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SECOND-PERSON IN-DEPTH PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY AS AN APPROACH FOR STUDYING ENACTION OF BELIEFS

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ABSTRACT

Phenomenology and empirical research are not naturally compatible and devising an empirical technique aiming at researching experience is a challenge. This article presents second-person in-depth phenomenological inquiry – a technique that tries to meet this challenge by allowing the transformation of a participant greatly interested in the investigation of their own subjective experience, into a co-researcher. It then provides an example of this technique being used in a study on enaction of beliefs, more closely showing the cooperative research process of researcher and co-researcher and its result: a grounded theory. The article ends with a discussion on the techniques strengths and weaknesses.

KEY WORDS

phenomenological inquiry, first-person perspective, experience, enaction, belief

CLASSIFICATION

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INTRODUCTION

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHENOMENOLOGY AND EMPIRICAL RESEARCH, SOME PROBLEMS AND ATTEMPTS AT SOLUTIONS

Husserl developed phenomenology, because he wanted to set science on a solid foundation. He believed that the natural sciences (among which he also counted psychology and other sciences of *the mind*) is naïve towards its own axioms and presuppositions: reality is simply assumed to exist out there, waiting to be explored and described [1].

He saw phenomenology as a transcendental science that is supposed to investigate the basis of knowledge and how it is possible. The naïveté of natural science should be overcome by systematic questioning of the presuppositions that natural science takes for granted. Among which, treating the mind as part of a natural world is the one that is the most interesting for cognitive science. Husserl shows that experiencing is our primary condition and makes a stand for treating it this way. For that he develops a methodological system that, instead of our "natural" attitude, takes hold of a phenomenological attitude and grounds itself in bracketing our everyday, i.e. "natural" attitude [1]. That is why "the phenomenological attitude has frequently been described as an unnatural direction of thought." [2; p.338]

Along with natural science's basic presuppositions, Husserl [1] also rejects its methodological approaches. He describes his project of research as a philosophical one and does not see reconciliation as possible (except for the possibility of science accepting phenomenology as the primary discipline, upon which all other disciplines are based). According to Zahavi, Husserl viewed suggestions that the phenomenological account could be absorbed, or reduced, or replaced by a naturalistic account, as "sheer nonsense" [2; p.334].

Despite such a harsh delineation, the need to include a first-person (experiential) account is evident ever since the birth of cognitive science as an interdisciplinary approach devoted to studying the mind. This has introduced an abundance of different methods for studying experience. Some of these are quantitative (e.g. [3, 4]) while other methods are qualitative (e.g. [5-8]) and specially designed for the research of experience. Disregarding Husserl's desire for avoiding the empirical, many of these methods (especially the qualitative ones) nevertheless follow basic phenomenological guidelines (like the attempt to bracket presuppositions about the nature of experience etc.).

Francisco Varela, one of the most vocal proponents of bridging the gap between the third- and first-person oriented approaches in cognitive science, points out that the study of experience needs to measure up to the standards of natural science – chief among them being replicability and intersubjectivity [9].

It would seem, that the very problem of many of the existing methods that the drive to achieve these standards steamrollers some of the essential characteristics of experience.

"- Experience is simultaneously the framework of our observation, the observing eye, and the object of observation.
- By researching it, experience changes.
- The change in experience in turn changes the observer and therefore the observation.
- The above circularity is not a → b, b → a; it is a → a – experience observing experience.
- Our current experience is a point in the history of experience, which is constructing itself.
- Acquiring knowledge about experience is not so much about creating a categorical system as about expanding awareness to reach ever more subtle skills of bracketing the natural attitude and enhancing meta-experience (the experience of experience).
- Knowledge about experience is itself a new experience [...]" [10; p.380].

An empirical approach to studying phenomenology should therefore, in accordance with the above characteristics, satisfy three conditions:

1) Accept the constructive nature of observation and do away with idea of independence of observation and the observed.
2) Intersubjective validation should not be a necessary condition for studying experience. This does not mean that studying experience cannot produce intersubjectively not valatable and/or replicable results, but results should not be dismissed solely on those grounds. Hope remains that the study of experience will someday unveil invariants, but this hope should not be valued more than the data available to us.
3) Accept the possibility that research changes the researcher. [10]

Some of these challenges are already addressed by an interview method called the elicitation interview. The method was conceived by P. Vermersch [11] and its most prominent representative is C. Petitmengin, who provides a thorough description of the elicitation interview in her 2006 article: Describing one's subjective experience in the second person [7]. In it she points out a great number of difficulties of becoming aware of one's subjective experience (such as the dispersion of attention and the confusion between experience and representation, as well as the problems of retrospection and articulation) and how these difficulties might be overcome in with an appropriate interview technique.

Despite the great sensitivity of the elicitation interview regarding many qualities of experience, it evades some of the tricky challenges of investigating experience, namely the question of who is actually researcher (the person conducting the interview or the one introspecting their own experience) and the constructive nature of the second-person process.

An attempt at upgrading the elicitation interview method in the direction of an empirical phenomenology (as outlined by the three conditions mentioned above) is the method of the second-person in-depth phenomenological inquiry or SIPI for short (partially already described in [12]). Second-person here is used to "delineate the focus of the research: third-person (examining the experience of others), second-person (dialogical co-research) or first-person (examining one's own experience)." [10; p.379].

SECOND-PERSON IN-DEPTH PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY (SIPI)

The elicitation interview underlines just how hard it is to observe one's experience and addresses the problems of retrospection, recognising the contours of experience and articulating them. But it still appears to be a case of a researcher gathering data from a participant. For the acquisition of phenomenological data it is vital to learn how to study one's own experience [7, 13]. This is possible only if the person whose phenomenology is being studied is genuinely interested in their own experience. For this we propose that such persons themselves become co-researchers.

METHODOLOGICAL TURN

As Petitmengin [7] has pointed out, introspection is challenging. It amounts to nothing unless the observer dedicates a lot of interest, attention and dedication to the task. If a participant is sufficiently interested in the research question, so much so that it becomes *their* research question, in a way, they undergo the transformation from participant to co-researcher. It is at this point that research is considered in-depth.

This transformation brings with itself a change in the research dynamic. It is no longer so that the researcher tries to wring out data from a participant. The co-researcher observes their own experience and shares their findings with the researcher. The researcher in turn helps the co-researcher in this endeavour by evoking interest in the research question and opening up space for the co-researchers research that is introspection (cf. [8, 14]) with the techniques laid out by the elicitation interview [7]. In the Figures below is an oversimplified representation of the “classic” position (Figure 1) and the methodological turn (Figure 2).

RESEARCHER $\xrightarrow{\textbf{OBSERVATION}}$ **PARTICIPANT**

Figure 1. The “classic” position simplified.

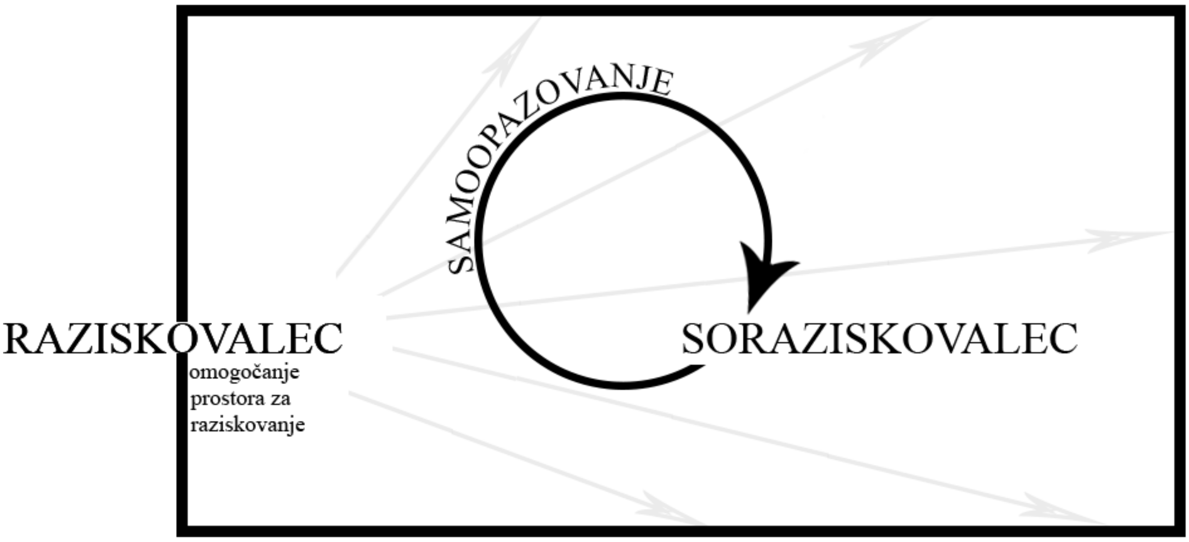

Figure 2. The methodological turn.

PHASE STRUCTURE OF SIPI

SIPI is carried out in two phases, sketched out in Figure 3.

Phase one begins with a series of elicitation interviews. Here we might still be referring to a participant reporting (and not researching) and a researcher trying to obtain phenomenological data. The function of these interviews is twofold: gathering experiential reports on the phenomenon we are researching on the one hand, and introducing the participant to our research question and coordinating terminology on the other hand. This is done through a participatory process of refining experiential categories. It is important that the participant understands the research question and the goal of the study at hand, and that they themselves suggest the terms with which their experience is to be described (cf. [8]).

Phase one is selective. During this process the participant is meant to familiarise themself with the process of studying experience (as well as its challenges and perhaps some trick on how to overcome them) and ask themself whether this process suits them. If they then also decide that the research question is of great enough interest to them that they are willing to personally commit to an active in-depth study of the phenomenon, they are ready to begin the second phase of SIPI as co-researchers.

Phase two consists of two parts: journal-keeping and interviews.

At this point, the co-researcher is already familiar with the research question, has an invested interested in it, and has already obtained some experience with introspection. It is therefore possible for them to begin observing their experience in everyday life. Observations relevant to the study are noted in a journal. This journal partly follows the structure laid out by John

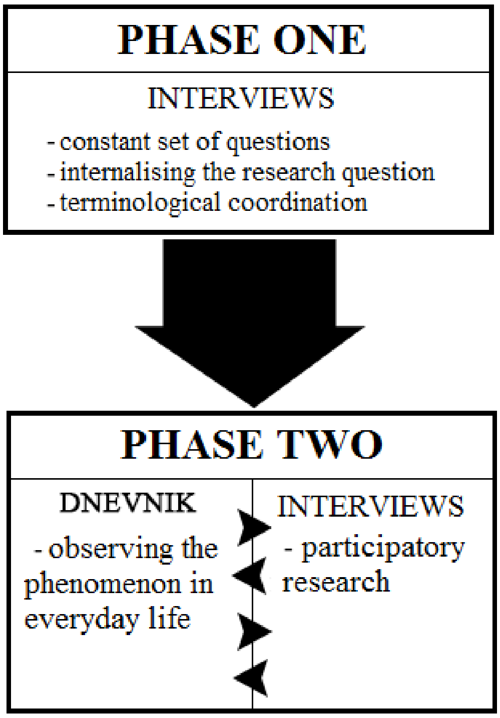

Figure 3. Phase structure of SIPI.

Creswell [15], who suggests structuring entries into a reflective and a descriptive part. Our version uses the terms *experiential part* and *situational context* (a description of the situation in which the experience occurred).

Interesting journal entries are then reviewed in interviews. While the interviews in phase one were split between researching the phenomenon and familiarising the participant with the research question and approach to exploring their experience, interviews in phase two focus primarily on the former. Here we speak of participatory research, where research and co-researcher, through the cooperative process of dialogue in the form of a research conversation, revisit interesting and relevant experiences. The results of this research process are always co-constructions of both, the researcher and co-researcher, in a process perhaps similar to what De Jaegher and Di Paolo [16] call participatory sense-making.

These co-constructions are not final, but keep evolving over the course of the study. This sequential analysis of acquired data constantly directs and corrects the course of the study, shaping new views and asking new questions regarding the studied phenomenon. Sequential analysis, though reduced in scope, already takes place in phase one, where finding from previous interviews as well as from other participants shape the researcher's approach towards the studied phenomenon. But it is at its strongest in phase two, where each interview and therein discussed journal entries can be considered its own research sequence. Findings from the interview guide the co-researcher in their introspection and journal entries, while the journal entries form a new foundation on which researcher and co-researcher together arrive at new discoveries. In addition to that, findings from one co-researcher are compared with findings from other co-researchers, which again influence further research. Thus, the results of SIPI are never "a final truth, but only a point in the spiral of (interwoven) interpretations." [17; p.22].

A CASE ILLUSTRATING THE APPLICATION OF SIPI

SIPI was used in a study on the phenomenology of the enaction of belief. Enaction here refers to the description of F. Varela, E. Rosch and E. Thompson [18] of a middle way between understanding cognition as passive reception of an external world and understanding cognition as projecting a world in accordance with the cognitive system's structure.

Interested participants were invited for at least one (and if interest holds, more) phase one interviews, which became more and more structured as the study progressed, eventually settling on a constant set of questions that allowed comparison between participants. Participants who, during the course of phase one, acquired a firm understanding of the researched phenomenon and developed a proper, deep-seated interest in studying it even outside the context of an interview, are invited to keep a journal, recommended the predetermined entry structure and thus progress to phase two as co-researchers. Now interviews are no longer pre-structured. They are now shaped by the co-researcher and their observations of their everyday experience, as noted in their journal.

Independent of the interviews, the research group conducts regular meetings and discussions on the current course of the study, new findings from individual interviews and interesting new questions or directions of research. Here, researchers and co-researchers together compare their experiences, highlighting commonalities and differences, suggesting common terminology and explanations for observed phenomena.

CO-CONSTRUCTING A CATEGORY

One of the sub-questions asked in this study is: "How does the communicational situation affect the enaction of beliefs?" What is observed here is whether and how different situations, most prominently exemplified by different interlocutors, affect either which beliefs get enacted or the way in which those beliefs are enacted. But for that we predicted that the interlocutor would somehow have to be present in the person's experience. How? For many co-researchers, this is very hard to observe in their own experience, especially expressed in terms coined by someone else. Below is an excerpt from an interview, wherein researcher and co-researcher try to find this phenomenon, inadvertently coining a new term for describing it.

> **T01:** I don't know. How, ok how do I experience this (long pause) well... well if I wanted to tell you, well, this part of experience as in "do I see anything? Do I hear anything?" and such, I don't remember that now. And the rest I can't describe.
> **R:** I'll ask like this: is there anywhere in your experience a feeling of what this boy thinks of you?
> **T01:** Not really that. Just that, he wouldn't think badly of me.
> **R:** How do you know he doesn't already?
> **T01:** I don't. I think because ... I don't ... I know from my relationship with him.
> **R:** Be specific.
> **T01:** Well, because he never said or did anything, that would make me think he thinks bad of me, and because I think he's a kid and not even capable of thinking anything like that.
> **R:** Look, you developed this whole argument about this. Where – did you ever contemplate this?
> **T01:** This right now?
> **R:** Yes.
> **T01:** With this – in this situation?
> **R:** Yes.
> **T01:** No.
> **R:** So, but still you knew.
> **T01:** Yes.
> **R:** So this argument was just you explaining it to me.

T01: Yes.
R: It is not true, that you think that because of this.
T01: Because of what, then?
R: I don't know. I mean –
T01: Well, you always know that in the background.
R: Where, well, yes, this! This background is what we're looking for!
T01: Yeah, you know that!
R: Where do you know that?
T01: I mean, I know that.
R: Yes, this part! […] So it's somewhere in the background.
T01: I mean, in the background... I mean that metaphorically.
R: Mmm, this background sounds very real to me. Can you describe this background?
T01: Yeah, I don't know.
R: You see, what I wanted to say was that you apparently never sat down, took some time, and contemplated: "aha, look, that boy never said anything bad about me, and he's just a kid, and I don't know what else. What can I deduce from that? Oh, that he think good of me!" You probably never looked at it like that.
T01: No.
R: So there was something else. What? Something in the background, some feeling is in the background. So you just explained it like that to me, in reality you didn't argue it like this to yourself.
T01: Yeah, a feeling, that ... a feeling ... of the relationship, that ... you develop over time. And at every point you have a feeling of the relationship. In this case, with that boy.
R: Yes, this feeling is what we're interested in!

FEELING OF THE RELATIONSHIP VERSUS FEELING OF THE CONTENT

We present one of several grounded theories that have emerged during our undertaking: the apparent inverse proportionality of *feeling of the content* and *feeling of the relationship*.

Feeling of the relationship is a deductive category. Its origin goes back to the hypothesis that interlocutors affect the enaction of beliefs. This category refers to descriptions of interlocutors (or the current social situation) being in the centre of attention: "What does he/she think of me? What is our relationship? What is expected of me in this exchange?" One example of this category is already presented above, but to paint a clearer picture, we provide another:

> Well, from them I received, well, signals. […] if they're paying attention or if they're looking away. And if they were looking away, I'd feel stupid, or stupider than if they were looking at me. […] And that was like boost, a boost of ... feeling good talking to them.

Feeling of the content is an inductive category. It represents descriptions of the content one is trying to communicate (or receive through communication from an interlocutor) being the centre of attention, where one focuses on what information has already been transmitted and what information still needs to be conveyed in order to communicate a full explanation. This is exemplified by the following quote:

> I knew what I have already told her and what she knows about this. And then, how I would connect it all and explain it. And in that feeling, when I knew what she knew, I tried to somehow put myself into her shoes, and try to look at

the whole thing as if I knew only what I told her in those last fifteen minutes, what I would need to add or what I would have wanted explained.

The preliminary results of the study suggest the following: the experience of beliefs being enacted varies from instance to instance, and in these instances the *feeling of the relationship* or the *feeling of the content* plays a central role. What is most interesting is that there appears to be an inverse proportionality in the manifestation of these *feelings*, that is a person seems to always feel one *feeling* to be much stronger than the other – either focusing on the social situation, the interlocutors emotions and how the relationship is to progress, or on the content of the information being transmitted.

DISCUSSION

Of great concern to the presented technique is the question of validity. On one hand, the possibility of observing the desired phenomenon in an everyday environment with arguably minimal interference from a researcher allows for very high ecological validity. On the other hand, the selection process co-researchers is very fastidious. One of the reasons for implementing SIPI is to dedicate more attention to individual differences in experience. We think that this research technique can more clearly bring forth different ways of constructing a personal reality. But the problem is that the demands the technique poses to participants (a personal, existential interest for the investigation of their experience) disqualify certain groups and with that certain modalities of the construction of experience.

SIPI's methodological turn doubtlessly addresses at least two of the three conditions we have set ourselves for an empirical phenomenology. By encouraging the participant to become a co-researcher, the observed attains its rightful status as the observer as well. And because introspection is a skill that is honed by its practice, growth and change in the (co-)researcher is an inseparable part of the practise of studying one's experience.

What also remains problematic is the question of intersubjective validation. Participartory research is very vulnerable in the area of replication. SIPI empowers both the "original" researcher and the co-researcher by giving them freedom to co-construct research results. An upside of this process is that partial intersubjective validation can already happen during the interviews (which thus become more and more similar to discussions between researchers than the gathering of data). But this kind of research of course adds complexity and lowers the chances of replication. We believe that empirical phenomenological research is currently in the butterfly collecting stage – similar to biology in the 18th century, when researchers like Humbolt walked the world and gathered samples. Only when enough samples were obtained the coordination of appropriate gathering techniques and sensible classification could begin.

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