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# Interpretational potential of the psychology method

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#### **Abstract**

The relevance of the problem under study is conditioned by the necessity to develop a complex integrative approach to coherent, internally consistent psychological research. This can be done through introducing the category of interpretative method potential. The aim of the article is to describe and justify the interpretative tradition in psychology as a reflection of contemporary post-non-classical paradigm in the study of psychic reality. The leading methodological approach to the problem is the paradigm of post-non-classical rationality characterized by the growing number of qualitative studies, the rise of interdisciplinary research, communicativeness and network organization of knowledge. All these developments add new content to the informative and interpretative components of the psychology method. Establishing the link between the psychological research method and its purpose rather than its object opens new opportunities for a meaningful use of the interpretative component of the method. The research presents an understanding of a set of research methods as the elements of a single continuum with an interpretative capacity criterion, which casts a new outlook on the problems of the correlation between "strong" and "weak" sciences, subjective and objective interpretation of research results, scientific and suprascientific knowledge. The information contained in the article may be useful for the methodological analysis of the nature and implementation of psychological research methods in the frameworks of the modern post-non-classical rationality paradigm.

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# **Keywords**

Method of psychology, post-non-classical rationality, interpretation, interpretative component, interpretative potential.

## Introduction

Analysis shows that the basic processes driving the development of science occur primarily the field of methodology [Bobryshov, 2006; 2013; Mokii et al, 2015; Sardanashvili, 2015].

Within the methodological field of psychology, in the broader context of issues that have the greatest potential for the genesis of science, the problem of method is of paramount importance. The method is directly linked to the object, the specifics of psychic phenomena, the possibility to acquire new knowledge and the development of psychology as a science [Allakhverdov & Ivanov, 2008; Yurevich, 2008].

At the same time, the complexity of the psychology method problem is increased due to the general understanding of scientific method which, in the broad sense, represents a system of principles which regulates the transformative, practical, cognitive and theoretical activity, and, in the narrow sense, defines a certain way of organizing research procedures [Kasavin, 2014; Ushakov, 2008].

The content and understanding of the psychology method represent a separate research problem, and although the empirical methods are thoroughly studied and classified, the same cannot be said about the theoretical methods. The correlation between the theory and method of psychology is not investigated properly [Zhuravlev et al, 2016; Wachtel, 2014].

A unified system of methods will systematize the methodological and theoretical psychological research grounds and link the historical context to the modern practice of the post-non-classical rational methodology. This system is presented on a continuum from low to high interpretational potential and can be applied in psychological as well as inter- and multidisciplinary studies.

# **Methodological Framework**

Reflections on the method of psychological science, as noted by V.A. Mazilov (2006), are of fundamental importance for the development of the proper psychological methodology. For example, it is incorrect to believe that the methods used in natural sciences can be applied to psychology; very often unjustified generalizations are made extending the standards of natural sciences to the whole field of psychology. N. Smith (2001) states the inapplicability of the experimental methodology of physics to psychological researches; although there was a time when this methodology created a stable foundation for the development of psychology. Nevertheless, it is necessary to clarify and emphasize that this conclusion is valid for a specific methodological perspective (it is described in greater details below): for example, if in non-classical psychology the role of "inspirer" was, to a certain extent, assigned to physics (it was especially clearly manifested in Gestalt psychology; the energy metaphor can also be traced in psychoanalysis), post-non-classical psychology (modern research paradigm) was

formatted largely by cultural studies. They set a trend according to which when research principles are transferred from one scientific field to another, they should not be taken literally, and often they should not be transferred at all.

The substitution of concrete scientific methodology by a set of postulates and principles is inherent in soviet psychology. Today, these provisions have lost their status of inviolable guidelines and serve only as "scientific and methodological approaches". According to V.P. Zinchenko (2003), instead of "sentencing" the principles, historians and methodologists of psychology should pay attention to the development of its specific problems: the object and method, the link between theory and practice, psychological explanation principles, integration of psychological knowledge, conditions and mechanisms for its interpretation, etc.

The problem of defining the essence of the method appears to be fundamentally important and should be based on the currently actual methodological provisions developed within the psychological science.

Today's research considers the processes of epistemological paradigm transformation: the transition from classical and non-classical world view to the post-non-classical type of rationality, substitution of positivist thinking for the hermeneutic one, systematic way of knowledge organization for the networking one, communication (and convergence) of the sciences and humanities, focus of researches on interdisciplinary discourse [Kornilova & Smirnov, 2016; Stepin, 2011; Gergen, 1994b].

D.A. Lushnikov (2014) assesses these transformations with reference to social reality. He notes that the mechanisms of a new type of sociality and a new social order formation are disruptive towards traditional sociality. To alleviate negative connotations, the author emphasizes (and we tend to agree with him here) that, "From the perspective of diachronic analysis this assumption invokes an evolutionary pattern observed during phasic transitions from one sociality type to another" (p. 284).

According to M.S. Guseltseva (2009), the key characteristics of post-non-classical rationality include: cognitive complexity (ontological, epistemological complexity and uniqueness) of the studied phenomena, superreflixivity, insufficient conceptualization (A.Ya. Gurevich); combination of explanation and description (classical rationality) with the principles of historicism, development and relativity (non-classical rationality) and "subjective experience legalization" (A.V. Yurevich), "imagination legalization". In this regard, the increase of qualitative and interdisciplinary research, communicativeness and network knowledge organization are the signs of the entry of science into the post-non-classical rationality phase.

In addition, while the classical and non-classical types of rationality suggested the analysis of a concept through placing in a clear frame, post-non-classical rationality brought about a new era of interpretation, which destroyed the borders and made it possible to give freer interpretations. "The surfaces can be seen, but the depth must be interpreted", said K. Wilber (2001, p. 99).

Post-non-classical rationality outlined a boundary between a "historical fact" ("thing-in-itself" according to Kant) and its interpretation. This type of rationality emphasizes the interpretative component, which means that the author (interpreter) has a right to his own vision along with the duty of critical reflection, imputing understanding to him – yes, it is his worldview, but perhaps his vision is not shared by others, and the author's interpretation can be true or false.

The basic implicit and sometimes even explicit idea of cognitivism states that cognitions represent personal facts and events which can be evaluated only on the basis of logical deductions. It arises from Descartes' interpretation of nonphysical mind as internal personal world, which was, nevertheless, criticized by a number of psychologists. Thus, J. Kantor (1987) is a proponent of so-called objectivity

of subjectivity. In addition, W. Stephenson (1993/1994), the author of the Q-methodology – the basis for quantitative (objective) measurements of subjectivity, maintains that a response is subjective in the position of a subject communicating this response, while this same response is objective for its perceiver.

This reasoning leads to the conclusion that so-called personal sphere imposes on psychology the same restrictions as are imposed on any other science, since it does not fulfill any other function except for the indication that all possible events are available for observation in varying degrees, and each of them can be observed from a certain point of view and only with appropriate methods. It is clear that psychology is in a better position than such sciences as physics, chemistry, astronomy and biology which cannot receive a verbal response from their study subjects. In this sense, "the restriction on subjectivity" attributed to psychology, is rather the advantage of it as a science (Smith, 2001).

K. Gergen (1994a) criticizes the view of rationalists (mostly those belonging to the continental Europe rationalist school), who state that there is no such neutral external standpoint that could provide an opportunity to study individual knowledge, regardless of the fact that this knowledge is presented by a certain individual. He notes that the facts considered to be empirical data are not universal knowledge; they are interpreted by certain social groups which obtain the data. K. Gergen's approach to knowledge is a typical sociocentric approach, which states that knowledge is entirely associated with social discourse; knowledge is what a certain social group considers to be true at a particular time, and "socially constructed" knowledge cannot be truly understood outside of the group. It is paradoxical, yet quite logical that the importance of context in determining the specifics of a phenomenon does not contain any truth outside of the group which declares this context true. This sociocentric system is called social constructionism. It is influenced by post-modernism, and its advocates insist that our reality is generated by biological organization, cultural processes and linguistic agreements.

Among the sociocentric theories, an approach stands out which tries to neutralize the influence of empiricism, to undermine the unknowable world of rationalism and global relativism of social constructionism. It states that empirical studies give us only limited evidence of possible functional and causal relationships and linkages, not their irrefutable proof. In this case, psychological research is considered as a confirmation of theory rather than its verification. Similarly, the "neo-realism" approach recognizes the historical, social and linguistic conventions (agreements) that influence our decisions, values, methodology, theory and interpretation, and other structures used in psychology. We assume that cultural relativism can be overcome, which is proved by the fact that people master the process of intercultural communication. As most of the psychological researches regard the intra- rather than cross-cultural interaction sphere, the problem of intercultural relations does not arise at all [Smith, 2001].

#### **Discussion**

Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that the methodologists and historians of psychology distinguish a fundamental aspect in psychology – the interpretative component within the post-non-classical paradigm. Applied to the problem of scientific method, in a first approximation it means the following: often the researcher's abilities to understand the information about the studied reality are more important than the method of obtaining this information. Therefore, as A.G. Spirkin (2006) generalizes, the method itself (and scientific cognition uses a variety of methods) does not predetermine success in the study of the reality; it is important not only to choose an appropriate method, but also to apply it skillfully.

In our case, the above reflections and generalizations allow us to formulate the following thesis: the study of psychic reality is possible through the concordance of two factors – the method as such (the mode or technology used) and the interpretation. The first component exists outside the scientist's individual consciousness sphere, that is, it is objective in relation to the latter, while the second one – interpretation – is completely determined by the researcher's subjective sphere. Both of these components belong to the same research reality – to the method.

The connection between research methods as the regulatory principles of obtaining experimental data and the subject matter of psychology has been historically established. This view is so widely accepted that it is still considered an axiom [Kornilova & Smirnov, 2016, 8]. In our opinion, the relationship between the subject matter and the method of science is ambiguous; they are different realities, linked only by the fact that a particular method in a particular case (i. e., due to its application experience, its history) is more suitable for a particular study field than another method, but no more than that. Interestingly, T.V. Kornilova [Kornilova & Smirnov, 2016, 9] outlines a clear solution to the problem of unambiguous and generally understood content of the method through the distinction of subject matter and methodological tools and schemes for experimental data interpretation. This distinction is important, although the author does not dwell on the matter.

We assert that method has direct connection to the purpose of study, but not to its subject; implementation of method depends on research tasks. Therefore it should be emphasized that if a researcher failed to achieve his goal, he used wrong methods. His failure is not associated with the fact that he explored a wrong subject within a wrong domain. The interdisciplinary nature of modern psychological research (although it has been shown [Lukyanov, 2014] that any science is interdisciplinary in terms of certain criteria) suggests diverse research methods, which obviously does not imply an amorphous (undefined) subject matter. In addition, there is a traditional fundamental difference between necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence of a phenomenon; thus, it should be noted that the use of a particular method does require a certain research reality (namely, a broad subject matter as a reference point for research, but as a limiting factor). In order to investigate this reality, it is not necessary to possess a particular (predetermined) set of methods. Obviously, this set is defined by both the scope of a study (problem to be solved) and any expected or forecast facts (hypothesis), which are best reflected in research aim and detailed tasks. Finally, the empiricism of psychological research [Mironenko, 2006] is, in our opinion, its most essential characteristic as it implies the focus on research results rather than on research subjects. In this sense, the subject is somehow "crystallized" as a research result: it grows out of the general scope outlined in the beginning of a research and is specified and completely formulated at its final stage. It follows that method as part of research is obligatory at the initial stage, whereas subject takes shape at the final stage, that is, it functions as a result of accumulating continuously received facts. It is the development of science that leads to the establishment of its subject, not vice versa. Thus, subject and method are separated in time as well.

It is possible to systematize the method of psychology by introducing the concept of "interpretative potential" [Lukyanov, 2013]. It is understood as the possibility for researchers to use subjective interpretation of the facts found when implementing a specific method. In this sense, method is a procedure for obtaining data within a particular science which (the procedure) includes an objective part (the method implementation scheme) and a subjective part (interpretative part of the method).

A.G. Spirkin's idea of scientific methods is close to our understanding of this concept. The author maintains that the solution of specific research tasks requires certain general philosophical methods as

a prerequisite, the main feature of which is flexibility. These methods make sense in any research practice, indicating a general way to the truth. If specific methods appear as the methods for revealing objective laws of the subjects under study localized in a particular subject field, philosophical methods act as the methods of studying the same subjects from the perspective of identifying the universal laws of their development, which originally manifest themselves in connection with a certain feature of the subject. Each method allows for cognizing certain aspects of the subject thus determining the need for the "mutual complementarity" of methods that is caused inter alia by the fact that each method has certain limits of its cognitive potential [Spirkin, 2006]. In relation to methods of a specific study, A.G. Spirkin's principle of "mutual complementarity" is associated with cognitive capabilities, or, in our terminology, interpretative potential.

### **Conclusion**

The interpretative potential concept provides for the existence of a continuum of psychological research methods, where, on the one hand, there are the methods of high interpretative potential (for example, the method of personal interview) and, on the other hand, the methods of low interpretative potential (for example, the methods of mathematical statistics). Therefore, all methods used in any particular study or in science in general are scientifically accepted, although they differ in interpretative potential.

Thus, the method of psychology in its modern understanding should be considered within the frameworks of the post-non-classical rationality paradigm with an emphasis on cognitive complexity of the psychic reality. The superreflixivity of this reality requires special attention to the nature and content of interpretative mechanisms and schemes of study. In this regard, the interpretative component of method is fundamental and determines the level of its interpretative potential. The category of interpretative potential as a fundamental criterion in the selection and justification of research methods is especially important since the researcher aims at revealing the aspects of the studied reality (the direction is set by the aim), and does not study the existing reality for discovering something new (the limit is set by the study subject); the method is associated not with the subject matter, but with the aim and objectives of the study.

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# Интерпретационный потенциал метода психологии

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#### Аннотация

Актуальность проблемы обусловлена необходимостью разработки комплексного интегративного подхода к согласованным, внутренне непротиворечивым психологическим исследованиям. Это может быть сделано путем введения категории потенциала метода интерпретации. Цель статьи – описать и обосновать интерпретационную традицию в психологии как отражение современной постнеклассической парадигмы в изучении психической реальности. Ведущим методологическим подходом к проблеме является парадигма постнеклассической рациональности. Установление связи между методом психологического исследования и его целью, а не его объектом открывает новые возможности для значимого использования интерпретирующей составляющей метода. Исследование представляет собой описание ряда методов исследования как элементов единого континуума с критерием интерпретационной способности, который открывает новый взгляд на проблемы корреляции между «сильными» и «слабыми» науками, субъективной и объективной интерпретацией результаты исследований, научные и сверхнаучные знания. Информация, содержащаяся в этой статье, может быть полезна для методологического анализа природы и реализации методов психологических исследований в рамках современной парадигмы постклассической рациональности.

#### Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

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#### Ключевые слова

Метод психологии, пост-неклассическая рациональность, интерпретация, интерпретирующая составляющая, потенциал интерпретации.

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