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# **Phenomenology of Adult Education as an Interdisciplinary Field: Revisiting Sherman Stange**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper's theoretical analysis is to reintroduce and explore Stange's phenomenological analysis of adult education, and offers insight to how this field of study can expand its intellectual boundaries to become an interdisciplinary force of learning that permeates all other academic disciplines.

## **Introduction**

As a doctoral student twenty-five years ago I had the privilege to take several graduate classes in phenomenology from Sherman Stange, a philosophy professor who had a joint appointment with adult education. One lesson he gave that has most resonated with me throughout my career is that adult education in and of itself is not nor should be a separate discipline. Rather it is a field of study and the interdisciplinary glue that connects all disciplines. In other words adult education in all its richness can be found in sociology, biology, philosophy, mathematics, political science, architecture, as well as in the everydayness of our existence. This paper uses Stange's phenomenological framework to make the argument that adult education needs to be interdisciplinary in order to be relevant and sustainable.

The individualization of learning for personal gain has fueled adult education as a field of study for the last fifty years but it has come at a cost. One only has to go to an adult education conference or open one of its journals and they will quickly notice that our scholars and researchers tend to cite the field's existing body of knowledge; we have become experts on ourselves. This is also seen in many adult education graduate programs where most if not all of a student's coursework is in adult education. As a masters student thirty years ago I took a summer class with Morton Gordon, a visiting adult education professor from the University of Michigan, who was in the twilight of his career. When describing how he became a professor, he chuckled and said his doctorate was in economics and when hired his department was looking for someone who could bring new ideas into the field. In fact he went on to say that many if not most of the professors in his generation did not have adult education degrees. Today at most universities a candidate for a tenure-track faculty position will not be considered unless they have a degree in adult education. The result of this parochialism is that much of today's adult education research borders on sophisticated navel gazing.

## **Purpose of this Exploration**

In an effort to expand the horizon of adult education, the purpose of this paper's theoretical analysis is to reintroduce and explore Stange's phenomenological analysis of adult education to see if it can offer insight to how this field of study can expand its intellectual

boundaries to become an interdisciplinary force of learning that permeates all other academic disciplines.

### **Stanage's Phenomenological Lens of Adult Education**

Stanage's phenomenology lineage begins with Edmund Husserl (1960, 1962), who claimed that phenomenology is the foundation for all sciences and not a replacement for empiricism but an addition that borrows from non-empiricism. Husserl believed that though empirical analysis presents factual material more analysis is needed within the framework of nonempirical consciousness. Stanage differed with Husserl in that he did not see it as the foundation of but rather as a part of almost all research in any science. As a student of Husserl's, Spiegelberg (1960, 1964) challenged the narrowness and dogmatism of positivism and behaviorism, and argued that for empirical research to be genuine phenomenological analysis is needed. In other words, phenomenology can be used with quantitative, qualitative and historical research as it affects how one gathers and analyzes data. Stanage used Spiegelberg's concepts of "phenomenology of experience" when working with adult educators. In class Stanage often cited John Dewey and Paulo Freire as examples of phenomenologists who understood how experience leads to collective relevance that then leads to collective revitalization. Stanage (1987) argued this point by juxtaposing Plato and Dewey's views on knowing and knowledge. Both described knowledge as "perceptions within the everyday world", yet neither considered "perception to constitute the whole of knowledge" (p.28). The process of inquiry therefore cannot be limited to one type of research or one type of analysis. In fact this isolated analysis does not consider that all our judgments are predicated on a set of beliefs and values that we collect and reformulate throughout life.

Stanage further developed this argument, relying on Dewey, through his description of significance. "The criteria for judging significance, meaning and worth are practical, largely arbitrary, and changing; commonsense inquiry is 'qualitative' as distinct from mathematical inquiry; it is teleological (end-seeking or purposive), non specialized and presented in nontechnical language, although it deals normally with the most generalized kinds of problems" (p.25). Yet he pointed out that scientific inquiry, which includes empirical research, "grows out of the direct problems and methods of common sense" (p.25). Phenomenology then is not designed to develop theories or universal models. Instead it is used in *each* event to examine *each* premise and assumption in order to understand the essence of the event.

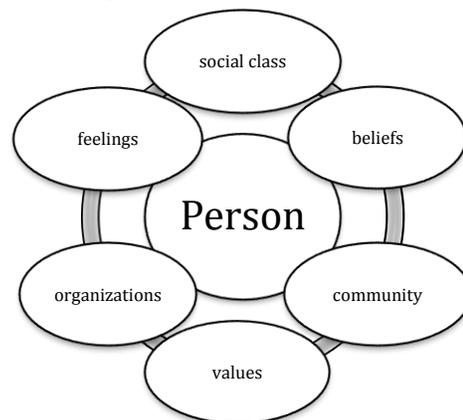
Where does, Stanage asked, adult education position itself within these science disciplines—social or physical? Is it a discipline or a subject matter? He concluded, "adult education is not a discipline" (p.34) but "does indeed have a clear and distinct subject-matter" (p. 35). This subject matter center's around, according to Stanage, *person* or *personhood* where "*person* is the full education of what persons are and have in common; it makes possible communication on the basis of intersubjectivity with the coexistence of persons" (p.37). *Person* within this construct is the essence of the collective person within the context of their existence, community, and social structure. Adult education, therefore "is the enactment of, and the systematic investigation of the phenomena constituting the adult education of *person*, specifically of persons' free and deliberate motives for acting" (p. 37). He argued that adult education is a human science in that a systematic investigation and analysis occurs of the *persons'* phenomena where facts are situated within beliefs and values. This analysis is not

limited to the human sciences but is essential to all sciences in that we cannot see facts and numbers separate from our beliefs, values, and presuppositions.

### Disciplinary Perspectives and Bodies of Literature

Stanage (1969, 1972, 1975) as a professor of philosophy published most of his writings in philosophy journals or publishers. But he is best known to adult educators for his tome *Adult Education and the Phenomenology of Research* (1987) in which he “presents a new way of conceptualizing some old phenomena toward the formulation of new perspectives” (p. 2). He raised four interrelated questions that are vital in the lives of adults which he argued should be the driving force behind adult education research: Who am I? What can I know? What ought I to do? And what may I hope? (p. 2). Stanage described *who am I* using the phenomenological ideas of feelings, experiencing and consciencing, which he stated is the human science of adult education. Habit, relevance, and metaphor embody the educated adult, and leads to the second question, *what can I know*. Importantly, this question does not ask what *do* I know or what can I *learn*, two questions with different implications for adult education. Everydayness, languages of relevance, and vital life are concepts Stanage used to capture the purposefulness of each person life in the third question, *what ought I to do*. Finally, these first three questions are the essential foundation behind the final question, *what may I hope?*

Though Stanage framed these questions using the concept of *person*, he does so through the contextualized, constructed individual that lives within a complex web of feelings, beliefs, and values, as well as within social class, organization, and community. *Person* is not an individual within a vacuum. Rather it is the embodiment of an individual within the world in which he or she lives. This implies that adult education research in order to be relevant and fresh needs to occur within these worldly contexts, and therefore is inherently interdisciplinary.



Stanage relied heavily on Donald Polkinghorne’s (1983) notion that Western epistemologist’s adherence to *apodictic* knowledge (that which is absolute with indubitable certainty) cannot stand up to the uncertainty in our daily lives, and that what we once thought was true is only a subjective or temporal truth. Polkinghorne questioned the usefulness of the debate on various research methodologies associated with human sciences and natural sciences, and the contrasts between positivism and anti-positivism. Whereas the positivist argues that “knowledge be confined to what has been experienced or can be experienced” and “science should restrict itself to discovering reliable correlations within experience” (p.19), the anti-positivists point out that the “human realm” of “meaningful experience” includes everything that

is “human-added” (p.21). Yet it is within this uncertainty that we find truth in which phenomenology seeks to find its essence, hence the objective with subjective are difficult to separate, as is certainty from opinions and beliefs. Neither Stange nor Polkinghorne were positivists or anti-positivists. Philosophically they fall within Charles Peirce’s (1958) school of pragmatism where function of thought is intended to solve problems where there is always an element of doubt in all research that seeks accuracy. For example, as I analyze large databases using logistic regression I realize that the outcome of this analysis is limited by what variables I include or do not include in the formula, and therefore does not free me from interpretation shaped by my personal experiences and beliefs. Hence, the adult learner as a phenomenon is more than mere statistical constructs as there is a murky comingling of results with life experiences where each finding is examined and described. Yet just as I cannot rely solely on numbers and facts, neither can I rely solely on my life experiences. Numbers and facts must be interpreted, in the same way as life experiences, as part of the whole and not as atomistic parts. Yet, deductions based on observed facts do not necessarily imply causation. For example, when analyzing a large database if the findings indicate that female African-Americans are more likely to earn a GED than other groups the data does not explain why. The deduction is only based on what is observed or measured. Kuiken and Miall (2001) in their argument for numerically aided phenomenology point out that quantitative research lacks the precision to capture the complexities of human experience by simplifying the event and qualitative fails to exact the degrees or size of the experience or different parts (categories) of the experience.

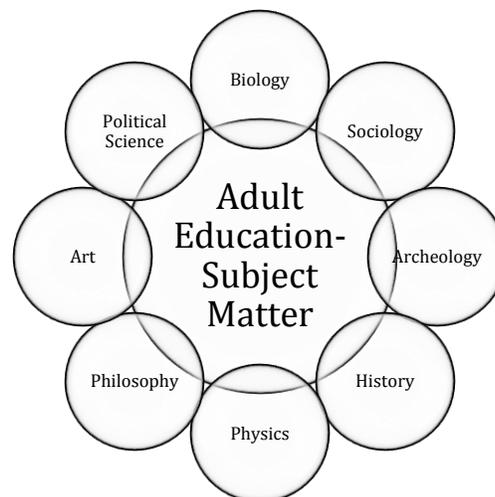
According to Polkinghorne (1983) empirical forms of knowledge are based on these five assumptions:

1. A hypothesis is formed from a set of assumptions
2. It is tested using a criterion set of procedures
3. It explains the hypothesis using a set of laws or statements
4. It verifies by fulfilling a certain conditions
5. It follows certain rules to formulate the definition of its basic concepts (p.202).

Yet this knowledge is theoretical and precludes various forms of understanding. This theoretical knowledge then requires the observer to be disengaged from the event “outside the everyday lifeworld” (p.202). This empirical world is quantitative and formalizes categories and numerical relationships, and is isolated from the phenomenological focus on structures and experiences. Therefore it often fails to capture the essence of reality. Mindful that a continuing challenge for all research, not just empirical research, is the essence of reality attainable through any methodology, Hirsch (as cited in Polkinghorne, p. 245) suggests using reasonableness as a benchmark for validity when using probability judgments. In other words the findings or conclusions may not match reality or universal truth exactly but they seem reasonable and probable. Such probability judgments can be used with both quantitative and qualitative methods, recognizing that determining which hypothesis or finding is most probable is interpretive or subjective. It is here that grounding the data in reality is problematic in both quantitative and qualitative methods, and is where phenomenology can be used as the bridge between method and reality. Ercikan and Roth (2006) building on Husserl eloquently argue that the polarizing dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative research, the objective and subjective, is not meaningful or productive for educational research.

## Implications for the Development of Adult Education Theory and Practice

Regarding this dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative research, Stanage (1987) developed the case that phenomenology “undercuts” this dichotomy of applied versus theoretical and quantitative versus qualitative in that phenomenology can be used with both research paradigms if the researcher is willing to set aside causality and focus only on the phenomena of the event. “There is no necessary reason, for example, why some mathematical models without encumbering metaphysical presuppositions of reductionisms and certain kinds of phenomenological investigations cannot be used in the *same research project* focusing on the same problem(s)” (p.278). He pointed out that this type of investigation is difficult, as it requires bracketing the researcher’s presuppositions and does not preclude the exploration going back to the “origination” of “beginnings” of the event “within the constituted structures of the *person*” (p. 278). He did step back from Husserl’s assertion that phenomenology is foundation to all sciences and argued that it is foundation to the subject matter of adult education. Central to his thesis is that when adult education of *person* is the subject matter then phenomenological investigation is an appropriate if not the most appropriate approach to research and analysis. If we consider that quantitative and qualitative findings are a form of education to both the researcher and those who consume this research, it is therefore easy to see how *person* is a part of all sciences in one form or another. In every science it may not be feasible to exactly capture reality but it is achievable to seek to see reasonable and probable accuracy. Ergo Stanage’s thesis that adult education is not a discipline but a subject matter of all disciplines requires the profession to reexamine its purpose and goals.



Stanage (1987) embraced the idea of *consciousing* as an intersubjective process where thinking is “for the purpose of achieving something in life, or thinking in order to perform any relevant action...it is literally knowing with or knowing-together” (p.233). Therefore, there is no such thing as thought or research that is discrete or “atomistic to itself, or apart from a continuity...” (p. 233). Building on this idea, the thesis in this paper is that in order for adult education to sustain itself it has no choice but to be interdisciplinary, to develop theories with our colleagues in other sciences where *knowing together* leads to *acting together* within a research-to-practice paradigm. This paper theorizes that the challenge that Stanage set forth for adult education is that we need to engage with others who reside in different networks and research

paradigms in order to achieve important goals. This engagement requires that we learn from and practice with scholars and practitioners from different disciplines. As Stanage often argued in class and personal conversations, adult education was never intended to be an island unto itself.

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