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ACKNOWLEDGING MORALITY IN METHODOLOGY

by

Rachelle E. Howard

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

Department of Marriage, Family, and Human Development

Brigham Young University

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Rachelle E. Howard in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### ACKNOWLEDGING MORALITY IN METHODOLOGY

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Marriage and family research has its foundation in the positivist tradition, which dismisses the relevance of morality to the scientific enterprise. Yet morality is inherent in marriage and family studies—both in the topics studied and in methodology. In this conceptual research, positivist assumptions are explicated to show that positivist methodology relies on a stance of moral neutrality that turns out to be a hidden morality. This hidden morality requires that people be studied as other objects. The need for a methodology that has an explicit moral philosophy and that acknowledges that humans are not “things” is discussed. Levinas’ relational philosophy of “being for the other” is shown to be one viable starting point for a methodology that takes the moral domain seriously. In contrast to methodologies that have their basis in positivism, this philosophy offers a coherent account of agency, a relational alternative to individualism, and an explicit moral stance intended to strengthen marriage and families. A method of evaluating research based on criteria of “being for the other” is outlined and used to evaluate three research articles to demonstrate how an explicit moral philosophy can strengthen the meaningfulness of empirical marriage and family research.

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## Introduction

In recent years, issues pertaining to morality have received increased attention in some human science areas relating to theory and to practices such as therapy and counseling (Doherty, 1995; *European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counseling, & Health*, 2005; Gantt & Williams, 2002; Miller, 2004; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). However, as Williams and Gantt (2002) declare, “the question of morality has...been all but dismissed as a subject of serious intellectual concern” (p. 1). Nowhere is this truer than in traditional human science research methodology (the philosophy that justifies the use of a specific method). Adequate evidence exists that humans experience moral feelings or sensibilities, yet despite the importance of moral issues, they are a neglected part of human science research.

Several other issues have been raised regarding the problems and inadequacies of current human science research methodology, including the inherently interpretive nature of human science inquiry (Packer & Addison, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1983; Postman, 1994), the necessity of making assumptions about the meaning of a given observed behavior, the philosophy of human being used to draw interpretive conclusions, and the unavoidable relationship between theory (i.e., assumptions) and method (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Slife & Williams, 1995). For example, Slife and Williams have explored in some depth the problems associated with reductionism, including how reducing humans, in order to study them, to “things” whose behaviors are provoked by external forces, typically results in a deterministic view of people. Rychlak (2005) also has expressed similar concerns and has made a case for the need to retain a view of humans as agents and not as machines. Other concerns related to reductionism are that we do not give sufficient attention to context and that translating human experience into the language of numbers poses problems in our attempts to understand the meaning of human experience (Slife & Gantt, 1999). However, the moral nature of research endeavors has seldom been discussed further than to recognize that

reductionism results in a loss of meaning. Generally, when critiques of the philosophical problems with current research methods are raised, the discourse seems to acknowledge the problems without making attempts to find solutions. (Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2005 is one notable exception). This may, in part, be due to the philosophy already embedded in current research practices, where the assumption is that our methods are somehow value-free and outside the domain of philosophical analysis (and thus also irrelevant to moral questions) altogether.

How, then, in the conduct of science, does morality relate to research methodology? Taylor (1989) explains that morality pertains to our ideas about what is good for humanity or what constitutes the good life. Additionally, Williams and Gantt (2002) define as moral “that which makes a meaningful difference to a human person in a given human context” (p. 11). A meaningful difference means that one course of action is preferred over another on the grounds of a value judgment that involves, perhaps, issues of good, better, best—and thus the making of moral judgments. Warner (2001), while making it clear that his idea of the good life is centered on quality personal (especially family) relationships, explores the moral consequences of treating people like objects (turning them into things) and how doing so is detrimental to our relationships. That is, he discusses how treating people like objects makes a meaningful difference in personal relationships. I submit that many of the problems with traditional human science research, especially regarding the search for meaningful results, arise from not attending to moral issues, including 1) not having a clear notion of the Good (or not making this explicit), and 2) regarding people as objects in the way we conduct and write about our research studies.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the interface of morality and research methodology as it relates to marriage and family studies, and to suggest starting points that grant a place for the moral in human science research efforts (in research design, in measurement, and in interpretation of results). I begin by briefly reviewing the historical debate concerning the criteria for an



appropriate methodology for studying humans. I address the place morality already occupies in marriage and family research, and then I outline basic assumptions central to traditional research methodology and how they dismiss the importance of morality. Next, I discuss assumptions fundamental to taking the moral nature of research seriously, including assumptions about what it means to be human. I take a position regarding what constitutes the Good, and I discuss why making explicit our notion of what is good adds value to our research efforts. I then briefly present the relational view of humans suggested in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas and indicate how such a view of humans as moral beings—not objects—could transform the impact and meaningfulness of our research endeavors. I discuss the implications of invoking this alternative philosophy, addressing how the language we use is central to the moral nature of conducting and writing marriage and family research. And finally, I evaluate three research articles to illustrate how this alternative view can enrich even our empirical work.

## Historical Background and Review of Assumptions

### *Historical Context*

The question of how to best study people has been in dispute for centuries. Central to this debate are basic assumptions about human being, including assumptions regarding how humans differ—or do not differ—from other objects of study. Hobbes (as early as 1651) was among the first to express the idea that human phenomena are not different from other kinds of phenomena and that people can therefore be studied like other objects (Leahey, 1987; Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 17). Whether or not researchers believe that humans are indeed like other objects, studying people in the same manner we study objects has become the norm. That is, the human sciences have adopted the same methodology for studying people as has been used in the natural sciences to study objects.

Most adherents of traditional human science methodology have not attended specifically to the question of how humans and objects differ; rather, they have been more concerned with a particular conception of knowledge and how knowledge can be acquired. Polkinghorne (1983) explains that by the 1860s most researchers involved in studying people and their relationships, like those involved in natural science studies, had adopted a combination of naturalism, empiricism, and positivism. Naturalism is the belief that all phenomena can be explained by natural laws and that spiritual or moral explanations are unnecessary. Empiricism emphasizes sensory experience as the source of knowledge, and positivism requires that knowledge be certain, which certainty comes through observation and experimentation. These *isms* focus, not on ontological questions about the meaning of human being (the nature of the “thing” being studied), but on how the study of humans is merely an epistemological issue (Taylor, 1987). That is, these *isms* describe how we know what we know about humans; they do not describe the human condition itself. With the early advances made in the natural sciences—particularly in physics—using a methodology that embraces these *isms*, the prospect of establishing psychology or other human-related fields as “scientific” by using the same kind of methodology seemed promising. Such was the hope of supporters of what became the received view of science (Leahey, 1987; Slife & Williams, 1995).

But in the mid to late 1800s, several people expressed opposition to merely adopting natural science methodology (treating humans as objects—as things) for the study of people, among them Dilthey, Wundt, Brentano, Husserl, Weber, and James (Polkinghorne, 1983). They and others wanted a rigorous, systematic methodology (and for many, even an empirical methodology); yet, they argued that humans are different from objects and thus should be studied differently. “[T]hey believed that these studies [of human phenomena] should address the fullness of human experience, including values and meaning in addition to perception” (p. 20). However, though many shared such anti-positivist sentiments, there remained disagreement about what alternative methodology would

be adequate for the human sciences. Perhaps because no one alternative view had enough supporters to rival the natural science methodology that had quickly gained popularity, positivism became the mainstream position.

Polkinghorne (1983) outlines both sides of this debate more thoroughly than is my purpose here (cf. pp. 15-133). I want simply to note that supporters of positivism gave little attention to the other side of the debate and instead focused on refining efforts within the positivist tradition. Today, many scholars involved in human science studies recognize that positivist science is no longer regarded as it once was—at least by some—as the way of obtaining “that truth which will, in the end, prevail” (Richards, 1910, p. 18). However, as Knapp (1997) explains, many of the post-positivist positions that have been presented as alternatives to positivism retain the fundamental assumptions of positivism. For this reason, the question of how to best study people remains unsettled, with several voices vying for a more human-centered science (e.g. Knapp, 1997; Packer & Addison, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1983; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Rychlak, 2005; Slife & Gantt, 1999).

### *The Positivist Tradition and the Representational Model of Knowledge*

The rise of marriage and family studies as a human science field came at a time when positivism was looked upon as *the* way of science. As a result, most early family theories are deeply and explicitly rooted in positivism. According to Knapp (1997), “in the family literature, positivism has been cast rather uniformly, and narrowly...as the objective or value-free use of the methods of ‘science’ to discover general explanatory laws of social/familial behavior” (p. 371). One of the important tenets of positivist science is that observation can be independent of theory. A common example of this assumption in operation is the idea that “the (observed) facts speak for themselves,” thus needing no theoretical interpretation to pollute the pure objectivity of observation. However,

this received view of science came under renewed scrutiny in the 1960s (Polkinghorne, 1983; Polkinghorne, 1990). Philosophers of science recognized that there is no theory-free research. Indeed, the belief that we should be “objective” in our research endeavors is a philosophical position, a theoretical assumption. In a sense, this belief is pre-empirical, to be validated by conceptual analyses, and not by sensory data. Even “method itself,” Slife and Williams (1997) point out, “is a theory—a philosophy. Similar to any other theory or philosophy, it makes assumptions about the world, and important implications arise from those assumptions” (p. 120).

A distinction should be made here between methodology and methods. Research *methods* are *the specific procedures* followed to gather information and carry out a research study or experiment. Polkinghorne (1983) explains that methods “take their validity and reliability from their participation in a particular system of inquiry” (p. 5). Human science research *methodology*, refers to the way we study people—*the whole system of inquiry* with its attendant assumptions and practices. Methodology, then, includes research methods and practices, as well as assumptions about the subject being studied (what it means to be human), the nature of truth, and the proper way to acquire knowledge.

As noted previously, numerous scholars have addressed problems with current research methodology. My purpose here is to highlight those assumptions that dismiss morality as an issue relevant and important to research methodology. One important assumption that pertains to the morality of research methodology is brought to light in *Being and Time*. In this extensive analysis of being, Heidegger (1962) points out that it has long been assumed that all things have the same kind of being. He claims, however, that humans do not have the same kind of being as other objects. The implications of this are important because if all things—people and objects—had the same kind of being, studying people and objects in the same way would be a legitimate enterprise. However, if human being is different from the being of objects, as Heidegger claims, the way we study people may require a grounding in exactly how humans are different.

Consider this way of making the distinction: when we anthropomorphize, we ascribe human characteristics to nonhumans, typically by endowing something nonhuman with human-like intentions. For example, I might beg the vending machine to give me the food I have just purchased, feeling the machine has cheated me by taking my money and withholding my food. In this simple act, I have attributed three interrelated human capacities to the inanimate vending machine: first, the ability to engage in a human-like relationship—evidenced in my talking to the vending machine; second, agency, including the power to act purposefully—I regard the vending machine as if it had chosen to withhold the food I purchased; and third, moral responsibility—I feel the vending machine has wronged me by taking my money while retaining the food. Obviously, these capacities are not characteristic of objects; they are human capacities. Indeed, the capacity for moral action and responsibility, which presupposes both agency and relational involvement, is a distinguishing feature of humanity and is fundamental to how we experience life. Therefore, to not address the moral domain in our human science work is to exclude from our studies a central part of what makes us human.

Furthermore, in spite of positivist-inspired efforts to exclude morality from family science, morality is evidently inherent in marriage and family research and shows up in a number of ways. First, the existence of family science as a field of study evidences a moral judgment. A group of people at some time determined to study families, presumably because they valued families and found the study of marriage and family relationships meaningful. Returning to Williams' and Gantt's (2002) definition of morality as "that which makes a meaningful difference" to someone, and that assessing a "meaningful difference" inescapably involves making a value judgment, it is apparent that the study of marriage and family relationships cannot help being a morally-based endeavor.

Second, the topics researched in marriage and family studies are of a moral nature, or in other words, they make a meaningful difference in human relationships. Major topics studied include

the quality of parent-child relationships, marital quality, consequences of divorce, work and family, poverty and family outcomes, gender socialization, and sexuality in marriage and other close relationships (*Journal of Marriage and Family*, 2000). Note that words such as “quality” and “consequence”, in relational contexts such as these, call for a moral judgment. That is, they quickly lead us to think of good versus poor parent-child or marital relationships and positive versus negative consequences of divorce. Additionally, much of the research in marriage and family studies involves comparing outcomes for different groups of people to determine if one course of action is preferred over another or if one group demonstrates better outcomes than another. For example, after extensive study, it has become widely accepted that authoritative parenting styles are better for children than authoritarian or permissive parenting styles (Baumrind, 1967). To conclude that one style of parenting is better than another is to judge the moral value of both the style and the outcomes. Marriage and family research requires moral judgments of this kind.

And third, as Slife (2007) points out, every methodology has values, yet a basic value of positivist research is to be objective or value-free. Thus, within positivist beliefs is an inherent, yet hidden morality. Positivist science takes itself to be value-free, yet it “*values* being value-free” (p. 11). Slife explains that bias is not only unavoidable but is crucial to evaluation. For example, though the critical evaluations in *Consumer Reports* are claimed to be unbiased, the reports actually have a strong safety bias in evaluating vehicles. This bias is crucial to assessing quality. If safety were not emphasized in determining the ranking system for cars, the entirety of their rankings would change. Without criteria (which amount to some kind of bias) to assess quality, the rankings would be random; some kind of bias or criteria must be used to make a meaningful, valuable assessment. Similarly, value-free research is impossible; if it were possible, value-free research would be merely random and therefore useless. Family science seeks to be value-free, explicitly promoting moral neutrality—but this is itself a value system, a hidden morality. A feature of this particular morality is

to make no distinction in the way people and objects are studied. Because of this, positivism is not objective; rather, it takes objectivity and moral neutrality—which dismiss other ideas of morality—as its dogma. Positivism depends on a hidden morality requiring that, for research results to be valuable or meaningful, people must be seen as objects.

Thus, in the positivist tradition, because people are studied as objects of the same genre as other kinds of objects, morality is dismissed from the get-go. The representational model of knowledge (to be explicated shortly), to which positivism is committed, spawns additional reasons to dismiss morality as relevant to the study of human beings. The same can be said of post-positivist approaches that retain basic positivist assumptions (Knapp, 1997). Drawing on Knapp's discussion of the representational model of knowledge as an accurate portrayal of positivist assumptions, I will explain how, in additional ways, the assumptions of this received view of science and its successors eliminate morality from the realm of methodology.

The representational model of knowledge is founded on a certain understanding of truth, which can be described this way: truth exists “out there” as an independent, objective, unchanging reality that is separate from fallible human experience. Knowledge, then, consists of propositional statements that accurately represent the objective, independent reality. Knapp (1997) identifies the following assumptions as characteristic of the representational model of knowledge.

- 1) “Things” are the foundation for representation and knowledge.
- 2) These representations are *atemporal* (i.e., they are not affected or limited by time) and *universal* (i.e., unchanging from one context to another).
- 3) There is a fundamental separation between the object represented and the representing subject—a subject/object split.
- 4) Method, if applied appropriately, will produce trustworthy representations and thus assure the validity of our knowledge.

I will now discuss how each of these assumptions dismisses the importance and even the possibility of morality.

### *Metaphysic of things*

The first assumption is what Williams (1990) has called the “metaphysic of things.” Metaphysics deals with questions pertaining to what is real. Williams explains that in the positivist tradition, we consider fundamentally real only static, atemporal things or entities that we can speak of in thing-like terms. A common way of doing this is to create psychologicistic explanations for human behavior. An explanation is psychologicistic if it assumes that some underlying mental process is responsible for bringing about a behavior. Take the example of a phobia. Instead of describing how a person feels (i.e., fearful, even terrified) in certain circumstances, an invented entity (a phobia) is regarded as responsible for the person’s feelings and behavior. But a phobia is not an actual thing we can touch or see; it is a construct. This invented construct is then regarded as a fundamentally real “thing” that has causal power to act on a person (e.g., my fear of heights kept me from achieving my goal to reach the summit of the mountain). As Knapp (1997) indicates, “One of the most basic elements of positivistic science involves the naming of a ‘thing-in-itself’” (p. 373). Once a concept is named, it is taken to represent some aspect of reality. As we have done with phobias, we reify (regard as if they had concrete existence) all kinds of psychological states, as well as things like nature, nurture, culture, process, and even history to explain behavior (Faulconer & Williams, 1985). Such concepts are abstracted (i.e., removed) from lived experience. But, given the status of “things,” we often view these abstractions as fundamentally real—more real, even, than lived experience.

Williams (1990) explains that one of the problems with psychologicistic explanations and other reifications is that the “thing” that explains actions or behaviors is never studied directly.

Subjective mental states are made the conditions, antecedents or explanations for human action and experience. Rather than being the direct object of study, psychical experience



becomes the basis for explanation of other human activities, which are then taken to be the real objects of study. (p. 141)

Ideas (i.e., reifications, whether they be psychological states of mind, or nature, or nurture, etc.) are separated from experience, and, taking on “an autonomous status,” these ideas “become somehow compelling” (p. 142). Thus the phobia (an idea), rather than the person, is responsible for the person’s actions in the circumstances that give rise to the phobia. Yet, the behavior the phobia supposedly causes is studied, rather than the phobia being studied directly. This makes some sense in that phobias are invisible, abstract constructs, but studies proceed without a coherent logical case for how such abstract causes actually can impact temporal, physical behaviors.

These ideas or constructs (which are not really material things and are therefore not studied directly) are understood to be determined by their qualities or properties (Williams, 1990). For example, one property of a phobia is that it compels the phobic to avoid the feared object or situation. It is understood, Knapp explains, that “the objective realities of the ‘thing-in-itself’ *impinge upon* the observing subject” (p. 375). So, for the woman afraid of heights, it is the phobia that compels her to avoid the mountain summit. The phobia is not merely a description of the situation and the woman’s feelings; it becomes the explanation that accounts for human action. In the positivist tradition, as in the previous example, ideas or constructs are considered “things-in-themselves” with inherent properties, and are endowed with causal power. “Explanation of things and their manifestations is legitimately done, therefore, in terms of the properties and qualities of things and their relations. If understanding is possible at all, these properties and their relations must be lawful and consistent” (Williams, 1990, p. 145). From this understanding, it follows that the purpose of studying things is to uncover the causal laws that dictate observable regularities. Knapp (1997) notes evidence of this insistence on necessity: “Rather than asking what a human event *means*, positivism seeks to establish *what it is*” (p. 391). Explanation is then in terms of necessity. Inasmuch

as we adhere to the positivist assumption of the “metaphysic of things,” we understand the world in terms of things (or thing-like entities) and the necessary relations among them.

The question, then, is how does this insistence on necessity dismiss morality? If we look to reified concepts (e.g., a phobia, nature, nurture, a process, etc.) as causal factors acting upon us, we understand human behavior as the necessary result of these causal forces. This understanding disallows any real alternative possibilities in human behavior, thus negating human agency. Moreover, in the positivist tradition, variability in human action is assumed to be due, not to agentive possibilities, but to unidentified and unmeasured additional causal variables. Without possibility, meaning and morality are eliminated as well because, as Williams (1992) states, “A meaningful act is what it is in the context of possible acts provided by a social and moral world” (p. 753). Acts that are necessary are not meaningful, nor good, nor bad; acts that are merely necessary cannot be moral, because there is no possibility that they can be other than they are. By explaining human action as caused by “things” with power over us, we deny a view of humans as agents capable of responsible moral action.

#### *Atemporal universality*

In the positivist tradition, representations must not only be thing-like to attain the status of knowledge, they must also be unchanging across time and context—they must be atemporal and universal. This assumption is closely tied to the “metaphysic of things.” Faulconer and Williams (1985) make it clear that the positivist understanding of causation “relies on the assumption that static, atemporal entities are the fundamental kind of existing things and that other things exist only to the degree that they can be reduced to these static entities and their atemporal characteristics” (p. 1182). This notion of atemporal and universal representation arises from the idea of truth as unchanging and independent. Faulconer and Williams explain, “It was reasoned that if there is to be knowledge, that knowledge must have some unity with itself, and if it has unity with itself, then its

principles cannot be different from one moment to the next” (p. 1183). According to the positivist tradition, then, knowledge or explanation should be atemporal and necessary. That is, knowledge should be unchanging and determined by causal law. Put another way, to assume that knowledge about human beings is atemporal, is to say that human behavior is a symptom of an underlying atemporal, universal law—that a human will always do “X” if confronted by “Y.”

To better understand atemporality—that “things” are not limited or changed by time—it is helpful to note a few points about our modern notion of time. Knapp (1997) explains that the traditional conception of time is similar to our understanding of space: time, like space, is without content but is capable of being filled (much like space in a container can be filled) without affecting its content. According to this understanding, time is separable from existence. So objects, having existence, and even events (because they are objectified) are taken to be independent of time—they are taken to be atemporal. Faulconer and Williams (1985) explain that when the atemporal is given priority over time there is no possibility, only necessity. This is because possibility requires temporality (the possibility of change).

Heidegger (1962) found similar problems with overlooking the importance of time and context. As noted previously, Heidegger recognized it had long been assumed that all things have the same kind of being. However, his claim is that human being—*Dasein*—is not like the being of objects. One important difference between human being and the being of other objects is that humans are not merely acted upon by time, but experience time meaningfully—according to who they are in any given moment—not according to what time is. The meaningfulness of human experience is inseparably connected with time. As Faulconer and Williams (1985) point out, in positivist thinking, the being of objects is understood to be somehow separate from time, and this includes humans because humans are looked upon as objects. But time (i.e., temporality) is essential to any meaningful account of human experience. Assuming that people and objects have the same

kind of being—a being separable from time—results in explanations of human experience and behavior that are bereft of meaning. Heidegger suggests that a major reason for this assumed homogenization of being (i.e., that all things—people and objects—have the same kind of being) is that individual entities, both people and objects, have been studied as things-in-themselves with little regard for context or time (Heidegger, 1962; Inwood, 1997). Thus, when atemporality and universality are already assumed, the only way to study people is as objects.

Moreover, overlooking time and context as part of being also results in (and seems to require) abstraction. As humans we have a remarkable capacity to imagine ourselves removed from our present time and situation. Perhaps because of this capacity to consider our surroundings as if we were not part of the whole, it seems to make sense to study things-in-themselves—as isolated entities. Polkinghorne (1990) comments on what seems to happen when we take this supposed objective point of view:

The process of creating a point of view outside one's own experience is derived from the ability to create by imagination the self as observer, standing at a distance from and detached from one's own experiential field. From this imagined distant point of view, one can suppress most of the contents of the flow of experience in order to concentrate on a particular part of one's experience, thus making the part appear as a figure and making the rest of experience recede into the background. The original fullness of experience becomes a shadow while the focal object is abstracted into a clarity. (p. 109)

Polkinghorne indicates that by attending to the focal object and abstracting it from its surroundings, that object seems clearer. However, the richness and messiness of the surroundings is lost—the context becomes blurred or distorted. In human science research, we similarly attend to the abstract (e.g., conceptual models) at the cost of losing the temporal and contextual richness of experience

that provides the foundation for meaning. This is a problem because it gives us a false sense of security in our abstract knowledge.

Slife (2005) discusses further some important consequences of looking to universals or generalizations and thus giving insufficient attention to context. Specifically, because of this tradition of studying individual entities—whether people or objects—as things-in-themselves, there is a tendency to assume what Slife terms an abstractionist ontology. Consider this example. A person caught in sub-zero temperatures finds a stash of wooden tennis rackets. From an abstractionist ontology or viewpoint, we might insist that these tennis rackets are sports equipment. However, for the person facing the life-threatening cold, the tennis rackets are firewood; to see them as anything else requires an almost absurd abstraction (removing the object from the context). The context gives not only meaning and value to the tennis rackets but also helps define them.

Similar to regarding the tennis rackets as sports equipment in the extreme example above, from an abstractionist perspective, people are likewise viewed as self-contained individuals that retain their identity and attributes from one context to another. It is as if we see each individual, not as a unique whole person, but as a stereotype of one, where we label, categorize or, in Levinas' term, we “totalize” each individual, as if they were to be fully understood from moment to moment because they are unchanging, and a given behavior inescapably has the same meaning in every context. From such a point of view, both identity and personality are independent of an individual's relationships with others. Slife (2005) describes the weak form of relationality that arises from an abstractionist ontology.

[P]ersons, places, and things...begin and end as self-contained individualities that often take in information from the outside. Relationships...in this weak sense are reciprocal exchanges of information among essentially self-contained organisms. The term “interaction” often connotes this weak form of relationality because members of the interaction “act on” each

other from the outside, with their qualities and practices depending on what kind and how much of this interactional information is incorporated into the self. (p. 158)

From this perspective, he explains, identity comes from what is inside the person (even if what is inside originated outside—as in the nurture side of the nature vs. nurture controversy). This weak relationality “is ultimately a type of individualism or atomism” (p. 158) and denies a view of people as fundamentally relational. How we see humans matters in the issue at hand—the consideration of where morality and methodology intersect in the study of human experience.

The assumptions of atemporality and universality—and the consequent inattention to context and temporality—contribute to the positivist notion of causation, and accepting these assumptions typically results in espousing an abstractionist ontology and an individualistic conception of humans. As discussed previously, the positivist understanding of causation makes no allowance for genuine possibility so vital to moral action. Additionally, grounding change (action) in the unchanging (atemporal entities) presents a logical impossibility (cf. Knapp, 1997, p.392-393; Faulconer & Williams, 1985).

An additional problem with a weak relationality philosophy is that it typically is expressed as a philosophy of individualism, which dismisses morality in a subtle way. Weak relationality promotes a certain morality—one that emphasizes the values of individual freedom and rights, personal choice (autonomy), and self-reliance—under the guise of moral neutrality (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). But when the values of individual freedom and personal choice are given priority over other notions of Good, the result is often an attitude of great concern for other’s freedom with little regard for what is in other’s best interests. This attitude is manifest as reluctance to take a definitive moral stance and to claim instead a moral neutrality that is not acknowledged as a stance itself (typically a stance of moral relativism). This seems odd, however, if we ground discussions of what is Good or what is moral in a relational ontology (weak or otherwise) because, from a relational

perspective, morality is inherently social. Therefore, it makes no sense to attach a concept of the moral to individual moral choice alone (Levinas, 1979, Hunter & Wolfe, 2006). Individualistic philosophy, which is inherent in atemporal universal representation, disqualifies any idea of morality that might require acknowledging our moral connectedness to others.

### *Subject/object split*

Perhaps the most basic assumption of positivism and the representational model of knowledge is that there is need for representation due to a fundamental division between the objective world of things and the subjective world of human experience (consciousness). This dualism is cast as the human subject, or self, versus an objective reality uncontaminated by human subjectivity. According to positivist thinking, the subjective realm encompasses everything internal including mental processes, emotions, moral sensibilities, values, and interpreted meanings; while the objective world consists of objects as things-in-themselves that have atemporal characteristics and being. Because our human world is continually changing, it is thought that truth must exist in a separate sphere—an objective, unchanging reality (Faulconer & Williams, 1985). These separate realms can be discussed in a number of ways—mind vs. body, inner vs. outer, subject vs. object, etc.—but however we speak of it, a fundamental separation is assumed. This mind/world Cartesian dualism is “implied in the use of methods, concepts, propositions, conceptual frameworks, measurement validity, etc.” (Knapp, 1997, p. 379). The purpose of these methods and concepts is to make possible the correct (or approximated) re-presentation of an objective reality.

Given the long-standing tradition of privileging the atemporal, the desired goal of representation is objectivity, but the problem arises of reconciling two unrelated realms—realms inaccessible to each other. In other words, how is it that humans, bound to their subjective experience, can access the objective world? Heidegger (1984) illustrates this problem with the metaphor of a box.

Here the subject is thought of as a sort of box with an interior, with the walls of a box, and with an exterior. Of course the crude view is not put forth that consciousness is in fact a box, but what is essential to the analogy and what belongs to the very conception of the transcendent is that a barrier between inner and outer must be crossed. This means that the inner is, first of all, really restricted by the barrier and must first break through it, must first *remove the restrictions*. (p. 160)

If humans are restricted to the inside of the box, then attaining objectivity (i.e., gaining access to the outside world) requires some kind of transcendence. Objectivity—equated with truth—is believed possible through the use of methods. In other words, methods are the supposed means of transcendence, overcoming the walls of the box. Thus, most marriage and family studies, because they are grounded in the positivist tradition, place considerable emphasis on empirical research methods in order to attain objectivity.

Little attention, however, is given to understanding the philosophical underpinnings that make objectivity seem so desirable—or even possible. As noted previously, the notion that we should be objective and use a particular method is a philosophical position (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Slife & Williams, 1997). This is not an objective (unbiased) stance; it is part of a tradition that favors a detached perspective (an abstractionist ontology) in an effort to attain certainty. The legend of seven blind men is sometimes used to illustrate why objectivity is important. The story is told of seven blind men who encounter seven different parts of an elephant. Upon touching the elephant, each of the blind men, bound by his experience, identifies a different object and none identifies an elephant. Yet, the storyteller declares with certainty that each man touched a different part of the same elephant and not the seven different objects they identified. Unlike those within the story, the storyteller is apparently not bound by the condition of blindness. Instead, as Hazelrigg (1989, p. 450-451) points out, the storyteller assumes a position of privilege not available



to anyone within the story—an “objective” view. Objectivity appears desirable because it appears accessible, like being able to see the elephant. If objectivity means having the truth—as the storyteller who alone knew that the object under consideration was an elephant—when it is inaccessible to others, it seems obvious that any researcher would seek a similar perspective. However, are we as researchers, theorists, and students not more like the blind men in the story, bound by our experience in seeking what is not readily available to us? As one professor asks his students, “How many of you have gotten outside your experience today?” To attain objectivity of the kind sought in positivist studies would require that people somehow get outside their experience.

In a positivist framework, because human experience is separated from objective reality and truth is located in the objective reality, morality has no place in scientific inquiry. Richardson, Fowers, and Guignon (1999) explain that nearly all modern attempts to make sense of morality assume a Cartesian dualism. Some theorists have tried to place morality in the objective realm, but doing so compromises autonomy. Situating morality in the subjective world seems to make more sense, but this also has problems. Indeed, locating morality in the subjective domain dismisses morality as a topic relevant to scientific inquiry. But this is not the only way morality is dismissed. If we assume a fundamental separation between self and world, favoring the objective side, we suppose a privileged position—like that of the storyteller who sees the elephant no one within the story can see—exists. Such a position, being “objective,” cannot be subjective; thus, anything subjective such as emotions, values, or morality, has no relevance to the objective position. In this way, objectivity gives rise to the idea that we can take a morally neutral position. Moral neutrality, however, is an illusion; it is impossible to take a stance that is not a stance. Instead, even in our research efforts, a particular morality—one that supports modern individualism—is promoted under the pretense of moral neutrality and value-free research (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999).

*Appropriate application of method ensures trustworthy representations*

To review briefly, positivism is an approach to science that requires that knowledge be certain. Knowledge, according to this approach, consists of accurate representations of an independent reality of unchanging “things,” and knowledge of the independent reality is obtained through the scientific method. Basic steps of this process are:

- 1) begin with a basic research question
- 2) research the topic to learn what others have found
- 3) form a hypothesis
- 4) perform an experiment to test the hypothesis and collect data
- 5) analyze the results
- 6) draw conclusions
- 7) make the results public
- 8) retest the hypothesis (usually done by other researchers)

In the positivist tradition, particular emphasis is given to steps four and five, with specific parameters: a controlled experiment should be conducted to collect quantifiable data which are then analyzed using statistical procedures. Controlled conditions in experiments provide predictive power, which is vital to the positivist project of attaining certainty. Ideally, empirical data, which lend themselves to quantification, are gathered and statistically analyzed. Empirical data are preferred because they are considered objective. “This is usually understood to mean that what scientists observe is not influenced by ‘outside’ factors such as the values, expectations, and desires of the scientist” (Slife & Williams, 1995, p. 171). Data collected and analyzed according to the parameters described above are several steps removed from the predilections of the researcher—first, because they are observable and thus, in a sense, public; second, because they are translated into the abstract

language of numbers; and third, because they are then analyzed through statistical means—all of which purportedly escape subjective influence.

From within a positivist framework, concerns about the trustworthiness of representations are centered on attaining objectivity. As Knapp (1997) explains, “the claim of theory”—including the scientific method which is itself a theory—is “a claim of having apprehended reality in a superior way, a way that successfully transcends the confines of one’s subjectivity to gaze upon the object in its true, previously unconcealed form” (p. 380). The scientific method, then, is actually a moral judgment that deems a specific set of procedures—which supposedly ensure objectivity—to be the best way to obtain knowledge. Knapp indicates how method fosters objectivity:

[Something is] objective [if it] re-presents “that-which-is-already” in such a way that the representation is *not* distorted by subjective (i.e., nonobjective) influences. In order to accomplish this, the positivistic view insists that the representing subject must disengage itself and “stand apart from” the object of representation in order to “discover” “it” as it is in its concealed condition. (p. 380)

The claim of method is that this can be accomplished. Method is supposed to be the means by which the subject can “disengage itself and ‘stand apart from’ the object.” Because objectivity is believed to eliminate “all potentially contaminating... influences,” Williams (2005) explains, “[it] is thus the modern equivalent of the privileged perspective that has been the ideal of modern rationalism” (p. 239). Therefore, because method allegedly ensures objectivity, it is also assumed to ensure trustworthy representations. Objective representations—uncontaminated by human beliefs, values, interests, commitments or meaningful possibilities—leave no room for moral judgments. The irony is that the received view of methodology was born from moral judgments in the first place—including the moral judgment that there is no room in science for moral judgments.

Thus, the philosophy of methodology that guides human science dismisses morality. This is a problem for two reasons. First, that position is, itself, a moral judgment regarding the meaningfulness of human experience, but the philosophy of the methodology denies both that moral judgments are being made by invoking the methodology and the legitimacy of making moral judgments. This creates a false understanding of the meaning of the scientific enterprise and what it does or does not contribute to the quality of human being. Second, dismissing morality disqualifies attempts to ground quality of human experience in moral possibilities. By turning humans into things, human experience becomes merely necessary outcomes or consequences of being acted upon as inanimate objects are acted upon by universal laws. Understanding the wholeness of human experience, including those aspects of being that are most meaningful (practically significant) is thus eclipsed from the scientific enterprise.

In brief, the practical consequences of assuming that proper application of method guarantees trustworthy representations are to discount the moral dimension of human experience and to dismiss meaningful explanations of human behavior. This is because such emphasis is placed on using empirical data and statistical analyses to achieve predictive power that the method dictates what kind of questions can be asked and studied meaningfully—only those that call for observational data (or data collected through the senses). Though the avowed first step of the scientific method is to select a topic and ask a question, the method of study (empirical data collection and analysis) is predetermined, disqualifying many questions of a moral nature. In other words, the starting point of empirical research is not really the research question; the starting point is already the method—which limits the kinds of research questions that can be examined. Questions such as what elements are essential to quality family relationships, or what does the birth of a child mean to a marriage, for example, do not lend themselves to direct observation or quantification. Empirical study of topics such as these involves operationalizing—using something observable to

represent something that cannot be observed (cf. Slife & Williams, 1995, pp. 191-193; Williams, 2005, pp. 246-247). This is problematic because the question at hand is not studied directly. What is more, the data that already represent something that cannot be studied directly are then translated into the language of numbers to be statistically analyzed and are thus removed one step further away from the original behavior context or question. In addition to whatever validity problems these practices create, because positivism favors a method that is said to ensure objectivity, most moral questions cannot be addressed adequately and are instead dismissed or disqualified as irrelevant.

Also, assuming that *application* of method ensures trustworthy representation dismisses the humanity of the researcher and its relevance to marriage and family studies. The positivist philosophy sometimes includes an attitude that data speak for themselves and, therefore, if research is done objectively, anyone would find the same results. Because such importance is given to objectivity, it is assumed that the method is more important to research findings than is the researcher. However, as researchers, we bring to our studies our own understanding and experience of marriage and family relationships. This influences the questions we ask, the way we design our studies, and the information we gather, as well as the way we interpret data and the conclusions we draw—all of which are indispensable to trustworthy representation of research findings. If what we bring to our research endeavors is also a belief in the illusion that we are not (or cannot) bring our own beliefs, commitments, and meaningful lived experience to our work, then indeed, we may be shutting off a valuable—if not fundamental—strength that could inform our work. As Williams (2005) asserts, “Any belief that [methods] are appropriate or valid is nothing more than a philosophical commitment” (p. 237). The assumption that a method is objective and that its proper application ensures trustworthy representations dismisses morality because it dismisses both the idea of possibility and a researcher’s capacity to engage in research endeavors that are capable of making a meaningful difference.

*Shortcomings of Positivism and Post-positivism in Addressing the Moral*

I have asserted that a key problem with the most typical research methodology in human science arises from an unintended but real lack of attention to important moral issues. The primary ways I have suggested that morality is neglected are 1) people are regarded as objects in research studies, and 2) research studies do not make explicit what constitutes the Good. The positivist assumptions I have discussed exemplify how these two issues are often ignored. The first issue, of treating people as objects, goes hand in hand with the metaphysic of “things” and atemporal universality. When we consider “things” as the foundation for representation and explanation, we then look at humans as “things” and explain human experience in necessary terms, just as we explain events involving objects. We look for unchanging causal laws to explain human events (even though no laws of human behavior have been identified). By explaining human events and experience in causal terms we dismiss the possibility of agency. We restrict our conclusions to those that can be cast as evidence of causal laws, thereby limiting what we can see. For example, if we assume that people are by nature hedonistic and self-serving, we deny the possibility of altruistic or compassionate motivations and behaviors—in spite of evidence suggesting that people are capable of seeking another’s best interests without selfish intentions. In addition to looking for causal laws, we also typically overlook context in order to study self-contained individuals and (often unwittingly) adopt an abstractionist ontology and individualistic view of humans. By looking to atemporal and universal explanations, we reduce people to objects that are acted upon by thing-like entities with causal power. Seeing people as objects, we do not account for humans as relational, agentive beings with moral sensibilities who live and act in meaningful ways. Instead, by adopting the assumptions of atemporal universality and a metaphysic of things, we look upon people just like all other objects of study and thereby treat them as things. This results in an incomplete or distorted view of people in our studies because it rejects the possibility that people can engage in moral relationships.

The second moral issue, of not making explicit our notion of what is Good, is likely a result of assuming a subject/object split and adhering to a method that is believed to ensure trustworthy representation because of its commitment to objectivity. This split restricts all questions of the moral to the subjective realm. Once we decide that morality pertains only to a subjective realm, separate and distinct from our objective world of study, and that we should follow a prescribed method to ensure objectivity in our studies, we shy away from asserting moral values. Such assertions would be—well, “unscientific.” Rather, we feel an obligation to conduct objective (often equated with value-neutral) research. However, morally neutral claims cannot effectively contribute to research that leads to quality human relationships because they refrain from promoting anything as good, thus providing no basis for making value judgments regarding what a quality relationship is. For example, if I limit myself to describing behavior, I cannot (or do not) address issues of how such behavior came to be or what grounds there are to think things could be different.

Furthermore, adopting an attitude that takes the illusion of moral neutrality to be real lends support to an individualistic moral stance that actually promotes moral relativism. To assume neutrality is to either suspend assessments of (moral) quality regarding what we are observing or describing, or to insist that any and every moral position that could be taken is outside the boundaries of our explanations. How, for example, do we justify intervening in adolescent drug-users’ lives without making an ethical judgment that drug use is destructive, bad, and undermining of the Good life, if we are going to be “morally neutral” about it? We would have no grounds to intervene in the first place. In brief, moral neutrality regarding individual choice is to ignore or suspend an assessment of the moral meanings of the choices engaged in, and is not a neutral position. By invoking criteria in the world of lived experience, philosophies of moral relativism and individualism can be shown to be destructive of a central feature of that experience—marriage and family relationships—yet research studies sometimes promote these values in the name of

objectivity. By assuming a subject/object split and applying method as a guarantee of trustworthy representation, we neglect identifying a moral Good and often fail to see the moral implications of the research methodology we have invoked.

In discussing assumptions that dismiss morality as a topic relevant to human science studies, I have focused specifically on positivist assumptions because of their continued prevalence in academic research. However, most post-positivist and postmodern approaches also fail to adequately address what is moral about the way we study people. Even those that explicitly reject the positivist assumptions I have outlined often retain other philosophical positions that prevent them from taking seriously questions that call for moral judgments. Such approaches tend to 1) exclude or give an incoherent account of agency, 2) embrace modern individualism, and 3) leave moral relativism unaddressed or unquestioned. In these ways, many postmodern and post-positivist approaches are similar to positivism in their inability to address moral issues.

### The Case for Making Morality Central to Research Methodology

A shared stated purpose of several marriage and family programs, research institutions and professional organizations is to enhance the quality of marriage and family relationships. Yet, the refusal of traditional research methodology to address moral issues undermines this very purpose for which the studies are conducted. This is because so much of the meaningfulness of how humans experience life includes making moral judgments, taking moral action and explaining their thoughts and behaviors in terms of right and wrong. Thus, an alternative methodology or alternative methodologies are needed for marriage and family studies to fulfill this avowed purpose—granting a place for methodologies that acknowledge morality as an inherent and essential part of marriage and family relationships.



The first question this task may generate is a challenge to the very ideas, either that we should even address the moral, or that the moral dimension in any way improves our scientific efforts in the human sciences. Reflect on this assertion: “I believe in learning for the sake of learning.” That idea seems to be an illustration that is consistent with a methodology that claims a pure objectivity in undertaking research. That is, the researcher makes no subjective assumptions, has no purpose for researching (learning), or at least does not or refuses to make any judgment about the quality of the research topics, results, outcomes, impacts, etc., because just the researching or learning from the process itself is somehow sufficient to justify the activity. Yet, even the idea of learning for the sake of learning is making a (value) judgment about the value of learning itself. This is a position that can be “added upon” by subsequent discoveries—however surprising—which multiply the moral possibilities we come to see in making sense out of scientific work. For example, most renditions of the Curies’ work that unintentionally resulted in the discovery of penicillin suggest both the moral value of scientific study and the moral value of unexpected outcomes. Science is not only shot through with moral values, but research is praised, rewarded and revered when the outcomes contribute positively (morally) to the quality of human experience. Thus, science is immersed in the moral domain, and therefore our notions of the Good are not only relevant to how we conduct human science, they are also inescapable.

In the remainder of this thesis, I explain my notion of the Good as related to quality marriage and family relationships and acknowledge that a meaningful (and scientifically defensible) purpose of marriage and family research is to understand and promote this Good. I then discuss some ideas of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas whose relational philosophy suggests starting points for an approach to marriage and family research that is grounded in a view of humans as moral beings and that can, therefore, address moral issues more adequately and promote quality relationships. In conjunction with this, I discuss Richard Williams’ (1992) account of agency and

how it informs Levinas' philosophy of "being for the other." I have chosen Levinas—and Williams' reading of him—because Levinas' focus is not merely individuals (as in classic psychology), nor the group or culture (as in sociology and anthropology), but the relationships of human beings. He proposes a radical (or revolutionary) view of the meaning of relationships—revolutionary according to traditional views of methodology in the human sciences—by suggesting humans experience a moral call in the presence of another that binds them in moral obligation to do right by the other (Levinas, 1981[1997]).

*The "Good" in Research Methodology*

Given that a common purpose stated by several marriage and family studies programs and organizations (including National Council on Family Relations, American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, and American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences) is to promote family well-being, my explicit assumption is that marriage and family research should help us understand what contributes to quality marriage and family relationships and promote such relationships. To help promote quality relationships, researchers must be willing to say what is and is not good for families and support their claims. Claims of what is good or harmful for families can be supported by empirical evidence, but the claims themselves are not empirical. Nevertheless, these issues can be examined—philosophically and practically—to enhance the value of research. Currently, human scientists seem to be willing to grant the moral implications of their findings when the subjects being studied are children—but refuse to make judgments about the value of researched behaviors and attitudes when it comes to adults. (It seems there is a philosophical commitment to human freedom to behave, without a concurrent concern about the value of the behavior.) If we are to do quality work, we must not run away from saying what is good for human relationships. Indeed, the quality of marriage and family research and its capacity to promote quality relationships depends on how well human scientists make their case in saying what is good for families.

That being said, a methodology that grants the legitimacy of morality in research studies is needed to better address moral concerns and promote quality family relationships. Such a methodology must be grounded in a moral philosophy that leads us to regard humans not as objects, but as people, both in our studies of human experience, as well as in our day-to-day encounters with others. There is value in seeing people as distinct from objects because it allows us to account for the moral as part of human experience, including in our research efforts. To address the moral in marriage and family relationships, a moral philosophy for methodology should offer 1) a coherent account of agency, 2) a relational alternative to modern individualism, and 3) a defensible moral grounding that calls into question philosophies and practices that are damaging to marriage and family relationships. A coherent account of agency is necessary because without agency—without possibility—there is no morality. By definition marriage and family research involves the study—not of individuals—but of people in relationship. For this reason, context and particularly a relational ontology that regards people as fundamentally relational are vital to a moral methodology. And a family-centered morality must be geared toward strengthening family and exposing the detriment of philosophies and practices that are not family-centered. Existent research methodologies, notably hermeneutics and phenomenology (c.f. Knapp, 1997; Packer & Addison, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1983; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Van Manen, 1990) have already been shown to be compatible with a moral philosophy. I will attempt to show how Levinas' relational philosophy addresses each of the afore-mentioned points and, thus, is also a viable starting place for a moral methodology.

#### *A Relational View of Humans as Suggested by the Writings of Levinas*

Levinas offers a relational account of human existence that stands in contrast to the objectified, atomistic view implied in positivism. Rather than seeing people as self-contained individuals, he puts forth a view of humans as fundamentally relational and asserts that individual

identity emerges in the face-to-face relationship with another person. In *Totality and Infinity* (1969), Levinas examines at multiple levels the relationship between the Same (i.e., the self or I) and the Other (person). In most Western philosophies the temptation is to reduce the other person to some idea of the Same—to create a totality. But, according to Levinas, in the face-to-face encounter with another person, I find myself in a relationship that I did not create and from which I cannot escape. This relationship with someone who is entirely other than I is a relationship of moral responsibility; I am responsible to and for the other person. For Levinas, obligation is at the foundation of our humanity. Because I am human, I “exist in obligation to others” (Gantt, 2005, p. 91), and part of my obligation is to answer for my deeds in the face of the other person’s needs and suffering. The presence of the other person demands from me a moral response; therefore, the other person—whoever the person is—presents me with both the obligation and the opportunity to care. Williams (2002) explains that this obligation or responsibility to the other person is infinite; “it can never be fulfilled. This is partly because the face of the other represents yet others, and in fact, an infinity of others, and thus, my responsibility and my possibility for ethical action is never exhausted” (p. 158).

The starting point for Levinas is the alterity—the *otherness*—of the other person, and it is this alterity that provides grounds for relationship, morality, and agency. Indeed, agency and morality are inextricably tied together and both are called forth in the face-to-face relationship with another person. To more adequately discuss what Levinas’ philosophy brings to our understanding of agency and morality, it is helpful to examine their foundations in traditional philosophy. However, since my primary purpose is to discuss the practical implications of a moral philosophy for the conducting and writing of research, I will only summarize Williams’ argument concerning the question of agency and how freedom understood as “having the world truthfully” involves moral responsibility in our relationships with others.

### *The question of agency*

The question of agency is central to our understanding of what it means to be human. The position we take on this watershed issue “will inform our understanding of the meaning of all human action, as well as our view of morality, the possibility of genuine intimacy, and virtually every other human attribute” (Williams, 2002, p. 144). Most philosophers or theorists who reject the determinist position instead favor agency understood as choice. Williams (1992) outlines problems of equating agency with choice, which is occasionally used in an ill-informed attempt to invalidate determinism. First, choice requires a chooser. Typically, the chooser is understood to be the self. For the chooser or agent to make any meaningful choice, the choice must be based on some grounds. The grounds or context for choice may include an individual’s environment, physiology, previous experience, social expectations, etc. These grounds are traditionally understood in necessary, causal terms as “things-in-themselves” acting upon the self (another thing-in-itself). If the choice is based on these external or internal causes, then it is not a free choice at all; it is merely necessary. This is a restatement of the determinist position. At the other extreme, in “choice theories” attempting to understand agency, choice would be entirely unaffected by context, independent of any grounds. Positions favoring this understanding have been referred to as “radical choice theory” (c.f. Williams, 2002, p. 148; Taylor, 1985) and include Sartre’s notion of being “condemned to freedom.” Yet, if choice is independent of grounds, the choice is merely random. It seems to make sense, therefore, to place agency somewhere between these extremes on a continuum—between necessity at one end and the absolute freedom of radical (random) choice at the other. This is not the logical option it presents itself to be.

Explanations of agency as choice, like radical choice accounts, hold that our ability to choose comes from our capacity to reason (Williams, 2002). Consistent with this line of thinking, agency is seen as a type of partial freedom because there are limitations on our capacity to reason. According

to these explanations, individuals possess agency and reason as part of an inherent nature. But reason, by its nature, is as compelling (and in the same ways) as other causal forces. Most explanations for agency as freedom or partial freedom also invoke agency to defend agency. For example, some say that the grounds for a choice do not determine but, rather, influence the agent in choosing (Williams, 1992). This again suggests a continuum between complete freedom and complete determinism. Yet, for this to be the case, the agent must have the capacity to not yield to influence. If the agent, therefore, “has agency” but can be influenced to some degree (suggesting a continuum from weak to strong influence), the issue of determinism has *still* been retained and thus the possibility of agency has not been adequately explained. Williams (2002) asserts that there is no coherent middle-ground position on a determinism-freedom continuum. In fact, logically, the terms freedom and determinism must be categorical—not on a continuum. Determinism is understood as an “in-itself” mode of being with causal explanations to account for all human action; absolute freedom is understood as a “for-itself” mode of being where individuals make rational choices in their own best interests. While both these modes of being assume that people are self-contained individuals, they share no common ground that renders a partial-freedom account of agency logically defensible.

Williams (1992) proposes that a satisfactory explanation of agency requires a human context of freedom *for understanding the grounds on which choices are based*. A human context of freedom suggests that the agent and his or her actions are themselves a feature of the context or grounds for making choices. Freedom of action, therefore, is connected to what the person is doing. Williams illustrates with this example:

Assume that I am given a rather complex cognitive problem or puzzle to solve. This problem is sufficiently complex that it is really impossible to solve unless I am taught the proper strategy, because it is outside my experience. In order to help me solve the problem, I

am taught many algorithms and approaches to the problem; I might even create my own “solutions,” so that I have a large number of alternatives available. I may be free to choose among these alternatives or not choose any of them. All of the alternatives available to me, however, are wrong, leading to my failure to solve the problem. (p. 757)

Thus, despite having the ability to choose among alternatives, the person is not free to solve the puzzle because the truth is not available. A lack of understanding—not a lack of choices—renders the person’s freedom ineffectual.

A commonsense understanding of freedom includes correctness or freedom from error (Williams, 1992). Remembering that my actions are part of my context for making choices, my being free requires that I am not deceived in my involvement with the world, particularly in my relations with and responsibility to others. Williams explains,

*What the agent is doing* is integrally bound up with agency [with *being* an agent]. Our common experience (as illustrated in the puzzle example) suggests that freedom requires truth or freedom from falsity. From this then I propose that to ask whether a person is free is to ask *how* he or she is “in the world,” whether or not he or she is involved in the world truthfully. Freedom is not a quality people have nor a “category” attached to humanity, but an activity, a way of being in concrete situations. Freedom is having the world truthfully. (p. 757)

Having the world truthfully pertains to relationships with other people. Truth here is not truth as correspondence to an objective reality; instead, truth is being in the world in a way that invites openness and includes awareness of context. Williams quotes Heidegger (1977, p. 129) in discussing contextual truth:

“Truth” is not a feature of correct propositions which are asserted of an “object” by a human “subject” and then “are valid” somewhere, in what sphere we know not; rather, truth is disclosure of things through which an openness essentially unfolds. (p. 757)

Instead of distancing ourselves morally and socially from others to attain an objective viewpoint, living truthfully requires us to be fully engaged in our social and moral world. In fact, “other human beings provide the occasion for my living truthfully or untruthfully” (p. 759).

*Being for the other*

Levinas’ philosophy, characterized as “being for the other” (Gantt & Williams, 2002), informs what it means to be involved in the world truthfully in our relationships with other people. Levinas suggests that what is most human about us is to recognize and respond to others’ humanity. Therefore, to have the world truthfully is to respond to others’ humanity with compassion. According to Levinas, when I encounter another person, I find myself in a relationship of obligation that I did not create or choose. Williams (2002) explains that this is a relationship of “being responsible” in two senses. First, I am *able* to respond because there is someone before me to respond *to*. And second, the presence of the other person *requires* a response. Anything I do—even if I do nothing—will be a response. In this relationship of moral obligation to another person, I am invested with freedom—and with responsibility. Thus, as an agent, my freedom is to be had in taking on the infinite obligation to the other person and “respond[ing] truthfully in light of this to that obligation in the face of the other [person]” (Williams & Gantt, p. 30). I cannot fulfill the obligation because it is infinite; but in being willing, I am free. Rather than equating agency with volitional action, agency is better understood as moral responsibility.

Because Levinas begins with the alterity of the other person—rather than with the inherent nature of the self-contained individual—he offers a rendering of agency that escapes the conceptual problems inherent in placing agency somewhere between determinism and radical choice. Instead, agency is inextricably tied to our moral responsibility to others. Additionally, it is the alterity of the other person that provides grounds for my being. Williams (2002) explains, “Understanding of our being does not begin with our being.... Rather, it begins with the absolute alterity of the other” (p.



154). Individual identity comes from our relationships with others. Even our language, which is fundamental to our ability to reflect on who we are and have any notion of individual identity, comes from others (Bergo, 2007). Levinas' descriptions of being (i.e., as being for the other) deny the individualistic portrayal of humans found in most approaches to marriage and family studies. Contrary to positivist and many postmodern accounts of human experience in which altruism is the exception (if it is possible at all), Levinas indicates that a compassionate response to the other person's needs and suffering should be expected. It then follows that selfishness—not altruism—requires explanation (Gantt, 2005). This implies that any practice detrimental to relationships is in violation of the moral responsibility we have to one another. “Being for the other” stands in contrast to positivist and post-modern approaches that 1) fail to render agency meaningful, 2) take individualism as the rule, and 3) unquestioningly accept moral neutrality and moral relativism because it offers an understanding of human being that acknowledges moral responsibility—a term that encompasses agency, morality, and relationships with others—as central to human experience.

### Implications for Conducting and Writing Research

Levinas' philosophy has important moral implications for conducting and writing about marriage and family research. In contrast to traditional approaches that begin by assuming people are self-contained individuals, the idea of “being for the other” suggests a starting point for research that acknowledges our moral responsibility to others and our intent to make a meaningful difference. In other words, even research is a moral endeavor; it is supposed to make a difference. In keeping with the intent to make a difference and acknowledging our moral obligation to others, I have suggested the purpose of marriage and family research is—or should be—to promote quality relationships. Thus, research itself is grounded in the attempt to foster the well-being of the subjects being studied. Additionally, research has practical value that can make a difference to those who read

it. We do research not merely about others, but for others. I see three ways of carrying out our purposes of “being for the other” in conducting and writing research.

First, a research study should begin with a question relevant to promoting harmonious<sup>1</sup>, meaningful marriage and family relationships. This question should not have to be adapted to a pre-determined research design and set of methods. Instead, research designs and methods should follow from our questions. (See Slife & Williams, 1995, p. 179-182 regarding how our research purposes ought to inform our methods instead of the other way around). Some questions can be adequately addressed using traditional empirical methods; however, a morally-based methodology would grant appropriate legitimacy to qualitative methods that is often not the case in current discussions of what methods are defensible. This does not mean that qualitative methods are automatically preferred; rather, the value of any method depends on how well it is suited to studying the issue at hand. This position actually points back to original conversations about both the legitimacy and value of human science (Polkinghorne, 1983). An implication of the current proposal is that “being for the other” suggests that both the what and how of our research efforts should be employed to make a meaningful difference.

Second, in “being for the other” we should be more attentive to the basic assumptions about human being that we take into research. In our research studies, do we see human subjects as self-contained things being acted upon, or do we see people as relational moral agents? Our assumptions about what it means to be human show up both in how we try to measure people and in how we interpret results. We should give careful attention to the assumptions we make in measuring people, including the ways we ask questions and the responses we include in surveys, questionnaires, interviews, etc. For example, we need not assume people are inherently selfish or ask questions in a way that promotes moral relativism. We should also be cautious in deciding whether and how to

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<sup>1</sup> Harmonious connotes that although differences and disagreements are experienced in relationships, these differences are complementary. Thus, harmonious relationships are not conflict-free, they are not contentious.

operationalize. This is particularly important in deciding when it might be more appropriate to use qualitative methods. We should avoid operationalizations that reduce people to mere objects being acted upon by the causal forces of environment or biology, etc. because doing so privileges a prejudice about being determined. Additionally, to be *for* the other in interpreting results, we must remember that our research findings do not portray a complete picture of human experience. This means, for example, we cannot assume that the outcomes we observe result from mechanized processes (or underlying laws of human behavior that act on all people, at all times, and in all places). Our understanding of what it means to be human must grant additional possibilities, including the possibility that even we as social scientists can be for the other—including by acknowledging our moral responsibility to the people we study and studying them as people rather than as objects.

Third, “being for the other” transforms the way we write up research results. We must make greater efforts to use simple language that is accessible to the ordinary person so that marriage and family research *can* make a difference. A methods section in an empirical study may understandably be incoherent to someone without a background in statistics, but we should be more careful to write about results and discuss them in a way that is meaningful to the layperson. Part of this is to articulate why and how the work is relevant to families or marriages, including making moral judgments about what hurts or helps people in their relationships. If our research is to make a meaningful difference to others, we must write about it in a way that invites readers to consider their own relationships and how the research is relevant to them or to others they know. To write research in a way that is both accessible and meaningful to others, we should focus on its practical importance throughout the research process. For if I lose sight of why the research I do has practical value for someone I know—that is, if I forget the face of the other person—I no longer feel obligated to act in behalf of that person. It seems this often happens in academic writing. We make

great efforts to write objectively, but in so doing, we remove ourselves from practical, relevant relationship contexts—we refrain from writing as if we are writing for someone we care about. And as a result our writing becomes abstract, unclear, and thus ineffective in promoting better family relationships. To be for the other, we must recognize our moral responsibility to the people who read our work and write in a way that acknowledges their humanity.

Some professionals may object to these grounds for doing human science. But to do so, they must invoke the very philosophy their criticism rejects. Those who still insist that an approach to the study of humans built on a moral philosophy like that of Levinas actually undermines science, are themselves invoking a philosophy they consider better than the one proposed. In that stance—in that disagreement—they are invoking not only an alternative philosophy of what they see as practical or essential to science, but are making a moral judgment of what is good, right, or best for the scientific enterprise. Whatever reasons they might give for rejecting the Levinasian option, they must believe the traditional approach is better. Is this not a value judgment about which understanding of the nature of human being is better for the purposes of human science? The idea that we cannot let questions of the moral enter into our conduct of science, lest science become a moral quagmire, is a philosophical move that rejects the moral dimension of scientific endeavors, and allows a sterility of meaning to dictate what in science is found meaningful and what is not. At worst, the granting of a different ontology of human being multiplies the possible meaningful “takes” on scientific practices and empirical outcomes.

#### *What It Looks Like*

To review briefly, Levinas’ philosophy suggests three ways of “being for the other” in conducting and writing research. The first way involves designing research studies with the express purpose of finding ways to strengthen marriage and family relationships. The second way of “being for the other” pertains to the assumptions we make about research subjects and treating them as

people rather than objects, particularly in terms of measurement (e.g. how we ask questions in surveys and questionnaires) and in how we interpret results. Finally, to be for the other in writing research, we must write in a way that is more accessible and thus invites all (including inexperienced students, for example) who read our work to see how it can make a difference for themselves or for others they know. By “being for the other” in these ways, we study people as people rather than as objects and make it clear how and why our research is relevant to promoting quality marriage and family relationships.

I have suggested that a moral philosophy of methodology can enrich even our empirical research. To illustrate the value of such a philosophy, I analyze three research articles according to the criteria of “being for the other” described above. First, I look for a stated purpose in the research related to improving marriage and family relationships and evaluate the research design according to how well it achieves this end. I have made the case that conducting marriage and family research is inherently a moral endeavor. Therefore, if this research is not done with the intent to make a meaningful difference in family relationships, I call into question the value of the undertaking. Both the purpose and the design should aim to strengthen marriages and families.

Second, I examine assumptions about human being evidenced in each article. I look for evidence of how research participants are seen as people or objects. I look specifically for evidence relating to the following issues:

- a) Behavior and outcomes are assumed to be determined by causal variables vs. people being seen as moral agents making meaningful choices.
- b) People are regarded as self-contained individuals and are studied in a way that is removed or abstracted from lived experience vs. research acknowledges people’s meaningful engagement in the world and with others as essential to a more complete understanding of the wholeness of human experience.

- c) The research supports or promotes moral neutrality and moral relativism vs. the research evidences a moral philosophy that strengthens, (or is *for*) families (not merely *about* them).

I evaluate how these assumptions are evident first in measurement and then in the interpretation of results. These assumptions are important because our understanding of the nature of human being guides us in creating and evaluating measures in human science work and in making sense of our findings. Research that invokes an explicitly moral philosophy consistent with “being for the other” depends on seeing and treating those we study as people rather than objects.

And third, I evaluate the writing of the research, looking to see if it is written in a way that is accessible to an educated person and if it clearly articulates how the research findings are relevant to improving marriage and family relationships. Research writing is essential to making a meaningful difference because through the writing of the research others will or will not find the results meaningful. Much of our academic work tends to be highly specialized. This becomes a problem when a) our academic jargon is incomprehensible to many for whom the work might otherwise be valuable; and b) our language is abstract to the point that, even if we understand what the research is about, it is difficult to see how it actually can make a difference for us or for those we care about. Research that is intended to make a meaningful difference for real people must be written in a way that people will see how it *does* make a difference; therefore, we must write *for* others.

*Example #1 “Expressed Attitudes of Adolescents toward Marriage and Family Life”*

(Martin, Specter, Martin, & Martin, 2003)

The purpose of this study was to examine adolescents’ attitudes regarding salient marriage and family issues including divorce, premarital sex, cohabitation, premarital counseling and psychoeducational interventions. The data for the study came from high school students’ responses to a survey that includes questions pertaining to several facets of relationships (sex, cohabitation,

role of religion, marriage status of parents, proclivity to seek professional help concerning relationships), as well as relevant demographic information such as age, gender, and dating experience. After discussing the findings of the study—how adolescents feel about divorce, cohabitation, premarital sex, and interventions—the authors conclude by suggesting implications for counseling. They emphasize that, in spite of societal trends of increasing divorce rates, most adolescents (including many from divorced families) desire to marry and think of marriage as a long-term relationship. They advocate making efforts to educate young people to help them build and maintain long-lasting relationships.

This study could be seen as exemplifying “being for the other” in several ways. The study is intended to assess adolescents’ attitudes toward and understanding of what marriage is in order to find ways to help them have successful marriages. The research design suits this purpose. First, the researchers have employed their efforts to make a meaningful difference. Asking young people how they feel about divorce, cohabitation, premarital sex, and counseling and other interventions is a straightforward way to assess their attitudes. The study also includes contextual information such as information about their dating experience such as the duration of their relationships and whether or not they had been sexually involved and with how many partners. Additionally, the findings of the study suggest that many adolescents are open to counseling and educational interventions, and the researchers identify places intervention programs might be established as well as specific issues that should be addressed to help young people prepare for marriage. These aspects of the research design help to accomplish the study’s purpose to help prepare young people for marriage.

Next, the research participants are regarded as people—there is room for the possibility that humans are relational moral agents, capable of “being” more than one way in a given circumstance. For example, in discussing adolescents’ attitudes about premarital sex, the authors indicate that a majority of the adolescents report engaging in sexual relations, while a much smaller portion of them

express positive attitudes regarding premarital sex. From this they conclude that “adolescents may not always act in accord with their expressed attitudes” (p. 363). This demonstrates that the participants are seen as capable of making moral judgments and of choosing whether or not they will live accordingly. Had the participants been seen as mere objects, the point made would have been how their behavior resulted from external variables acting upon them.

Additionally, the language of the study is clear and easily accessible to an educated person unfamiliar with marriage and family research jargon. The authors express their position that “marriage offers significant advantages to both adults and children” (p. 360) and give evidence to support it. They are sensitive in expressing how family and other relationship experiences may affect adolescents’ attitudes about important family issues. Because the language of the study is simple and because issues are identified that affect young people’s desires to marry and the quality of marital relationships they are likely to have, it is clear that this research is relevant for young people I know. The research is written in a way that acknowledges a moral responsibility to those who read it.

However, in other ways the study is in keeping with the positivist tradition of attempting to be morally neutral. One way this is evidenced is in the measures. For each issue that attitudes were examined, “no opinion” was the reported response of a large number of those surveyed. Including “no opinion” as a response implies that it is possible to be value-free. Little information is given about the measures—only one item from the survey is actually quoted—however, it seems that the survey itself is viewed as neutral when, in reality, the decision to use this particular instrument involves moral judgments about what information is important and relevant to the purposes of the study. The title of the paper also supports the notion of moral neutrality: “Expressed Attitudes of Adolescents toward Marriage and Family Life” gives no hint of the article’s (moral) purpose to promote interventions that prepare young people for marriage. It should also be noted that, though the intent of the study is clearly evidenced in the discussion of the results and implications for



counseling and premarital education, the purpose of the study is not explicitly stated as such early in the paper. In these ways the study conforms to the positivist tradition.

Using an explicit moral philosophy to inform the methodology would strengthen this study in a number of ways. First, the survey would be altered to eliminate “no opinion” as a possible response. Including “no opinion” as a response on Likert-type scale survey questions of this kind could be seen as promoting moral relativism. It suggests having “no opinion” is possible (i.e., that it is possible to be value-free), and it suggests that maybe it is not important to have an opinion about moral-related questions. The instrument could be altered in a couple of ways. One way would be simply to remove “no opinion” as a response, thereby requiring young people to take a position on important moral questions. In other words, they would be required to make moral judgments. Another way of altering the instrument would be to replace “no opinion” with “undecided”. “Undecided” suggests that a decision is yet to be made; while “no opinion” implies making a decision may not be important. This point may seem trivial unless we remember that conducting research is itself an intervention. The way questions are worded or the choice of responses can influence those who participate in research because research subjects are not objects but people who take meanings from questions and answers they ponder. Altering the instrument in this study would signify that it is important—both for researchers and for research participants—to make moral judgments. This would better acknowledge a moral responsibility to the research participants.

Additionally, giving more detailed information of the measures would strengthen the case that interventions are needed to help prepare adolescents to have successful marriages. And, changing the title to acknowledge the study’s intent of making a difference by promoting measures to prevent divorce and poor quality marriages, would make the study’s purpose more recognizable to those interested in supporting counseling and educational interventions and preventive measures.

Changing the study in these small ways would increase its potential to make a difference and would be in keeping with acknowledging a moral responsibility to those who read it.

If I were to ask the researchers of this study if they had a moral purpose in conducting this study, they may say their purpose was not morally-based. This would not be surprising because traditional research methodology itself offers no place for moral purposes in research. However, if the authors admitted to having a moral purpose, they might well say that to publish their research, they could not openly acknowledge their intent as moral. Again, this dilemma arises because the tradition—rooted in positivism—adheres to a methodology that relies on a hidden morality of moral neutrality. Recognizing this dilemma supports the case that there is a need to acknowledge morality's place in marriage and family research and methodology.

*Example #2*     *“Generation XXX: Pornography Acceptance and Use Among Emerging Adults*  
(Carroll, et al., 2008)

The researchers begin by explaining that in spite of the prevalence of pornography, the topic is almost entirely neglected in major developmental and family journals. The purpose of this study was to examine emerging adults' (ages 18-26) pornography acceptance and use in connection with their sexual values and activity, substance use, and values regarding family formation. The data came from students from six universities across the country who completed an online questionnaire that includes information about family background, personality traits, values, risk behaviors, dating, and sexuality. The results are discussed according to gender differences in pornography patterns, transitions in and out of emerging adulthood, and pornography in relation to couple formation. Overall, the findings indicate striking differences between men and women in their pornography usage and acceptance, with more women expressing an acceptance of pornography (49%) than actually using it (31%). Conversely, more men report using pornography (87%) than express that

doing so is acceptable (67%). Acceptance of pornography, rather than pornography use, was more strongly associated with risk behaviors for women and with sexual attitudes and family formation values for men. Regarding transitions in and out of emerging adulthood, the trend is for young adults to be involved in risk behaviors such as binge drinking more frequently early in their adult years, with the peak at about age 22, and then engage in such behaviors less frequently after that. This study indicates a different pattern with pornography use—the frequency with which emerging adults reported using pornography remained stable across age groups. Also, pornography was not found to be significantly related to emerging adults' desires for marriage and parenthood, but the authors discuss other ways pornography use may be related to couple formation. The study concludes with a brief discussion of limitations and directions for future research.

Much about the way this study was conducted and written is consistent with a moral philosophy such as “being for the other.” First, the researchers lay out clearly their purposes for conducting the study. Their intent is to 1) assess levels of pornography use and acceptance among emerging adults and how patterns vary across age groups of emerging adults, and 2) examine how pornography use and acceptance are related to emerging adults' sexuality, substance use, and family formation values. The questionnaire used for the study effectively addresses these issues as well as several limitations in previous studies. Much of the research to date focuses on extremes of pornography addiction, and studies of general pornography use report such a broad range in frequency that there is not a clear understanding of the frequency and impact of pornography use. This study was designed to address these limitations and others by using measures intended to obtain a more accurate understanding of the frequency of pornography use, analyzing men's and women's responses separately, obtaining information from geographically diverse groups, identifying whether pornography use is condemned or condoned by peers, and accounting for issues such as religiosity, impulsivity, age, and relationship status that may influence pornography use and

acceptance. The instrument used is well suited to the purposes of the study; the large sample size is helpful in obtaining a clearer idea of the frequency with which emerging adults use pornography; and the statistical analyses are effective in addressing the intended purposes of the study.

A second way this study is conducive to a moral philosophy of being for the other is that the participants are treated as relational, moral agents. For example, they were asked to make moral judgments by agreeing or disagreeing to statements such as “Viewing pornographic material is an acceptable way to express one’s sexuality” (p. 14), “It is all right for an unmarried couple to live together as long as they have plans to marry” (p. 15), “Being a mother and raising children is one of the most fulfilling experiences a woman can have” (p. 16), and “Being a father and raising children is one of the most fulfilling experiences a man can have” (p. 16). The responses were recorded on a 6-point scale that requires a judgment (in contrast to a 5- or 7-point scale that allows for “no opinion”). Also, the measures for frequency of pornography use, substance use, and other risk behaviors were based on a temporal scale (e.g., daily, 3 to 5 times per week, etc.). Designing the measures in this way reflects lived experience more accurately than a personally-defined response code (e.g., often, sometimes, etc.).

Additionally, the study is well written. The language is clear and uncomplicated. The purposes of the study are laid out clearly, and the results and discussion are thorough in addressing all stated purposes. For example, one of the purposes of the study involves examining how pornography use and acceptance is related to values of family formation. In the discussion, the authors address two findings related to couple formation. The first finding they discuss is that the results of this study indicate pornography is not associated with emerging adults’ intentions to marry and have a family. However, the authors point out that those who use pornography tended to be more accepting of nonmarital cohabitation and permissive sexuality, “two variables that have been found to be associated with less marital stability in future marriages” (p. 26). They also suggest that

“pornography use and acceptance should be interpreted within a framework that examines how these attitudes and behaviors influence young people’s marital competence and family capacities” (p. 26). These statements evidence an awareness of the potential impact pornography can have on relationships. The authors recommend that future research examine if pornography influences how emerging adults define marriage (e.g., as a committed lifelong relationship with one partner vs. a contractual relationship with legal benefits that can tolerate extramarital sexual involvement or can be terminated).

The discussion of pornography use as it relates to couple formation patterns is an example of the article’s clarity—one of its strengths. The writing is accessible to an educated person and thus acknowledges a moral obligation to those who read it. Likewise, the measures and the ways findings are discussed are in keeping with a moral obligation to treat research participants as people rather than objects. In these ways, the study is consistent with “being for the other.”

However, in one important way this study is not *for* others. In the writing of the study, the authors have refrained from making moral judgments. It seems great efforts have been taken to present the study and findings in a way that is morally neutral. For example, in the discussion of pornography use and how it relates to family formation values (outlined above), the authors refrain from suggesting that pornography use may be detrimental to marital relationships. In a sense this is understandable because the study of pornography is uncharted territory in the family realm. Researchers might be more willing to make value judgments about issues that have been studied more extensively because they could then defend their position based on research findings. However, morally neutral claims have limited practical value. Indeed, because of this reluctance to take a moral stance, the authors do not make it clear how this research can make a difference in the quality of (potential) marriage relationships—a vital feature of invoking an explicit moral philosophy.

Nevertheless, as I have discussed, moral neutrality is an illusion, and evidence of moral judgments can be found in this article. For example, though the authors do not state that pornography use may injure future marital relationships, they note that those who use pornography are more likely to be accepting of sexual permissiveness and nonmarital cohabitation, both of which others have found to be associated with lower marital stability (p. 26). Thus, they suggest indirectly that pornography may be harmful to marriages.

In the next part of the discussion on family formation values, the authors note the dissimilarity in men's pornography use and women's acceptance of pornography. Half of the women in the study expressed that pornography use is unacceptable. However, nearly 9 out of 10 men reported using pornography—half of them reported using it at least once a week. The authors indicate, "This disparity raises a number of questions about couple formation patterns between men and women" (p. 27). In other words, what happens when women who disapprove of pornography marry men who use it, especially if they use it frequently? The authors raise several questions related to this, including "What happens to men's and women's pornography patterns when they enter serious romantic relationships? Do men decrease or stop their pornography use when they enter a relationship? Do men continue to use pornography but do so covertly in an effort to hide their behaviors from an unaccepting partner? Do women start or increase their use when they become romantically involved with a man who uses pornography?" (p. 27). The authors suggest that it probably varies from couple to couple, "and the patterns that emerge likely influence future couple dynamics and outcomes" (p. 27).

In this discussion of women's disapproval of pornography in contrast to men's extensive use of it, a careful avoidance of making moral judgments is again evident. The authors bring up the issue, presumably, because *at least* the difference of opinion could prove problematic in future

relationships. They hint that this is the case, yet they do not explicitly say that pornography use, or even the difference of opinion, could be a point of conflict in relationships.

Though evidence of a moral stance can be found in this article, the lack of explicit moral judgments limits the practical value and meaningfulness of the results. Because the authors refrain from making value judgments, they cannot say how their research is important to the quality of family relationships. Some may challenge this critique as unfounded because the study was published in the *Journal of Adolescent Research* and emphasizes a developmental outlook. They may question the utility of making moral judgments or the merit of relating developmental work to marriage and family relationships. However, what is the purpose of studying development if we are not to address *optimal* development? And in developmental theory, family formation is regarded an important part of adult development (e.g., Erikson, 1964). Furthermore, the quality of family relationships (or potential family relationships) is a vital context or issue to be understood at any age or stage of development. Discussing how emerging adults' acceptance and use of pornography is relevant to the quality of family relationships would improve this study. It would strengthen the case that further research is needed and could make a difference. Invoking the moral philosophy of "being for the other" might alter this study in these ways: 1) it would include an explicit moral stance—at least in the discussion of how pornography use can affect the quality of potential marriage relationships, and 2) recommendations for future research could emphasize the need to better understand how pornography affects family relationships *in order to know how to strengthen marriages and families*.

*Example #3* "Transformative Processes in Marriage: An Analysis of Emerging Trends"

(Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007)

This article is a conceptual piece dealing with what the authors call "transformative processes" in marriage. Transformative processes refer to processes that effect a change in the

marital relationship such that the couple interacts in a qualitatively different way than they did before. The authors claim that marital research has been dominated by the study of conflict. They offer evidence to support their claim, asserting that while important things have been learned from the study of conflict, conflict alone accounts for little of the variability in marital outcomes. They suggest there is an intellectual climate for a shift in focus in marital research, moving away from the focus on conflict and toward studying marital “health.” They explain that conflict is being studied as part of a broader context and other positive, meaning-related processes such as forgiveness, commitment, sacrifice, and sanctification are receiving increased attention. The authors explain that “transformative processes” such as these are powerful in effecting positive changes in marital relationships. They indicate the importance of having a conceptual framework in studying marriage that accounts for transformative processes, which include “processes by which couples change without obvious outside intervention” (p. 282). They then discuss other issues related to marital transformations such as unexpected and discontinuous change and using taxometrics (a way of analyzing numerical, continuous data to discern categories with distinctive properties) to identify qualitative shifts that might indicate non-arbitrary boundaries for defining marital discord. They also present a model that illustrates the kind of marital self-transformation framework they propose and discuss implications of such a framework for marital research.

This is a conceptual piece about empirical work rather than an empirical study, so I have adjusted the method of evaluation accordingly. It should be noted that conceptual work, if it is to make a difference in helping families, can benefit from being explicit about the moral philosophy that informs the work. For example, is the philosophy invoked one consistent with “being for the other,” or is it hedonistic, or driven by other motives? Like empirical studies, in order to be *for* the other, conceptual work must 1) be consistent with a purpose related to strengthening marriage and families, 2) allow for the possibility that people are moral agents and not assume that human



experience and behavior can be adequately explained by underlying causal forces, and 3) be written in a way that invites those who read it to see its practical relevance in their own lives or for others they know.

The first criterion of “being for the other” involves beginning with an intent to foster quality marriage and family relationships. In this piece, the authors note practical implications of the conceptual work they discuss. For example, they indicate, “forgiveness has considerable power to elucidate the process of repair in marital relationships” and “provides important new opportunities for marital intervention” (p. 279). They also suggest that distinguishing between groups in a non-arbitrary way will likely suggest “new directions for intervention, maintenance of gains, and prevention of marital discord” (p. 287). However, they do not begin with an explicit purpose that is geared toward strengthening marriage. Nor do they offer examples of the grounds or starting points for intervention that could foster the operation of forgiveness or other of the processes they define as transformative and thus prevent or arrest discord. For these reasons, it is not clear how this conceptual work lays a foundation for making a difference in strengthening marriages.

The authors touch on another point related to directing the how and what of research to strengthening marriage and families. I have argued that to conduct research in a way that is *for* others, we should begin with research questions relevant to strengthening family relationships—consistent with the avowed first step of the scientific method. These questions should then guide us in designing research studies and determining appropriate methods to use. However, the authors of this paper indicate, “Conceptual change in our understanding of marital processes will need to occur hand in hand with the development of the new statistical tools for analyzing discontinuous change processes” (p. 276). Rather than letting practical questions about strengthening family relationships be the impetus for research, this suggests that methods are driving theory and research design. The authors see the need for advancements in theory as an outgrowth of the development of new

statistical tools; they do not express the need for conceptual advancements in order to improve the quality of marriages. This reveals an underlying assumption that both research design and conceptual understanding begin with method, demonstrating (as is common in the positivist tradition) an unquestioned commitment to the primacy of method. In contrast, the philosophy of “being for the other” suggests that our commitment and our efforts toward strengthening marriage and family relationships should come first.

The second point of evaluation pertains to basic assumptions about what it means to be human. These assumptions are just as important in conceptual work as they are in empirical studies and just as relevant to “being for the other.” This conceptual article does not deal with measurement—one place assumptions about human being often show up—however, the researchers’ view of how people should be studied is evident in how they discuss morally rich constructs and in the framework they outline for studying marital processes. Their assumptions highlight the importance of context, temporality and discontinuous change, and meaning—implying a shift away from positivism. For example, the researchers argue that conflict can be studied more effectively from a broader context of marital interaction. They suggest that processes such as forgiveness and contexts such as poverty and racism may influence how couples respond to one another. The authors support a view that “couples can sometimes change without outside influences” such as therapy or other interventions (p. 278). They cite research indicating that “nearly two thirds (62%) of unhappily married spouses who stayed married reported that their marriages were happy 5 years later (and 77% of unhappily married spouses remained married)” (p. 282). From this, they suggest, “we may learn a great deal about marital self-repair processes by contrasting the behavior of couples who stay unhappily together with those who demonstrate spontaneous remission of their distress” (p. 283). The researchers also emphasize the value of temporality in research studies. They explain the importance of “mutual influence processes” created over repeated

patterns of interaction in which “a previous partner behavior provides the raw material for a response that, in turn, will become the starting point for the partner’s next behavior” (p. 283). And they are interested in how processes such as forgiveness and sacrifice—processes that seemingly are generated “from within” can contribute to nonlinear and discontinuous change, and even be the core source of qualitative changes in marital interactions. “For example, a particular level of forgiveness in a relationship may be sufficient to allow the relationship to survive perturbations introduced by partner behavior” such as a serious transgression (p. 284-285). Or “a wife who views her marriage as sanctified and consequently believes that sacrifice for the relationship is a rewarding opportunity” may remain willing to make sacrifices even if external circumstances or her spouse’s behavior made it difficult to do so (p. 285). Additionally, the authors recognize that marriage provides people with a sense of meaning, and they outline a framework that “begins by acknowledging deep meaning structures” (p. 287).

Notwithstanding the importance of context, temporality (such as discontinuous change), and meaning in seeing people as relational moral beings, the view of human being portrayed here seems, in language and philosophy, to adhere to the positivist tradition of studying humans as objects—as being acted upon by abstract or invisible forces that seem to have germinated—either on their own, or at least outside the “ways of being” of the individuals themselves. For example, it is suggested that the constructs discussed (commitment, forgiveness, and sacrifice) “can be thought of as contributing to homeostatic mechanisms that protect the couple” (p. 283). In other words, forgiveness and sacrifice, rather than being studied as part of moral involvement with others—rather than being seen as symptoms of a given “way of being”—are instead reified and understood as processes, or part of a process, that dictates (i.e., determines) outcomes. The concepts of forgiveness and sacrifice become catalysts for the couple to be victimized (purportedly for the better) by mechanisms that surface in their marriage relationship. Perhaps the authors were attempting to make

a space in research endeavors for moral and abstract concepts that characterize and strengthen marital relationships, but were left with no other language or philosophical assumptions to make their case except those already usurped by positivism.

The authors also suggest that many couples may have “an inherent capacity...for marital self-repair and relationship-generated change” (p. 282). By not speculating or making a case for how these concepts are generated or operative, they are seen as inherent, but perhaps as mechanisms, that again “act upon” the individual with beneficial results. This position indicates that change can be seen as an inherent quality in certain relationships, but still not be an expression of change coming from individuals’ participation in relationships as moral decision-makers. In making a case for their “new view,” they retain the old philosophy. That is, now couples may be determined, not only by outside processes, but by internal capacities not available to all. So change that occurs without outside interventions is attributed to some self-defining property of the relationship and its mechanistic features.

These two examples evidence a view that 1) takes behavior and relationship outcomes to be determined by external or internal causal forces, and 2) regards the relationship itself as a self-contained entity (a thing) that can be understood by studying caused relationship processes (such as forgiveness, commitment, and sacrifice). These processes are also understood as thing-like entities. For example, the authors refer to “a particular level of forgiveness in a relationship” (p. 284), as if relationships or the individuals in the relationship *possess* a certain amount of forgiveness. Sanctification seems to be understood similarly, as something people can have or have to a certain degree—or not. This kind of rendition of forgiveness or sanctification removes the individual-as-moral-agent from the experience of *forgiving* or of feeling that *my* marriage is sanctified. In sum, the conceptual case put forth is not one that involves studying people and their relationships as reflecting their own moral way of being-in-the-world, but rather is about studying abstract ideas that

are reified and causally prior to the quality of the relationships observed or defined. This approach, after all, renders people as “objects” that manifest the outcomes caused by abstract constructs (plus additional measured and unmeasured causal factors by which objects are victimized, albeit beneficially).

Finally, just as in writing up empirical research, attending to “being for the other” in conceptual work requires a moral obligation to make the writing accessible to those who read it and to make clear how it is relevant for real people. (This would be necessary in a philosophy of human being that sees humans as objects as well, but on practical rather than moral grounds.) The academic language of this paper is challenging—not transparent to the educated, non-Ph.D. reader. It includes terms such as “self-regulatory transformative processes” to refer to couples changing without therapy or other interventions, and “spontaneous remission of marital distress” meaning that there is unexplained improvement in the relationship. In a few cases, examples are given to illustrate difficult terms, and this helps. However, there is extensive use of words that have rich moral meanings—words such as forgiveness, sacrifice, and sanctification—yet, commitment, forgiveness, sacrifice, and sanctification are discussed as constructs, each a potential “control variable,” with power to regulate relationship outcomes. These constructs are abstracted from lived experience rather than studied as deeply meaningful to people’s moral engagement in relationships. Thus, if I forgive you, it is not because of some way I am *being*, but because I have been acted upon by a regulatory variable. Because of this philosophical stance, it is not clear how research conducted in the ways discussed could (or will) actually make a difference in the quality of any given relationship. The main problem, however, is that when there is neither an understanding of concepts as symptoms of a way of being in relationships (instead of as causal variables independent of who the individual is “being” in the relationship), nor an expressed purpose intending to benefit real people, it is difficult to write in a way that helps real people know how to make a difference.

“Being for the other” would transform the analytical content and practical implications or recommendations of this conceptual paper. First, the paper would begin with a clear purpose of strengthening marriage. The authors indicate they want to better understand transformative processes in marriage, so they could discuss how this is important to strengthening marriage.

Next, “being for the other” would involve reexamining fundamental assumptions about what it means to be human and, thus, how we can appropriately study people by being true to a clear philosophy of what we are assuming about the human condition. That is, is it possible there is a type of double standard in research that is largely overlooked? Researchers are supposed to find creative and meaningful ways to measure behaviors and work with data (c.f. Brown & Kidwell, 1982). This requires purposive action (i.e., agency) and making judgments that have moral consequences. Apparently, we assume that researchers can make moral judgments and act purposefully. Yet, we seem unwilling to grant these same capacities to the people whose behaviors we measure. At the least, little thought or effort seems to be given to accounting for moral agency. Finding ways to account for research participants’ moral capacities is one way to be for the other in conceptual work of this kind.

And finally, the conceptual case in behalf of strengthening marriage would be stronger if it were written, not just about, but *for* others. Writing with a specific purpose aimed at strengthening marriage would help the authors to make it clear how this conceptual work could make a difference. Additional examples would help clarify difficult terms, and the specialized language could be simplified to make the work more accessible to people without advanced degrees in marriage and family studies. For example, here is how the authors discuss forgiveness:

It can be viewed as one example of a dyadic self-repair process.... [Some researchers] argue that forgiveness is important in situations where marital assumptions or relationship standards have been breached. Similarly [others] propose that forgiveness is important when

transgressions violate partners' relational ethics and sense of justice in marriage. Because assumptions and standards of marital relationship are threatened all too often, forgiveness may be a regular component of repair in healthy marital relationships. (p. 279)

Here is how the same concept could be discussed if it were written *for* others:

Forgiveness is an example of a healing process needed in marital relationships. Some researchers argue that forgiveness is important in situations where one spouse behaves in a way that the other sees as inappropriate. Similarly, others propose that forgiveness is important when spouses hurt one another and violate one another's sense of justice. Circumstances are seldom ideal—we get tired and hungry and irritable—and consequently, all too often, spouses intentionally or unintentionally behave in ways and say things that hurt one another. Forgiveness may be first a matter of willingness—of a sense of sorrow and empathy that includes compassion for the other—that generates the healing vital to healthy marital relationships.

### *Comments on Article Evaluations*

The articles discussed here have differing strengths and weaknesses. I selected them because they illustrate various ways morality is overlooked or dismissed in the conduct of research. Taken together, the strengths and weaknesses of these articles demonstrate both sides of the primary issues I have addressed in this thesis: 1) taking an explicit moral stance to promote quality marriage and family relationships vs. adopting the hidden morality of positivism, and 2) treating people as relational moral beings vs. turning people into objects to study them. The first article reflects a clear moral stance toward marriage and explicitly identifies what can be done to improve the quality of future marriages. The article also evidences a view of people as relational, moral agents. In the second article, people are treated as people; however, an explicit moral position is carefully avoided,

thereby limiting the practical value of the results. In spite of the moral basis of the processes discussed in the third article, positivist influence bears sway. A deep-seated commitment to method is apparent (even though it is a conceptual paper), and people are assumed to be subject to external and internal causal forces that render them essentially the same as objects. The articles are not intended to be a representative sample of current marriage and family research, but they do illustrate varying degrees of commitment to the positivist tradition.

In evaluating these articles I have attempted to take seriously the moral implications a Levinasian perspective affords. Some of the things I have noted, such as promoting moral relativism (albeit inadvertently) or making assumptions that turn people into objects of study, are clearly not in keeping with employing research efforts that would be *for* the other. Therefore, I have suggested ways each article might be improved. But there is not merely one right way of doing research *for* others. My analysis is not intended to be the final word on the matter. I simply offer one example of a morally defensible theory and method in an effort to demonstrate how an explicit moral philosophy can strengthen marriage and family research—by making it more meaningful and practical to professionals and consumers alike.

### Summary and Conclusions

This thesis is an effort to acknowledge morality in research methodology. Doing this has two parts. The first is to recognize that morality of some kind is inherent in human science research, in spite of every effort to be objective and value-free. To demonstrate this, I have explicated the place morality already occupies in marriage and family research—both in the topics studied and in the practice of research itself. I have discussed fundamental assumptions of traditional positivist research and how these assumptions dismiss morality. Positivist assumptions dismiss morality primarily because they 1) insist on a stance of moral neutrality that is actually a hidden morality and



2) turn people into “things.” The first apparently leads to the second. Part of the hidden morality implicit in moral neutrality is that we see people objectively—that is, as objects. Because much of human science research relies on this hidden morality, the first task of this thesis is to make it clear that morality is inescapable.

Relying on a hidden morality that requires us to be morally neutral is a tradition that has come from adopting natural science research methodology. Yet natural science research often has a moral purpose—it is intended to improve the quality of life. For example, technologies have been created that make it possible to communicate instantly with people across the world. This expands the possibilities of learning and of forming and maintaining relationships with others. Advances in medicine have eradicated certain diseases and saved thousands of lives. In our studies of marriage and family relationships, would it not make more sense to be like the natural sciences in their unabashed aims of improving the quality of life rather than in adopting their methods to study humans in a logically impossible, “morally neutral” way? Turning people into things disqualifies them as being able to address their own quality of life.

In addition to showing that morality in methods is inescapable, I have tried to show some of the consequences of relying on this hidden morality. I have suggested that many of the difficulties in finding meaningful results in human science research are largely a result of dismissing morality in the ways positivist assumptions do—by not taking a definitive stance that explicitly acknowledges a moral Good, and by studying people as if they were objects. For example, measurement is one area where consequences of dismissing morality are evident. It has been acknowledged that measurement poses one of the greatest challenges in marriage and family studies (Brown & Kidwell, 1982). In the positivist tradition, measurement almost always involves quantification. This is sometimes appropriate—when our research questions call for numbers. However, as Slife (2007) points out, when we are studying meanings, qualitative and interpretive methods are needed. Yet, there is a

continued tradition of attempting to measure people and their relationships as quantifiable “things” that are acted upon with no acknowledgement of the “human context of agency” (Williams, 1992).

If we are to take the study of human relationships seriously, we must understand that the meaning of people’s actions in their relationships “is integrally bound up with what [they] are doing”—with their moral and social context—“not with the metaphysical qualities of [their] circumstances” (p. 757). By adopting the implicit values of the tradition and thus treating people like objects in research studies and measuring them as such, we limit the meaningfulness of our findings.

Making the consequences of unquestioningly relying on traditional research methodology clear is vital to the second part of this thesis—making the case that morality *should* be acknowledged, that it should be an explicit and central part of our research endeavors. To this end, I have discussed and demonstrated how Levinas’ relational view of human relationships is one explicit moral philosophy that is relevant to strengthening marriage and family relationships and can enrich even our empirical work. Part of the value of this philosophy of “being for the other” in conducting and writing research is that it places us in moral obligation to do research *for* others. Doing research that is *for* others strengthens our work because it gives us clearer direction, invites us to reconsider our assumptions about what it means to be human and how to treat one another accordingly, and helps us articulate why the research we do is important and how we and others can make a difference. Doing research in this way requires our best moral efforts as researchers and as humans. Admittedly, this stance rejects the idea that researchers are things or objects and even leaves open the possibility that we care about the people we study.

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