintain the objectivity of the research. A scientist with a more postmodern viewpoint, however, might claim that a researcher’s experience of the area they are studying inevitably plays a role in the process of doing science, and that we should openly acknowledge the subjective aspect of our research. We could go even further than that, however. Rather than just acknowledging how our personal perspective influences our research, we could actually use our own experiences as a primary source of knowledge about the topics we research. We could call that “first-person research.”

2.0 FIRST-PERSON RESEARCH

Social science methods fall on a continuum from first-person research, where we look into our own first-hand experience, to second-person research, where we interact with and listen to other people to learn about their experiences, to third-person research, where we observe people, things, or systems without necessarily being concerned about what they are experiencing (Table 1). All of these are valid approaches to science, and all have a useful role to play in recreation research.

The idea of first-person research is not new. In fact, psychology began as a first-person science in the introspectionist laboratories of Wundt and Titchener. In 1890, William James, the founder of American psychology, asserted that introspective observation was the primary tool for doing psychological research: “*Introspective Observation is what we have to rely on first and foremost and always.* The word introspection need hardly be defined – it means, of course, the looking into our own minds and reporting what we there discover” (James, 1950, p. 185).

Table 1.—Summary of three approaches to recreation research

Research Approach	Basis of Knowledge	Examples
First-person	Observation and reflection upon the researcher's own first-hand experience.	Phenomenological description of the researcher's recreation experiences.
Second-person	Interaction with other people to learn about their experiences.	Interviews or surveys about people's recreation experiences.
Third-person	Observation of other people, things, or systems without concern for their experience.	Observation of recreation behavior. Measurement of physiological responses during recreation.

First-person methods fell out of favor in psychology with the advent of behaviorism, and most social science research now employs second-person methods such as surveys and interviews. There is, however, a renewed interest in first-person research methods in several areas today. Phenomenological psychology advocates an approach to science based upon first-person observation, reflection, and interpretation of experience (Shapiro, 1985). Experiential psychologists have developed first-person practices for constructing theories (Hendricks, 2004), and have issued a call for development of a publicly recognized, first-person science (Gendlin & Johnson, 2004). Heuristic research combines first- and second-person approaches, and regards the researcher's personal involvement with the topic of study as the essential core of a research project (Moustakas, 1990). The field of action research stresses the importance of blending first-, second-, and third-person research approaches to study the functioning of organizations and social systems (Reason & Torbert, 2001). In cultural anthropology and sociology, a method called autoethnography has emerged, in which investigators write themselves into their ethnographic accounts of a culture (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Interest in first-person methods, including phenomenology and introspection, has also recently arisen in the field of cognitive science (Varela & Shear, 1999).

3.0 FIRST-PERSON METHODS IN RECREATION AND LEISURE RESEARCH

A recent special issue of *Leisure Sciences* on creative analytical practice (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2007) features several articles that adopt first-person perspectives and methods. In fact, recreation and leisure research may be an ideal area in which to pursue the use of first-person methods. Recreation and leisure are highly experiential phenomena; it is hard to even define what they are without making some reference to the experience of the person who engages in them. Since recreation researchers often participate in the kinds of recreation that they study, there is a wealth of first-person experience to draw on in this field. As recreation researchers who are also recreationists, most of us presumably have had some of the kinds of experiences that recreation research tries to understand. A systematic examination of our own recreation experiences could be a useful addition to our repertoire of research methods.

The actual process of doing first-person research is not as straightforward as it might appear at first glance, however. There are important aspects of our experience that may escape our notice, remaining in the background or on the fringe of awareness. It may take a special kind of attention to bring these aspects into the foreground where we can observe them. Even then, it might still be very difficult to express them adequately in words. First-person methods and

practices developed in the fields of phenomenology and experiential psychology can be used to bring such implicit or ineffable aspects of experience into the foreground of awareness, to gain insight into their meaning, and to find ways of conveying them in language. These research methods could be especially valuable for exploring facets of recreation experience that often seem to evade our attempts at putting them into words, such as sense of place or spiritual values of nature.

4.0 A THEORY OF BEING ON VACATION

As an example of a first-person approach to research, I will now briefly recount an impromptu exercise in first-person research, in which I formulated a “theory of being on vacation.” This occurred about a year ago, while I was on a break from work. After a couple of days I realized that, even though I was away from the office and not working, I didn’t really feel like I was on vacation. I was preoccupied with a situation I had been dealing with at work, and was unable to relax and enjoy the time I had off. It was as if my whole experience was filled by this preoccupation and I was unable to separate myself from it. Although I could not yet put into words what would constitute an experience of “being on vacation” for me, I could feel distinctly that my preoccupation with work was preventing me from having that experience.

Using a technique from experiential psychology called focusing (Gendlin, 1981), I was finally able to detach myself a bit from this preoccupation, to get a felt sense of the whole situation, and to pose the question of what it would take for me to really feel like I was on vacation. The word that popped into my mind at that point was “freedom.” That word brought a sudden shift in my experience. The preoccupation with work seemed to shrink and withdraw, and the whole space of my experience opened up and took on a new quality of freedom, so that now I really did feel like I was on vacation.

When I reflected on what had happened, I was struck by the fact that the change in my experience

corresponded closely with the etymology of the word vacation. “Vacation” comes from the verb “vacate,” which means “to cease to occupy” or “to empty of occupants” (Morris, 1969, p.1412). What had just happened was that my experiential space had been vacated by the preoccupation that had been filling it. This interpretation of my experience became the starting point for some playful theorizing about what it means to be on vacation. In doing this, I drew on methods developed by Shapiro (1985) in phenomenological psychology and Gendlin & Hendricks (2004) in experiential psychology.

Shapiro’s method, which he calls “forming,” is a reflective practice for first sensing and then diagramming the structure of a phenomenon or experience. Gendlin and Hendricks’ method, which they call “Thinking at the Edge” (TAE), is a process for constructing theories that speak from an implicit, felt sense of an area of interest. Both methods involve attending to one’s bodily felt sense of a situation or subject and developing a structural description of that area of experience. Shapiro’s technique leads to schematic diagrams and metaphorical descriptions of the structure of an experienced phenomenon. Gendlin and Hendricks’ TAE practice culminates in a theoretical framework consisting of novel, logically interconnected conceptual terms.

The theory that I devised from my experience of being on vacation begins with the observation that my *self* at any moment is situated in an *experiential space*. This is not a physical space, but a felt sense of space – a kind of virtual space that embodies how the self is able to move and act in a given situation. That space is usually not empty; it can be occupied by things like concerns, activities, or tasks. I call these *occupiers*. An occupier has a sense of presence within my experiential space and lends a certain character to the space – it affects the way the space feels. An occupier has a *valence*, by which I mean that it has a particular way of inviting or pulling the self into *engaging* with it (Fig. 1). The felt quality of an occupier and its valence can be either positive or negative.

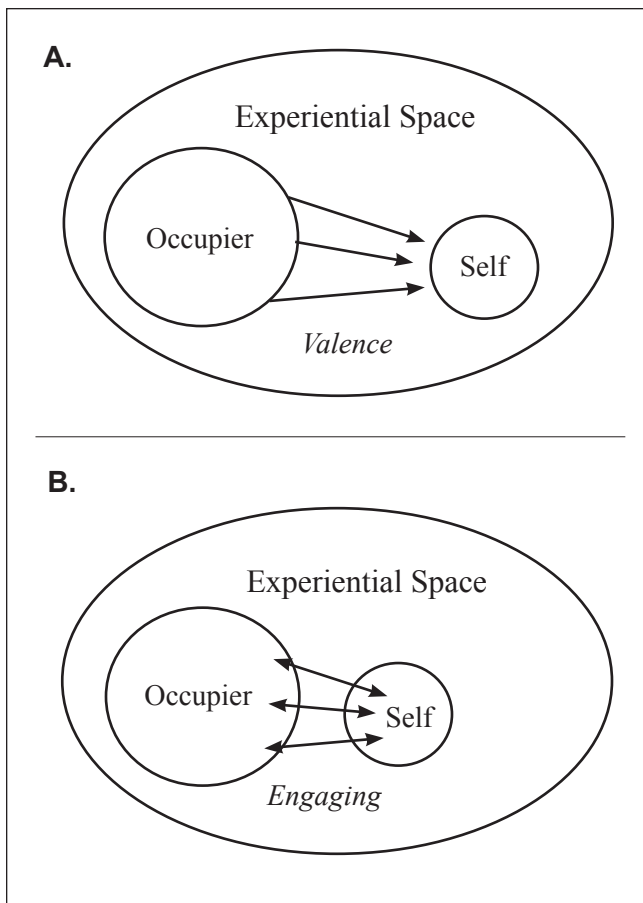


Figure 1.—The valence (A) of an occupier draws the self into engaging (B) with it.

Once the self takes up the invitation to engage with an occupier, it can do so from a relatively detached position, or it can be pulled into a more immersive form of engagement. As the self engages with the occupier, the occupier imparts a *form* or structure to experiential space, which affects how the self is able to move and act. An *external form* is what I call a form that compels or constrains the self to act in ways that are contrary to the self's intrinsic inclinations (Figure 2). When an occupier imposes an external form on the self, the experiential space feels constricted and cramped, filled with tension and resistance.

In the terms of this theory, I can say that *to be on vacation is to be in a vacated space—an experiential space that is free of occupiers that impose external forms on the self*. This is a space in which the self has freedom to move in its own way, a space that feels open, free, and relaxed.

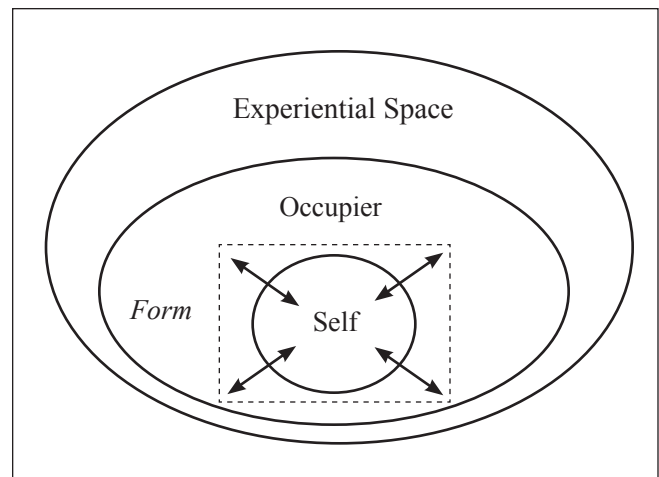


Figure 2.—An occupier imposes an external form on the self.

This example represents some rudimentary first steps toward a theory of the experience of being on vacation, based on my first-person awareness of that experience (or its absence). Many further developments and elaborations of these first theoretical steps are possible. For example, I could introduce additional terms and linkages to explore how the experience of being on vacation is related to the physical or social environment I am in and the activities I do there.

5.0 EXPERIENTIAL THEORIES

The theory sketched above is an example of what I call an “experiential theory.” This kind of theory differs from a conventional scientific theory in several important ways. The terms in an experiential theory – words like *occupier*, *valence*, and *form* – emerge from and refer directly to aspects of the researcher's first-person experience. They take their precise meaning from that experience, and do not necessarily carry the same meaning as they would in a more conventional context. To understand what these terms mean in the context of the theory, you have to try them on, so to speak, and sense how they function in relation to your own experience of whatever the theory is about.

An experiential theory does not just describe an experience; it also changes the experience in a particular way. After going through the process of formulating my theory of being on vacation, for example, I not only had a more precise conceptual

understanding of how that experience occurs for me, but I also had a more vivid and distinct first-hand awareness of the experience itself. The way in which an experiential theory evokes, resonates with, and carries forward the experience it is about is an important indicator of the validity of the theory.

In an experiential theory, the researcher's experience changes and unfolds in response to the theory; the theory itself may then need to be developed further to speak for new aspects of the experience that have emerged. An experiential theory is therefore never a completely finished product. There will always be "edges" where the theory and the experience can continue to unfold and carry each other forward (Gendlin & Hendricks, 2004). Thus, an experiential theory cannot be separated from the experience that it is about. If the terms of the theory lose their interactive contact with the actual experience, then the theory no longer functions as an experiential theory.

In addition to deepening our theoretical understanding of the nature of recreation and leisure experiences, experiential theories might also lend themselves to the development of practices to help individuals gain insights and make choices that enhance their enjoyment of recreation. My theory of being on vacation, simple as it is, proved to have such practical value for me. On several occasions it enabled me to see why and how I was missing out on the experience of being on vacation, and helped me to find my way back into that experience.

6.0 BEYOND THE FIRST PERSON

One criticism that can be leveled against a first-person approach to research is that it necessarily involves an N of 1, and is not generalizable beyond the person who developed it. A first-person researcher might seem to be unavoidably trapped within the narrowness of their own experience. But while it is true that an experiential theory starts out being about just one person's experience, it does not necessarily have to stay that way. Once a first-person theory has been formulated, it can be communicated, so that other people can apply it to their own experience and see

what happens. Where it does not fit, they can modify or extend it, or come up with an alternative theory. Through a process of mutual dialog and listening, experiential theories could be shared among a group of co-researchers, leading toward a jointly-held understanding that still embraces the uniqueness of each individual's experience. In this way, first-person research begins to merge into a second-person style of research, which transcends and broadens the perspective of the individual researcher.

There are many ways in which first-person approaches can interface with second-person and third-person research methods. An experiential theory might become the basis for a conventional scientific theory that could be tested by standard second- or third-person research methods. A conventional scientific theory could also be the starting point for an exercise in experiential theorizing, which might open up new directions for extending and elaborating the original theory. It is not a question of choosing one method over another as the "right" way to do recreation research. First-, second-, and third-person research methods can interact and inform each other in a variety of ways to create a richer and deeper understanding of recreation than any one approach could achieve by itself.

7.0 CITATIONS

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