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## The Ethical Phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas: Drawing on Phenomenology to Explore the Central Features of Family Life

*Phenomenology is introduced as a source of new insights into how family relations are lived and experienced today. The ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas holds particular promise in this endeavor, as his work highlights the ways in which family life emerges out of an ethical relationality that is operative in virtually all family relations. Through learning to see how ethical relationality informs the active, ongoing responsiveness of the ways of being of family members, forms of violence in family life, and the relation between family and other social organizations, interests, and institutions, ethical phenomenology can assist interpretive family research in making manifest dimensions of family life that were previously overlooked and unappreciated, and it can contribute to the development of theoretical innovations in understanding family.*

This special issue on innovative theories in the interpretive tradition promises to bring a breath of fresh insights into qualitative family research, insights that can invigorate the field and lead to expanding our vision and understanding of family and its diverse changes in the 21st century. In what follows, I examine some recent

contributions to phenomenology as a potential source of new insights into how family relations are lived and experienced today. Although phenomenology has had a rather prominent place in family theory in the past, being placed as one of the four major theories in the field in one theoretical compilation in the 1970s (Burr, 1979), its contribution to familial research has been quite limited and undeveloped over the years. Additionally, phenomenology itself is a field of tremendous diversity and innovation today, innovations with which family scholars may be unfamiliar and which can provide a rich pool of ideas and insights for a wide variety of interpretive research on family and family-related topics (Glendinning, 2007).

In what follows, I first introduce family scholars to the distinctive contribution of phenomenology to a general interpretive framework for understanding family and social relations. In doing so, I proceed without attempting to justify a phenomenological approach to more positivistic readers or situate phenomenology in terms of the “Great Divide,” as Crotty (1998) framed it, between positivistic and interpretive epistemologies. Instead, I focus the limited space available here on what phenomenology can offer the interpretive tradition of family scholarship and how recent innovations offer new insights and perspectives on family phenomena. The innovative dimension is explored through the work of Emmanuel Levinas, a prominent French philosopher whose work both is faithful to phenomenology and offers a new

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departure for phenomenological work. This new departure aims to show how our relation to the Other, or another person, is grounded in an ethical relationality that comes to constitute us, our relations, and how we interact with others.

In the final section, I briefly develop a few ways to realize some of the potential payoffs that a Levinasian phenomenology offers interpretive family research. As with all phenomenology, a Levinasian approach seeks to make manifest central features of human experience, features that although they may have previously been “hidden” from view are capable of being “seen” in the empirical or lived reality of the phenomenon under study. Learning to see how ethical relationality informs virtually all familial relations can assist interpretive researchers in developing profoundly more empirical and more complete understandings of what is really going on in familial relations. Additionally, the ethical phenomenology advanced here, as with other forms of rigorous interpretive and case study research (Flyvbjerg, 2006), offers a most significant opportunity for advancing theoretical innovation and development. For example, ethical relationality shows the need to transform an understanding of family life grounded in “nouns” to an understanding grounded in “verbs” and to see how negative or even violent interactions are informed by an ethical call of responsibility for the other person.

#### PHENOMENOLOGY AND INTERPRETIVE SOCIAL SCIENCE

Phenomenology has figured prominently within the tradition of interpretive social science since the early 20th century and has been widely influential in the development of social theory (Knapp, 2003). Beginning as a movement in philosophy in the early 1900s, phenomenology has established itself as a major contributor to contemporary continental philosophy (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2009; Glendinning, 2008). From its beginnings, phenomenological philosophy found its way into interpretive social science (Gross, 2007; Vaitkus, 2000), principally in the work of Alfred Schutz (1967, 1970) and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (Berger & Luckmann, 1967); ethnomethodology (Eberle, 2012; Ruggerone, 2013); and phenomenological psychology (Spinelli, 2005; Wertz, 2009). This influence extended to both theoretical and empirical research programs that contributed to

mainstream disciplines as well as the formation of specialty journals that frequently publish phenomenological studies: *Human Studies*, *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research*, and *Philosophy & Social Criticism*. Phenomenology has also developed into a common approach to qualitative research in a wide variety of fields, such as psychology (Giorgi, 2009; Van Manen, 1990; Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson, & McSpadden, 2011), the health sciences (Crotty, 1996; Madjar & Walton, 2005), and the social sciences (Moustakas, 1994; Porter & Cohen, 2013; Schwandt, 2000; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This is not surprising because there is a natural fit between qualitative research and phenomenological investigations.

Phenomenology is perhaps best understood as an approach to doing social science that asks fundamental questions about what phenomena are and attempts to answer those questions through careful reflective analysis of human experience. As the study of phenomena, or the study of that which shows itself, phenomenology is a profoundly nontheoretical approach to social science. Rather than begin with concepts, the construction of variables, and the goal of causal explanation, phenomenology proposes to take up the ontological question, “What is X (the phenomenon we seek to study)?”, most directly: through examination of how it is experienced. Phenomenology is therefore to be understood more as an investigative approach that seeks to first describe rather than explain human phenomena. In many ways, phenomenology is the most radically empirical of all the approaches to social science: It seeks to begin with empirical experience and is highly concerned with evidence or that which is evident to the knower or human actor. Causal explanations, such as those found in most quantitative studies of social phenomena, are often not sufficiently empirical for phenomenology. For example, if we were to point to a ladybug and ask, “What do you see?” we would not answer: “I see red and black stimuli hitting my retina.” Causal explanations of experience may prove immensely valuable, but they also move too quickly to use concepts, variables, and theories that go behind the phenomenon and give an account for it “in terms other than how it appears” (Ihde, 2012, p. 34).

A focus on careful delineation of phenomena through an examination of the experience of phenomena has brought social science many

important insights and increased our understanding of a wide diversity of concerns. Recent work in phenomenology has taken up questions such as “What is class?” (Charlesworth, 2000), “What is trauma?” (Wertz et al., 2011), “What is a gift?” (Ashworth, 2013), “What is pain and illness?” (Madjar & Walton, 2005), and so forth. To be sure, phenomenological research remains a minority approach in the social sciences and has had very limited influence in qualitative research in family studies. Nevertheless, recent work in phenomenology has focused on concerns of great interest to family scholars, taking up questions such as “What is intimacy?” (Beyers & Reber, 1998; Halling, 2009), “What is work–family role conflict?” (Hein & Austin, 2001), “What is family violence?” (Denzin, 1984), “What is being ‘unmarried’?” (Sharp & Ganong, 2007, 2011), and “What is pregnancy?” (Levesque-Lopman, 1988; Young, 1985).

Despite the continuing presence of what is often labeled “phenomenological qualitative research,” it is important to emphasize that phenomenology is not an approach that seeks to primarily record or report what people experience (something more akin to what symbolic interactionist research might seek to do) or develop some sort of conceptual model of self-reported experience (as grounded theory research might propose) (Crotty, 1998; Wertz et al., 2011). Phenomenologists acknowledge that such approaches may be valuable in themselves insofar as they facilitate developing portraits of how the subject (a particular individual or group) experiences something. Such portraits may actually provide helpful starting points for phenomenological analysis, but such research falls short of a fully phenomenological approach. Ultimately, the full value of a phenomenological approach in family studies can be achieved only if the distinctiveness of phenomenology is fully appreciated.

The distinctiveness of a phenomenological approach is grounded in the practice of *epoché*, the “bracketing” or setting aside of commonly given ways of experiencing things in order to engage the “things themselves.” Phenomenology looks for “essences,” or that which is essential to an experience, that which enables an experience to be the experience the subject has (Cerbone, 2006). The language of “essence” is counter to phenomenology if it invokes images of an atemporal metaphysical ontology that

grounds the phenomenon in something outside, underneath, or beyond our experience of it. And yet phenomenology finds itself speaking of the “essence” or “identity” of a phenomenon precisely because our experience invokes it. For example, Sokolowski (2000) described how we experience a cube in always partial ways, that is, from a perspective where one side appears to us with the other sides being “absent.” And yet in our experience of the cube, despite the fact that other sides, aspects, and profiles of the cube are hidden and our perception is partial, we perceive the sides, aspects, and profiles that we do as part of an “identity” or the cube as a whole. Our experience of a cube emerges as an experience of something that transcends its appearance. The identity of a cube manifests itself as always more than its appearance, and yet we only have access to it as a “cube” through its “partial” appearance to us. Exploring just how an actor’s account of his or her experience is a partial perspective on a phenomenon that is nevertheless also given as an “identity” or as having an “essence” is a crucial feature of phenomenological analysis.

Understood in these terms, phenomenology contributes to a scientific study of social phenomena most concretely through taking up in highly reflective ways basic questions concerning the ontological status of social phenomena. Its primary value is in helping scholars work through the fundamental and often startlingly difficult question of “What is this phenomenon (X)?” Doing phenomenology well, therefore, is not a straightforward or procedural task of reporting the subject’s experience but requires the development of highly reflexive skills. Indeed, “reflexivity” may be described as the primary method at the heart of phenomenology (Ihde, 2012).

Given this framework, phenomenology often needs to develop a “second language” to accomplish the tasks that it sets for itself. Phenomenology understands that phenomena are disclosed as the “things-that-they-are” through language. Language does not create the ontological existence of things in the world, but it does create the possibility of experiencing things in the world as the things we experience. Yet language will “disclose (some of) the qualities (while simultaneously veiling others), and in so doing open horizons of possibility in dealing with them” (Aho, 1998, p. 31). Because of this, phenomenologists often try to develop new words that

will enable new possibilities, disclosing new possible ways of understanding and relating to the world. From a phenomenological perspective, new words enable new aspects of phenomena to be seen, experienced, and understood, aspects that may have been previously hidden from our view.

For example, one of the central “findings” of phenomenological research has been the claim that a primary structure of experience is how our consciousness is characterized by intentionality. *Intentionality* refers to how consciousness is always consciousness of something and is always directed toward something beyond itself. Consciousness is in-tending, bringing or allowing something in, more than it is an ex-tending or reaching out from itself. Building on this analysis, phenomenologists describe human experience as consisting in two ultimately inseparable dimensions: the *noemic* (that which is experienced or the “what” of experience) and the *noetic* (the way something is experienced or the “how” of experience). These dimensions are understood as inseparable not because phenomenology ultimately seeks to overcome the philosophical problems associated with a mind–world or subject–object split but precisely because close examination of our experience reveals such a split to be unsustainable.

Drawing on an analysis of the intentionality of human experience, we can understand more fully why phenomenology is not fully adequate as simply a practice that seeks to secure an accurate depiction or representation of how a particular subject experienced something. As Ihde (2012) pointed out, “all noematic possibilities are correlated with noetic acts” (p. 74). In what phenomenologists often refer to as the “natural attitude,” the attitude common to everyday life, we simply assume that our experience is a sufficient description or understanding of the world. In contrast, phenomenology seeks to adopt a “phenomenological attitude” in which through reflexive examination of experience, or altering of the noetic acts, more noematic possibilities can be brought to our awareness. This effort of engaging in “the phenomenological epoché,” or the bracketing of everyday understandings, “does not destroy the truths proper to the natural attitude but wants only to clarify their sense” (Levinas, 1995, p. 147). Through expanding the noetic stance of the researcher toward phenomena, phenomenology increases the possibilities

for knowing phenomena themselves, or put differently, it enables the phenomenon itself to have a greater voice in its construction. Our understanding of the phenomenon in question, “what is X?”, expands as we probe through experience into those features of the phenomenon that are “there” but were not revealed clearly through the depiction of the subject’s own experience. As such, phenomenology allows for a more “objective” and critical practice in that it enables the researcher to call into question the common cultural understandings operative in the lifeworlds of human actors (Crotty, 1998). By showing an expansive understanding of phenomena, the sedimented cultural understandings are exposed as one possible way of being in the world among other possible ways of being and experiencing the world. Loosening the hold of the common culture also enables the researcher a more expansive vantage point from which to know how to direct further research into phenomena.

The potential of phenomenology to add to interpretive research has not been fully explored or developed despite the fact that so much of family phenomena would benefit from phenomenological analysis. Although there are many possible ways phenomenology could be brought to bear on family research, one of the most promising developments in recent decades has been the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who expanded phenomenological concerns to focus on how the ethical dimensions of human relations may have been hidden or passed over in previous phenomenological work.

#### EMMANUEL LEVINAS: EXPANDING PHENOMENOLOGICAL CONCERNS

Emmanuel Levinas, a Lithuanian-born Jew who lost his family to the Holocaust, made significant contributions to phenomenology from the 1930s through the 1990s (Levinas, 1969, 1981, 1987, 1996). The significance of Levinas lies in his ability to rethink core phenomenological understandings and to introduce new themes based on his phenomenological analysis, themes that develop around quintessential Levinasian concepts such as the Other, the face of the Other, the said and the saying, totality and infinity, and ethical responsibility. These themes have contributed significantly to the work of theorists such as Jacques Derrida (Plant, 2003), Jean-Luc Marion (2013), Zygmunt Bauman (1989, 1993,

1999), and others. His work seems to just be gaining further attention and significance as it finds its influence in numerous fields, such as law (Manderson, 2006), communications and technology (Miller, 2012; Pinchevski, 2005), health (Clifton-Soderstrom, 2003; Lindh, Severinsson, & Berg, 2007), psychology (Gantt & Williams, 2002; Goodman, 2012; Kunz, 1998; Williams & Gantt, 1998), sociology (Raffel, 2002; Smart, 1996, 2001), therapy (Larner, 2011), education (Child, Williams, Birch, & Boody, 1995; Standish, 2001), and feminism (Chanter, 2001; Perpich, 2010).

Entry into the written work of Levinas is difficult even by phenomenological standards. His writings are notoriously difficult to read as he finds he must create all kinds of new language to bring to light those aspects of human experience that were hitherto overlooked in previous phenomenological analysis. In addition, Levinas often presents the results of his analysis rather than a depiction of how he examined human experience to come to his conclusions. In his published books and articles he is primarily interested in showing the phenomenological conclusions of his work and how they matter for rethinking largely philosophical concerns. Nevertheless, despite the difficulty of showing the depth and sophistication of Levinas, it is possible to delineate some key findings or results from his work that can prove highly promising for family scholars.

### *Encountering the Other*

One way of seeing the significance of Levinas might be to appreciate how he shows the deficiencies of phenomenological concepts we have already discussed. In essence, Levinas provided us with a phenomenology of our encounter with a particular phenomenon: the Other or another person. We can think of his basic question as “What (Who) is another person?” In contrast with a phenomenology secure in its understanding of experience and consciousness in terms of intentionality, noema and noesis, Levinas’s analysis of our experience of another person throws all of these conclusions into doubt. For Levinas (1969), “one of the principal theses of [his] work is that the noesis-noema structure is not the primordial structure of intentionality” (p. 294). If consciousness is consciousness of *something*, if consciousness is taken to have a noema or whatness to it, then how are we to

understand our experience of another person when we find, as Levinas did, that the other person (or more accurately, the “face” of the Other) is not a “thing” at all and cannot be characterized in terms of a “noema”? Put briefly and succinctly, Levinas wanted to show us that the real, living being I encounter before me is not a thing but a person, a *someone* rather than a *something*, a “who” rather than a “what.” And Levinas sought to show that this difference makes all the difference in the world for understanding properly our experience of others and related human and social phenomena.

Levinas drew all of his phenomenological analysis together to name the other person: the Other. The capitalized *O* in the Other refers to the personal Other, the one and only living, particular being whom I encounter before me. But why name the other person “Other”? Because Levinas was trying to describe an identity or “essence” of our experience of the other person. What is it about the other person that makes my experience of him or her, as the experience that it is, possible? Levinas found that an essential feature of our experience of another as another person (the real, particular, singular, living being) is their alterity. He explained, however, that their alterity cannot be found simply in the fact that they have a different attribute or property than I do. Levinas agreed that we can indeed experience another person in terms of intentionality, in terms of his or her having a noema: appearance, placement in the room, social characteristics, what the person might mean in the cultural context and how we might understand the person to be a particular kind of person. As Alfred Schutz (1967, 1970) emphasized, we regularly encounter our world, including other people in it, and draw upon “typifications” to “know” them and then act accordingly in relation to them. Levinas agreed that this is a vital and necessary aspect of our experience of another person, but it is not all that is going on: “Before any attribute, you are other than I, other otherwise, absolutely other! And it is this alterity, different from the one which is linked to attributes, that is your alterity. This alterity is not justifiable logically; it is logically indiscernible.” Finally, seeking to point us to see alterity in a new way, he concluded, “You are you and I am I. This cannot be reduced to the fact that we differ because of our bodies or because of the color of our hair, or by the place we occupy in space” (Levinas & Robbins, 2001, p. 49).

### *The Face of the Other*

How can we understand the alterity of the Other? Through phenomenological analysis Levinas sought to bring to light dimensions of our experience that fall outside of a depiction of experience in terms of consciousness and intentionality. Levinas often referred to this aspect of our experience of another person as the “face of the Other,” and with this language he has tried to show us that the otherness of the Other to which he was referring is experienced differently, if at all. Levinas explained, “the face is signification [but] signification without context. I mean that the Other, in the rectitude of his face, is not a character within a context.” Meaning is usually to be found through the relation of one thing to another, but “here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself. You are you” (Levinas & Nemo, 1985, p. 86). Again, Levinas put it, “you are you.” The Other is someone I do indeed experience but not as a “what” but rather as a “who.” Who I experience is someone who is not reducible to any typifications, characterizations, namings, meanings, or qualities that I might (justifiably and practically) use to know and experience the Other. I do indeed experience my mother as my “mother” but she is also *someone* who *faces* me, someone who exceeds any naming or characterization I or my culture might provide: You are you!

### *Ethical Relationality*

There is an “essence” to our experience of the Other, their otherness, their unique and utterly irreplaceable individuality as someone, as the “you” that faces us and somehow makes them who they are beyond any characterizations or meanings we might give to them. Yet if the face of the Other is not reducible to the order of “knowledge” (as typification), then just how does the face of the Other manifest itself in our experience? Here we arrive at a central feature of the innovative capacity of a more Levinasian phenomenology: the ethical. The face of the Other is made manifest in the ethical relationality of the relation to the Other. Just as the otherness of the Other transcends the social and cultural framings of human interaction, so also does this encounter with the Other transcend our own self-understanding and subjectivity. For Levinas, to experience another person as an Other is to also experience oneself as called

ethically to be-for-the-Other. Our experience of the Other transforms our very being such that we find our subjectivity characterized by responsibility: We are made able to respond and ethically called upon to respond.

We would underestimate the claims Levinas was making if we were to think of him as trying to describe how a subject sometimes experiences another person. One could imagine his claims as saying, “I once recognized someone as this real person for whom I then felt like I should do something for them.” The problem is that this subjectifies his claims and misunderstands his phenomenological project as simply describing what some people have experienced. Instead, Levinas claimed to have unveiled “the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity.” In this way, responsibility for the Other is understood not as “a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another” (Levinas & Nemo, 1985, pp. 95–96).

In other words, Levinas tried to show how the Other faces the I or the self in such a way as to constitute the self fundamentally. Again, this is to be read phenomenologically and not as some sort of metaphysical or theoretical foundation. To experience the Other is to be an I unlike the I who relates to the world through knowing and acting upon that world. I do not discover the otherness of the Other but I receive her as a gift, indeed, as a gift that summons me to respond. The presence or face of the Other is received as a command for the self to be responsible. This command from the Other emerges out of both the inherent worthiness of the Other and the inherent weakness and vulnerability of the Other. The command of the Other is at once both “don’t harm me” and “provide for my needs.” We are commanded to be responsible and not caused. The phenomenological description shows our passivity to be ethical, not deterministic. If we were caused to be responsible, then our relation to the Other would be a nonethical relation. Instead, we are summoned in such a way that the face of the Other comes to constitute us and constitute our freedom to be (Kunz, 1998).

For Levinas, the otherness of the Other calls forth an ethical responsibility for the Other, a responsibility that arrives as it were from a “height” or from a source that is above us. In this way, Levinas argued, any autonomy that we

might claim for ourselves arrives, as it were, too late to establish itself independent of our relation to the Other. For Levinas, receiving the face of the Other “redefines subjectivity as this heteronomous responsibility in contrast to autonomous freedom.” And this responsibility is so constitutive of who we are that Levinas insisted that “even if I deny my primordial responsibility to the Other by affirming my own freedom as primary, I can never escape the fact that the Other has demanded a response from me before I affirm my freedom not to respond to his demand” (Kearney, 1984, p. 63).

To receive the Other is to constitute an “identity” or “essence” to the “I” that finds itself already moved by the Other, to be made “able” to “respond” or responsible for the Other. As such, I am no longer a knower detached in some way from another, capable of rendering them into some sort of social order, to “appraise” them as cognitive-behavioral theorists might have it, but instead I find myself already implicated in a relation to *someone* who faces me and calls out to me to be for them. My naming, my taking an Other up in the world in terms of some sort of conceptual field, is not indifferent, not an amoral or merely social practice, but is rather a responsiveness generated in a primordial ethical relation (Knapp & Lott, 2010). Hence, Levinas claimed that we can find responsibility for the Other in pervasive ways throughout human experience, ways that will often remain undeveloped in the consciousness of the human actors involved but nevertheless are precisely “there” or waiting phenomenological analysis, exposure, and then being capable of being “seen” or “fulfilled.”

#### *The Said and the Saying*

We can perhaps see this more clearly when Levinas examined the nature of human communication in terms of the dimensions of what he referred to as the “said” (the whatness of a communication) and the “saying” (the ethical relationality of the communication). For Levinas, “The *saying* is the fact that before the face I do not simply remain there contemplating it, I respond to it. The saying is a way of greeting the Other, but to greet the Other is already to answer for him” (Levinas & Nemo, 1985, p. 88). In our encounter with another we experience ourselves called on to respond in some way, often through forms of speech. But every form

of speech, every “said,” emerges already in the context of an already received “responsibility” or “saying.” There is, in other words, an almost metarelatational framework for human interaction that is grounded in the ethicality of our relation to the Other *as Other*, an ethicality that calls on us to respond. Our response, our “saying,” may take up any number of “sais” but, from a Levinasian phenomenological vantage point, each potential behavioral dimension of our responsiveness to the Other can be seen to emerge out of this more fundamental ethical relationality.

Levinas sought to focus our attention on dimensions of human relations that might otherwise be overlooked without careful phenomenological analysis. He asked:

Should language be thought uniquely as the communication of an idea or as information, and not also—and perhaps above all—as the fact of encountering the other as other, that is to say, already as response to him? Is not the first word *bonjour*? As simple as *bonjour*. *Bonjour* as benediction and my being available for the other man. It doesn’t mean: what a beautiful day. Rather: I wish you peace, I wish you a good day, expression of one who worries for the other. It underlies all the rest of communication, underlies all discourse. (Levinas & Robbins, 2001, p. 47)

Levinas was not trying to convince us that everyone greets one another with a literally said “Bonjour” as they encounter one another. Instead, he was trying to show us how an ethical relationality undergirds the encounter with the Other and brings forth out of us some kind of communication, discourse, behavior: a response. Our response to the Other does not emerge out of our own independent subjectivity, nor is it completely culturally and socially constructed; instead, it emerges out of a fundamental ethical relationality to the Other. For many, Levinas has succeeded in focusing the phenomenological attitude upon those often hidden dimensions of human relationships, dimensions that result in very significant implications for our understanding of the ontological character of social phenomena (Bauman, 1993; Goodman, 2012; Kunz, 1998; Morgan, 2007).

As I develop here, another way of seeing this dimension is to see that Levinas seeks to transform our thinking about ourselves, our relations to others, and the world around us from thinking in terms of “nouns” to thinking in terms of “verbs.” Despite its commonality and even

necessity, our primary modality of being is not one of knowing and acting in relation to “things” or nouns. Our ethical relationality enables our *being* in relation to others to be an always already engaged *way of being* that one can understand as primarily active and fully and temporally informed. Just as there is a “saying” to every “said,” so there is an ethical responsibility as an ongoing responsiveness to the Other in all human relations.

### *Totality and Infinity*

Levinas highlighted how the encounter with the Other is unlike any other encounter we have in our world. With the objects or things we encounter in the world, we take them up, we typify them, we relate to them after the order of knowledge and intentionality as described above. We may then ignore them or respond to them depending on the practical, social, and contextual features of our engagement in the world. Such a description of our relation to the world places us in a relatively autonomous relation to the world around us, a relation that privileges some sort of distance from things as well as some sort of control over things in our world. We basically could be seen as engaging the world in a very ego-centered way, a way in which we render the world in terms determined by and related to our own being. In Levinasian terms, we “totalize” the world by seeking to comprehend it, control it, and consume it or put it to our use (Kunz, 1998; Levinas, 1969). For Levinas, this is precisely what we might expect: We seek to make our world familiar to us and we seek to construct the world in such a way that we can be secure within it (Minister, 2006). We engage our world both materially in the sense of providing for our physical needs but also psychologically and socially in the sense of providing for our identities and so forth. In many ways, Levinas wanted to affirm the insights of Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Pierre Bourdieu, and countless others who aim to show us just how we proceed to construct a social world within which we can live out our lives.

Nevertheless, Levinas thought that careful phenomenological analysis also shows that these phenomenological accounts are insufficient when we look carefully at our encounter with the Other. The Other for Levinas is characterized by “Infinity” or that which escapes

“totality.” The Other is always someone more than my knowledge, someone more than what I name, what I enjoy, what I evaluate, what I respond to. This infinity of the Other is not something I bestow upon them, nor is it some kind of inherent Kantian dignity that rationality bestows (Chalier, 2002). Instead, Levinas highlighted that the infinity of the Other and the responsibility for the Other comes without rational justification, without any ego-centered judgments as to the Other’s worthiness or ego-centered determinations of moral obligations the Other deserves. Their mere presence as the Other, the someone who they are, breaks through my efforts at totalizing, knowing, and constituting my world, and recenters it: Now, instead of an ego-centered world, I live in an Other-centered world. This transformation arrives as it were, outside the order of intentionality. It arrives without perception in that it arrives immediately or as the im(not)-mediated experience of the Other or an experience that is not mediated through some sort of rational processes of signs, symbols, or other social constructed resources nor through an interpretive lens derived from the self (Knapp, 2000).

In this way, Levinas offered a phenomenology that allows us to see how our relation to the Other is one of “proximity” rather than possession. The Saying, a responsiveness to the Infinity of the Other, expresses “the proximity of the one to the other” (Levinas, 1981, p. 5) as a relation that exceeds my possession: I cannot be proximate to myself therefore proximity highlights how the Other is other than my possession. With this language Levinas sought to highlight how the “proximity of the Other is presented as the fact that the Other is not simply close to me in space, or close like a parent, but he approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself—insofar as I am—responsible for him” (Levinas & Nemo, 1985, pp. 96–97). Again, this is not to say that taking the Other as something knowable is to be avoided, a necessary evil, or to deny its efficacy and value, but is to simply extend the phenomenological insights to include an awareness of the infinity of the Other beyond the usual orders of knowledge. Levinas did not deny that “the Other is given in the concreteness of the totality in which he is immanent.” He only wishes to develop phenomenological language within which the Other can be shown to involve “a signifyingness of its own, independent of this meaning received from the world”

(Levinas, Peperzak, Critchley, & Bernasconi, 1996, p. 53).

### *Phenomenology, Not Ethics*

One must be careful to not read Levinas as advocating some sort of prescription (i.e., “one should put the other before one’s self”); rather, Levinas offered us a specifically phenomenological description of the phenomenon of being in a relation to another person. Hence, it is neither a Kantian call to perform one’s ethical duty (i.e., to recognize the dignity of another person) nor a claim that people describe themselves in the ethical terms Levinas has developed. Instead, it is the claim that careful phenomenological analysis shows the relation to the Other to have the essential features Levinas described. One may object that they see much in human behavior that does not attest to such a description: Witness the violence both within and outside of families, the anger, the betrayal, the indifference that people can have toward others. Indeed, Levinas is no stranger to the possibility of violence in the world having lost almost all of his family in the Holocaust. To be sure, as Bauman (1989, 1990, 1991, 1999) has shown, there are numerous ways in which the face of the Other can be “effaced,” removed from social relations such that the presence of the Other *as Other* and therefore as an ethical responsibility, never arises. Indeed, Levinas was clear that even when the presence of the Other is received, violence is certainly possible: “Murder, it is true, is a banal fact: one can kill the Other; the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity” (Levinas & Nemo, 1985, p. 87). Nevertheless, even in acts of violence, Levinas would claim, it is the presence of the Other that enables the response as specifically *violence*, as the refusal of the Other, as the desire to kill or repress the Other. As one Levinas scholar showed, even the acts of a serial killer can be understood in terms of a Levinasian ethical relation (Beavers, 1995).

In summary, Levinas advanced a new phenomenology of the presence of the Other in human relations, what may be called an “ethical phenomenology,” and showed that this presence grounds such relations in highly significant ways. As Morgan (2007) developed it:

Whenever I am engaged with another person or persons, whatever I am doing, my relationships and my actions are ultimately of significance, in a

sense before I am who I am and before my capacity to think or act, precisely because of the capacity I have and the necessity that falls on me to respond to that other person’s needs and very existence. I may be blind to this capacity and necessity to respond—my responsibility as responsiveness—but it is always there, an aspect of me and my relationship with each and every other person, whether I realize it or not. Hence, in a sense, I am always, in whatever I do, satisfying its directions or failing to do so, unavoidably. I am responsible for and to the other person “before” I am a person, but now we can see that this shocking statement is no contradiction; it is not as paradoxical as it seems. Rather, it is Levinas’s attempt to unsettle us into seeing our ordinary, everyday life in a different way. (p. 160)

### ETHICAL PHENOMENOLOGY AND INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH ON FAMILY

Kerry Daly (2007) reminded us that “learning to see is the foundation for becoming an effective qualitative researcher” (p. 3). In this last section I explore a few ways in which the insights of Levinas can help interpretive researchers to see more than they otherwise would as they approach a study of family life. How important is this “learning to see”? Fully developed, a Levinasian approach could transform theory and research in the family field. Recognition of “ethical relationality” as operative in familial relations potentially transforms all current theories and research on family from a focus on providing maps and explanatory accounts of the ontological terrain of “family” to focusing on providing articulations of ways and contexts in which “ethical relationality” is lived in contemporary families. “Family” would be more clearly seen as fundamentally relational and actively lived in an ethical responsibility that constitutes each of the participants in family life. Coming to see family theory within this framework would involve dramatic and immensely significant shifts in thinking about family, shifts that are beyond this paper to fully articulate. Yet for a Levinasian approach, such hoped-for theoretical developments will best accrue through coming to see more clearly, more phenomenologically, the ethical relationality at work in familial relations as they are lived. Ironically, the contention of phenomenology is that its radically nontheoretical approach to phenomena will produce major progress in theoretical innovation.

With the limited space remaining, I highlight four focal points for learning to see some of

the Levinasian possibilities for expanding interpretive research on family, expansions that can have significant payoffs for how we theorize and understand familial relations in the future.

### *Learning to See the Trace of the Other*

The primary and most basic insight of a Levinasian phenomenology is that our experience of the face of the Other leaves its trace in us as an ethical responsibility to be for-the-Other. Learning to see this in everyday family life is critical for advancing interpretive work even if, properly understood, the face of the Other is not a “thing” and so never really appears as something to be seen. Indeed, the face of the Other is known only through the trace that it leaves in our experience, a trace that Levinas thinks is better understood as something we hear rather than see. Nevertheless, learning to “see” or hear this dimension of our relations to others can certainly be enhanced. Take, perhaps, an everyday, illustrative example from my own life to help make this more concrete:

We live on a very busy road that curves right before it reaches our house. Cars frequently speed through the section in front of our house even though they have just turned and have had very little time to see what might be in the road to greet them as they pass. Despite frequent warnings from his parents, our three-year old child runs out into the street. I run to intervene even as I yell, “Get out of the street!” I arrive at our child and grab him forcibly by both arms and kneel to face him. Finding myself filled with powerful emotions, I surprise myself with the forcefulness with which I tell him: “You cannot run into the street! You will not run into the street! Or else!” And my emotions also speak to the power of this “or else.” Or else I will be forced to do something that helps you realize the danger you have put yourself in!

For Levinas, my experience manifests how the presence of the Other in danger is a presence that leaves its “trace” in such a way that it is lived as a constitutive responsibility. I experience myself constituted by a call to be-for-the-Other. Although social norms and social understandings of what it means to be a parent providing for the safety of their child may be operative and important, for Levinas, what the above experience discloses is also that which cannot be reduced to those social features. I find myself moved by the presence of not just “my son”

in danger but “the Other,” the real, living person that he is. “You are you,” as Levinas put it earlier. I rush not to simply do my duty as a parent but because I find myself placed before the Other, before “you” as the real, living person who “faces” me, to whom I am called to be responsible. The face of the Other calls out to me, “Help me.” And I hear this call and respond such that the “I” that I am is an I constituted by a responsibility to be for “you.”

How can we see the face of the Other and show more clearly this dimension of familial relations? Admittedly, this is a rather different and difficult task because the face of the Other is not a “thing” that is there to be seen. Nevertheless, we can show how the face of the Other is operative in a lived relation through seeing and bringing to light the trace of the Other that is left in the call to responsibility that constitutes the person thus called. We see the face of the Other, in this case, my son, in the response of others, in this case, myself. It may be quite useful to learn to see the trace of the Other in ourselves, but to do more than a first-person account we must learn to see the trace of the Other in the person who encounters the Other. We can see the face of the wife in the way of being of the husband and the face of the husband in the way of being of the wife.

Qualitative researchers often ask about *what* family members do, think, feel, and so forth in family life, and they can become quite adept at finding a richness and diversity of answers that will inspire interesting and informative interpretive work. And yet there can be more there for interpretive and highly reflective work to make manifest in familial relations. As Morgan (2007) pointed out, if we examine more closely *why* we act, think, feel, and so forth and examine more closely what is the significance of human interactions, then we will open ourselves up to seeing the responsibility for the Other operative in human relationships. Levinas invited researchers to conduct interpretive research where the empirical phenomena itself “speaks” and “shows” more than simply “what” people are doing in their family interactions. From a Levinasian perspective, family members are moved to respond to the Other every day. When my child calls out, “Dad!” I am called to respond. No matter what my response (my “said”) may consist in, the face of the Other has called out to me to respond to them and even a so-called nonresponse will be grounded in a “saying.” I find myself placed and

formed and constituted by this call. Just as in the case of my son in danger, I find myself already responsible before I would choose to act in a particular way, whether that be to follow social norms or to engage in some sort of innovative response.

A Levinasian phenomenology would seek to explore just how our concrete ethical responsibility to the Other matters in a plethora of ways, both expected and unexpected, for understanding family relationships. As such, a Levinasian approach can be a dimension of virtually every qualitative and interpretive research project where the interactions of real people are being examined. What is required is that the research not only delineate just “what” occurs but that it also highlight the “saying” and ethical relationality dimension that can be interpretively formulated and phenomenologically developed to be “there” as a fundamental part of the relation being explored in the research. It does not require that a special method be used or specific techniques be developed. Instead, it requires that the human dimension of real people “facing” one another be “seen” and brought to light.

*Learning to See the Moral Goods Operative  
in Familial Relations as Ways of Being  
for the Other*

Levinas offered researchers the opportunity to resituate interpretive explorations of “What is going on?”, even highly phenomenological explorations. Going beyond a traditional phenomenological examination of a phenomenon in terms of “What is X?”, ethical phenomenology reveals how a human phenomenon is grounded in a primordial relation to an Other that is intensely particular, a relation to this particular person who is *someone* in this particular moment. This makes a huge difference in how we understand even the “whatness” of a phenomenon. Because the phenomenon is now seen in terms of an ongoing responsiveness to a particular Other, the phenomenon can be reconfigured in highly temporal ways. Put simply, it can enable us to see the “whats” of family life less in terms of nouns and more in terms of verbs. We can more easily “verbize” the nouns that we may use to refer to the whatness of human phenomena because we can see them as active, ongoing responses or active ways of being formed out of being placed in a concrete ethical relation to the Other. Familial relations

can be seen less as a set of socially constructed “nouns” expressing a certain order of knowledge as they are ways of being (“verbs”) embedded in the concrete lived reality of every here-and-now moment of human relationships.

To see this point more concretely, if we return to the encounter with my son in the street, we may agree that the fact that I was his father and he was my son is significant for understanding “what happened.” Indeed, we may be able to show that there were socially constructed expectations surrounding what it means to be a parent that furthered and deepened the emotional and communicative dealings I engaged in with my son. However, an analysis that only highlights the way in which a social context participates in the construction of the “whatness” of the intentional features of this experience will also likely fail to examine fully the way those social features themselves can be seen as verbs, as activities, as ways of being that are active, highly temporal, responses to the Other. Without the ethical relationality dimension, we would fail to see how the face of the Other is a critical piece of what moves me and constitutes me and gives me the “why” and “wherefore” of “what” I do in my relation to him. By learning to see the ethical relationality dimension, we can see that my playing the part of the parent and perhaps drawing on social norms and forms of knowledge to help me know better just how to act for the Other are themselves expressions of my way of being, my living out of my responsibility for the Other.

Furthermore, a Levinasian ethical phenomenology offers us more than understanding human phenomena in terms of *being*, or active, lived ways of being in the world. It also helps us see that the ongoing, lived reality of our being is an expression of our responsibility. Our being in the world is verbal and active because we are in a relation not just to a world of things but to a *who*, a *you*. Relating to a you rather than an it involves an ongoing call to be for the Other, and our activity expresses our responsiveness to this call.

Again, these insights can be added to many different kinds of interpretive research projects on intimate and familial relationships. Additionally, exposing human activity as ways of being for the Other, as forms of responsiveness in which one’s responsibility for the Other is expressed, a Levinasian framework opens up a number of new investigative possibilities to explore. Building on the previous example, we

could see that just how one responds to another being in danger can vary. Although not the case in this particular example, we could rather easily also imagine that I run into the street, moved by the presence of the Other in need, but in this case I respond more out of a resentment towards the Other. I could be moved to respond but also be twisted and distorted in my response. I may resent the Other as an imposition that I must “deal with.” In such a case, I am moved by the Other but take up that movement as a burden inflicted upon me by the Other. As such, the social norms and social expectations associated with being a parent could be brought to bear “against” the child even though I was moved to be “for” him. In this mode of being, I could see myself acting on “my son” as “the-one-who-makes-my-being-a-parent-so-difficult” and in which case now being a parent and having a son are operative in the relation in a distorted way. My resistance to the Other would then involve taking up the “shoulds” and “oughts” of my social group and applying them defensively, as a way of exonerating or justifying my distorted way of being. My response could take the form of an “I’m going to teach you a lesson,” followed by a kind of vindictive infliction of physical pain, and could be justified as my fulfilling what a parent is “supposed to do.” What this case would help us see is that the enacting of a normative social and moral order is being used as a form of justification for one’s distorted expression of their being called to be responsible for the Other.

Being moved by the Other doesn’t mean that one must respond in a given way. Compassionate responsiveness is only one way of being responsive to the other person. Nevertheless, just how one responds to the presence of the Other in the moment, through either a responsiveness to them or out of a resistance to them, can be determinative of how the social relation develops and unfolds (Warner, 1986, 1997; Warner & Olson, 1981; Whiting, 2008). In other words, Levinas invited interpretive researchers to look for the ways of being oriented one towards another that are operative in framing just how familial relations are lived, experienced, and enacted (see Whiting, 2008, for one development of this point).

A Levinasian ethical phenomenology can assist interpretive researchers in learning to see how human actions in familial relations are infused with moral goods and moral stances

toward the Other that serve as expressions of responsibility for the Other. As such, ethical phenomenology is less designed to reinforce any kind of “value” or any idea or prescription of “what” family life ought to be like. It is not designed to facilitate the promotion of a set of “shoulds” or definitive characterizations (nouns) of what family life is supposed to be. Instead, life with others is revealed to be a life of encounters not reducible to any particular set of values, ideas, or moral or cultural prescriptions precisely because they are seen as lived expressions of responsibility (verbs) with concrete, personal Others. And as such, they are lived under conditions of being perpetually under question as to their adequacy (Knapp & Lott, 2010).

For example, if a Levinasian phenomenology were applied to the study of marriage and marriage-like relations, interpretive research could attempt to show how such relations are structured and infused with concerns for moral responsibility for the Other. Such research could show how empirically inadequate measures of a marital relation grounded in satisfaction can be by showing how the relation itself is grounded less on concerns for satisfaction than it is on concerns for “justice” (Burggraeve, 2002; Thomas, 2004). A shift of focus for the interpretive family researcher from satisfaction to justice would not be ideological but phenomenological. The phenomenological starting point is that justice is a central concern for the spouses themselves and not something imposed by the scholar’s theoretical commitments. This point cannot be emphasized enough for it points out that, for Levinas, justice is not a standard or theoretical ideal (noun) but a quest, a concern, an ever-present feature of existential experience in the marital relation (verb). Justice informs relations between spouses not as an ideal but as a question, as a perpetual call from the Other to be for them (Knapp & Lott, 2010). An ethical phenomenological analysis would facilitate showing how the question of the quality of one’s marital relation is itself a fundamental issue in marital relations as the presence of one’s spouse calls forth a responsibility and raises the question of justice in everyday marital lives (Morgan, 2007).

Beyond seeing resistance or responsiveness, “verbizing” nounlike concepts and characteristics, and seeing the concern for moral goods and “justice” in familial relations, Levinasian research could also take up the question of when

and how ethical relationality is effectively neutralized or limited in relations between family members. For example, Miller (2012) laid out the case for the exploration of how communication technologies can involve changing the “presence” of the Other in the relationship and even promote ways of “effacing the face” of the Other (cf. Bauman, 1990). Does the growing use of cell phones and texting for interaction between family members change the way the face of the Other is present in the relationship? Are forms of resistance (see the following section) more common when the relation to the Other is mediated through some form of technology rather than a more full and complete face-to-face relation?

*Learning to See How Violence, Forms of Negative Emotion, and Resentment Toward the Other Reflect Ethical Relationality*

It needs to be made clear that a Levinasian framework would not—and indeed, must not—overlook the negative emotions, the violence, and dark sides of familial relationships. Levinas is very aware that ethical responsibility for the Other does not necessitate actually acting responsibly toward the Other (Levinas & Nemo, 1985, p. 87). But how, then, is the ethical relationality he points us toward actually lived on occasions of violence within intimate relationships? A Levinasian phenomenological approach would begin by showing how the responsibility for the Other is both received by the perpetrator of violence but also resisted, and because it is resisted, the perpetrator experiences a need to “justify” his or her acts of violence. As Morgan (2007) developed it, Levinas would show how “even the choice to kill or the act of killing itself *already* in some sense incorporates an acknowledgement, an acceptance” (p. 71) of one’s ethical relationality to the Other. Levinas would seek to show that “all social encounters, even the most violent and destructive, are acts of responsibility, albeit ones that do not *express* and *develop* that sense of responsibility but rather corrupt and nullify it” (p. 71).

Good interpretive research could explore just how violence is possible as an expression of (distorted) responsibility for the Other. Perhaps another everyday example could illuminate this point. Lest we think ourselves immune from this process, let us think of the last time we were angry at our child and yelled at them. What was

the experience of this anger like? Most likely, it involved our making some sort of claim of their engaging in some sort of action that involves casting them as a particular kind of intentional object for which the anger we feel and express is fully justified. They have violated something and deserve to be or even need to be yelled at. Yet such a description would be limited, problematically so, because it relies too heavily on accepting the subject’s own (distorted) depiction of his or her experience. In other words, a complete phenomenological analysis would enable us to show just how the angry subject often explicitly denies their own involvement in the emergence of the anger. Relying solely on the subject’s (justificatory) depiction would cast the negative emotion as the result of what the other person has done and specifically dismiss the Levinasian insight that our emotions are active (verbal) expressions of our own way of being in an ethical relation.

From a Levinasian interpretive stance, we could show how the anger is a distorted expression of one’s responsibility for the Other. Oversimplifying, we could say that negative emotions often involve transforming a “you” to an “it,” a particular kind of “it” that justifies our resistance and (mis)treatment of the Other. Through naming the Other as a particular kind of person for whom a retaliatory response is warranted (Katz, 1988), the perpetrator will draw on the social dimension of human relations, or ways of framing the Other as a particular kind of thing (noun), to justify their ongoing resistance (verb) to the Other. In Levinasian terms, the otherness or infinity of the Other is resisted, subsumed under the totalization of an intentional consciousness that responds to the Other through denial and distortion. An ethical phenomenology helps us learn to see how forms of intimate violence can be an expression of a fierce resistance to the Other, a resistance justified, strangely enough, by the very social set of meanings that the Other is not reducible to (Arbinger Institute, 2006).

This kind of distortion in human relations may be difficult to learn to see, but think of how our own experience of anger may have changed if the child we are angry with responds to our anger not through resistance of their own or through a kind of strength opposing itself to an enemy but through one of weakness (they perhaps begin to cry). Perhaps in such a case our way of being changes and we see more clearly our child as a real person with real needs who is in some

way calling out to us, “Help me!” (Kunz, 1998). Within such a view, the anger may dissipate, compassion may ensue, and we may realize that in some ways our anger was a distortion of both their Otherness as well as the social dimension (our taking them as some sort of “it” or the “lesson” we thought so important to “teach”) brought to bear to justify our anger. Certainly such an example needs more extended development, but the point is a Levinasian frame may enable us to see previously hidden features of familial experience. While in the midst of resisting the Other, we experience the world distordedly, and it is only after we have changed our way of being in relation to the Other that we can begin to see the lived, concrete reality of our relation more clearly. Only after the distortion of the social world brought on by the resistance to the Other is removed can the “true” or undistorted value of the social meanings become available (Arbinger Institute, 2006; Warner, 1986; Warner & Olson, 1981).

*Learning to See the Ethical Relationality  
Involved in Understanding “Mediated” Family  
Relations*

Finally, I conclude this section with some comments on a quite different potential site where Levinasian insights may provide an entry into new angles for interpretive work on family: the examination of familial relations when they are mediated through technologies or contact points provided by other institutions, organizations, and interested parties. This might seem like quite a jump, from intimate relations to the ways in which forms of mediation can transform ethical relationality. But once the Levinasian phenomenological insights are absorbed we can see how the presence (or absence) of ethical relationality is not limited to face-to-face interactions. For example, Rossiter (2011) argued for seeing social work as an “unsettled practice” on the basis of a Levinasian phenomenological analysis of the relation between social workers and their clients. Rossiter showed how the presence of the Other calls for the social worker to call into question any and all representations (nouns) the social worker might use to “totalize” the people they serve. Social work seems to require making the “yous” the social worker seeks to help into “its.” And yet without such representations, social workers may find themselves hampered in their quest to engage in a critical social work

anxiously engaged in the pursuit of assistance for those very “yous”! Just how does a social worker both recognize and honor the Other as a personal Other and yet also facilitate action in their behalf, action that seems to almost require some sort of totalizing discourse in their behalf? Rossiter offered Levinasian insights that would also apply in a number of other instances of just this dilemma, and yet good interpretive work on just how social workers relate to those in need and deal with the enigma of representation could be highly productive in furthering our understanding of the relation between social work (and other institutions and organizations) and families.

Similarly, interpretive work on other dimensions of the family’s relation to other entities in society could be informed by greater attention to precisely the issues Levinas raised. For example, Gubrium and Holstein have quite successfully shown how significant organizational discourse is in the social construction of “family” today (Gubrium & Holstein, 1993, 2012; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, 1999). And yet we know little about the features brought to our attention through a Levinasian phenomenology and raised and discussed by Rossiter in her study of social work practice. Just how might an organization and its discourse, even its “family” discourse, actually be productive in “efacing the face” of the Other (Bauman, 1990, 1991)? What are the ways totalizing practices are deployed? How does the face of the Other nevertheless appear in the lived relation between family member and service provider? What are the ways in which the humanity of the Other can be both honored and yet the potential services of the organization be successfully offered? Or, put more explicitly in relation to interpretive research itself, how does the ethical relationality of the researcher–participant relation problematize the interpretive work itself (Garza & Landrum, 2010)?

#### CONCLUSION

Phenomenology has been insufficiently used by family scholars as a resource in the quest to further and deepen a rich understanding of family life in the 21st century. Although in no sense should we understand phenomenology to be the only proper approach to qualitative or other research on family, this article has attempted to show that it can provide an important window

into the interpretive study of family life. The work of Emmanuel Levinas holds particular promise in this endeavor as his work highlights the ways in which family life emerges out of an ethical relationality to the Other. Family relations are always more than what they may seem and they involve the expression of central features of relations between Others called to relations of responsibility. The ways in which this informs family life are countless and remain a terrain awaiting exploration through innovative interpretive research. The brief and limited glimpse at some of those possibilities provided in this paper can only serve as an introduction and invitation. Good phenomenology involves the practice of reflexive skills by researchers who bring themselves to the study of phenomena and thereby succeed in making manifest dimensions of human life that were previously unappreciated. Quality research on family life from a Levinasian framework awaits those that can take up the challenge and then bring to light those key dynamics involved in family relations that have hitherto been largely left unexplored, dynamics that hold great potential for contributing to important theoretical innovations in how we will understand family life in the future.

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