Lived Experience as an Emergency Responder

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The existential-phenomenological concept of the “lived-experience” was gripping to me when I was first introduced to it as a beginning graduate student at Saybrook University. Giorgi’s (1970) book “Psychology as a Human Science: A phenomenological approach” was my first introduction to the concept and study of human-persons in a non-reductive, non-decontextualized way. As a 21-year veteran of police, fire, and emergency medical services, I was seeking a method of research and a way to find more powerful psychological understanding about “my people” who share misfortune, tragedy, and crisis on a regular basis with the people who suffer them. How would an experimental approach ever reach into the world of one who shares life, death, and other existential issues with his or her peers and those of whom he or she has “sworn” to help? Moreover, without merely categorizing them, “who” are these people that arrive in the squad cars, large equipped trucks, and ambulances? Can a third-party objective perspective of scientific mainstream of the “social sciences” truly reach the lived-experiences of these people (Wender, 2008)? Moreover, do many clinicians have access to valid information about the emergency responders’ life-world sufficiently to empathetically connect in the professional relationship? I believe that existential psychology has much to offer the emergency responder in understanding his or her life-world and self-concept within the inherent gestalt of these vocations. Furthermore, I believe that the descriptive phenomenological psychological method of research can help us unlock many mysteries of the lived-experience of police, fire, and emergency medical professionals and volunteers (Giorgi, 2009; 1983). These mysteries are largely unknown to the civilian world (which is largely informed by sensationalized media) and even not very well understood among the ranks of emergency responders themselves.

Work. Understanding how they came to think this (again, the plot) still is not going to help matters. I tried doing this with all sorts of delusions since I was 8-years-old and I never got any where except frustrated. Pinpointing and exploring the loneliness behind the delusion of being the only one left opens new doors, and gets you bonus points for understanding what others do not.

I was recently asked to read a document of definitions of delusions at practicum and only ONE stated something similar to this. Most main definitions (including that of our trusty old friend the DSM) talk about delusions as a flawed belief caused by a misinterpreted or deluded reality. Okay, well, that is fine on the plot level, but I choose to not stay on this level because I do not like it. The theme level helps me interpret the experience of the delusions instead of pit their reality versus my reality (because I assure you that mine will not stand up in their world as mine would not stand up in yours). We each construct our own world and, therefore, all our realities are different and incomparable. What is real to me is not real to you, but themes transcend the differences of realities.

This is the reason that movies and books become so popular. The theme reaches out and touches us and we begin to relate to it. Being able to relate to individuals, delusional or not, does not just mean listening to the stories they tell. It means digging deeper and having a greater understanding of what creates that person’s unique identity.