

## PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF FIRST-PERSON RESEARCH

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is twofold. First, it aims to overview current empirical methods in the area of first-person research. Such a review cannot overlook epistemological and ontological issues, but must at the same time keep in mind methodological and almost technical nature of the problem. Empirical experience research is positioned within the frame of cognitive science and the overview of approaches and techniques of empirical phenomenology is presented, together with epistemological considerations. The second aim of the paper is concerned with the future of research in the discussed area. It suggests that in-depth, existentially liable introspection and self-inquiry should be considered as serious scientific research tools.

### KEY WORDS

empirical phenomenology, first-person methods, cognitive science, mindfulness

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## COGNITIVE SCIENCE AS NEW ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THE RESEARCH OF EXPERIENCE

Research of experience, or *empirical* research of experience to be precise, is an area which has been dealt with by science on several occasions (most vigorously in the framework of the project of the so-called German introspectionism at the beginning of XX. century), and, due to evident problems encountered in the objectivisation of the subjective, abandoned on no fewer accounts. The most recent attempt has emerged in the area of cognitive science – an interdisciplinary conjunction of different approaches in exploration of psyche. It is most interesting that it was exactly the progress in objective (third-person) research of cognition that spurred the re-emergence of studying the immediate, lived (first-person) human experience. It was neuroscientists themselves, whose mission is supposedly to find out the neurophysiological correlates to experience, who started to realize that it was not just the third-person perspective that was being problematic, but that our knowledge of the first-person one leaves much to be desired. This insight soon led to the realization that it was not easy to attain reliable data about experience. It does not suffice to just ask or merely to prepare a good questionnaire.

The need for a serious, scientifically sound study of experience had first been hinted at in the 70s by the cybernetics pioneer Heinz von Foerster [1], but it was his disciple, the biologist Francisco Varela, who articulated this need in a much more systematic and detailed way. The breakthrough article in which he introduced the concept of neurophenomenology [2, 3] was soon followed by the compendium entitled *The View from Within* [4]. Ever since the 90s, the empirical research of experience has been gaining its place in the framework of cognitive science despite strong criticism and opposition. These may be most clearly seen in the division of the areas of research into the psyche as sketched in the lectures of one of the most prominent cognitive neuroscientists Antonio Damasio [5; p.94]: events in the brain (physiology), behaviour (mostly psychology) and experience.

But the fact that first-person research got its place on the map of cognitive science approaches does not yet prove that Varela's ideas have flourished in the way delineated by him in his conception of the neurophenomenological project. The area of thinking about and practically realising such type of research is still a mere fledgling. We are still a long way from Varela's vision of two equally balanced areas of first-person and third-person research which would – each from its own side of the epistemological gap – build up a unified corpus of knowledge. In recent years, a wide array of attempts at gaining and interpreting data about experience has been developed. Nevertheless, the research of experience is at this stage still but little more than a kind of aid to third-person research; an aid to be used only in the case of greatest need and the results of which should always be proofed by other methods as well. This lack of methodological autonomy is for the most part the consequence of epistemological problems looming in the background, which scientists mostly tend to avoid. Due to that, the attitude pervading this area is for now still that it has failed to produce new insights into the psyche.

The aim of the present article is to offer a slightly more self-conscious view of the sensibility and possibility of gaining first-person data. Its scope is thus very wide. If we intend to understand the problems of experience research, we must not avoid the epistemological and ontological questions. Meanwhile we must also never lose sight of the methodological and almost technical nature of the problem. The present article intends to give an overview of the area with no ambition of offering definitive solutions. It has been written by acknowledging the superficial manner of addressing some of the very important aspects of the experiential landscape. Its aim is to present a kind of a map of approaches, accompanied by epistemological reflections to shed light upon their validity and significance.

## PHENOMENOLOGICAL DATA

Let me begin by trying to delineate the area of empirical phenomenological research, what exactly it studies and what kind of data it operates with.

The question which part of reality does empirical phenomenological research actually study cannot be answered in the same way as with other sciences. Phenomenological research deals with a part of the world, which is most intimate, or rather immediate, to us, the world ‘as it presents itself’. The physical world, human behaviour, social world ... all these are but diverse orderings of the experiential world – and all of them are less existentially immediate. Varela relied on the phenomenological tradition: “The phenomenological approach starts from the irreducible nature of conscious experience. Lived experience is where we start from.” [2].

Perhaps our area of research has been most clearly indicated by the philosopher Nagel [6] in the title of his article ‘*What Is it Like to Be a Bat?*’. “Clearly ‘what it is like to be’ a bat or a human being refers to how things (everything) looks when being a bat or a human being. In other words this is just another way of talking about what philosophers have called phenomenality since the Presocratics. A phenomenon, in the most original sense of the word, is an appearance and therefore something relational. It is a *being for* as opposed to *being alone in itself* ... “ [4; p.3].

The question what is experience is hard to answer by reducing it to other psychological concepts. It cannot be described simply as *this or that*. When talking about the gestalt of experience, we are speaking about *what is it like to be* this particular human being in this particular chosen moment. The area of our research is experience, i.e. everything that goes on in the scope of an individual’s awareness. Thus we are interested in *how* the content of consciousness is demonstrated, rather than *what* is being demonstrated. In relation to this, Merleau-Ponty [7; p.ix] states: Going back to the things themselves means going back into a world before knowledge.

At this point we might pose the question *what kind* of data about experience can be gained and *how*? Reflecting upon the *how* brings us to the paramount problem of phenomenological research: the fact that observation essentially changes the observed. For Searle this represented the key argument for rejecting empirical phenomenological research: Any introspection of one’s own conscious states is itself a conscious state [8; p.97].

In his article Varela showed the inconsistency of such criticism: if Searle really had believed in the power of this argument, he should abstain from any statements about conscious states (which he naturally does not do). Directing our attention to the *how* of experience does indeed change our experiential landscape, but that does not mean that it becomes a completely different existential landscape. Dressed into attention to itself alone it mostly just begins to shine in a whole new light. Petranker [9] wrote that by observing *we become conscious differently*.

If we think it through, the situation in the area of phenomenological research is not so much different from the situation in other scientific fields. Physics for example is also unable to directly describe physical reality: at the quantum level it is forced to settle for the observation of the effects of the processes observed. At this level, similarly to the observation of experience, we cannot bypass the influence of the observer. Thus even in the areas of ‘hardest’ branches of scientific research we are able to observe traces of past events. Traces, or in the case of experience research, memories.

We may notice a deep and almost indivisible connection between phenomenological, methodological and purely executive (technical) issues of phenomenological empiricism. The

epistemological question: What can be perceived at all? is but a small step away from the question of carrying out such a research (What is with directing attention?). The results and validity of the observations depend on the way of looking. Husserl was well aware of this fact, as was Varela. The skill of observation (gaining data) in the research of experience is just as important as in any other branch of science. Neither did Varela overlook the fact that some types of Buddhist meditation have been indulging in training the skills of observing experience for thousands of years. Large parts of *The Embodied Mind* [10] and *The View from Within* [4] are dedicated to discussing the relation of mindfulness training practice (like e.g. Buddhist vipassana meditation) to first-person research. Here we do not wish to address the skill of observing the *here-and-now* of one's experiential landscape in detail, nevertheless it is perfectly clear that the practice of mindfulness is a skill of intimate self-research [2]. The question to what degree it is possible for Buddhist practice to come in useful in this and how remains open for now.

Even if direct observation of experience in the form of mindfulness/awareness is indeed the technique (skill) of observing the experiential landscape *here-and-now*, scientific research can only be endeavoured once we are able to articulate our insights. And the only way of perceiving experience that allows us to position experiential data into intersubjective space is the articulation of memories of past experience, the memory of experience itself being another kind of experience, of course. But here we already come across a difference, since memory is just a part of the larger field of awareness, which means it is possible for the observer to position himself outside of this part. Once such a position is achieved, it means that we might be able to observe the memory of experience from a (at least some) distance, thus allowing us to describe it. The only data available to phenomenological researchers is thus the so-called phenomenological data - descriptions of past experience.

The ways of gaining phenomenological data and the question of what this data can tell us about our psyche will be dealt with in the following two chapters. At this point let me just clarify a potential confusion in the terminology of the nomenclature of the science dedicated to the research of experience. Since most of the basic concepts in this field of research originate in Husserl's work, the accepted term has become phenomenological research. But since gathering of data based on observation was especially in his later period bitterly opposed by Husserl, it is only just to add the clarifying epithet *empirical* to it. Occasionally, one might even hear the term phenomenography, but it has yet to catch on. Sometimes we deem this research project to be *first-person research*, but this term is also problematic: while we do study the first-person perspective (as opposed to the third-person one dealing with behaviour and neurophysiology), it is nevertheless true that this term makes it unclear as to *whose* experience we are actually researching (first-person could thus designate the research of my own experience, while third-person might refer to the experience of the participants of the research).

## **DOES EMPIRICAL RESEARCH OF EXPERIENCE MAKE SENSE?**

Before we review different attempts to gain first-person data, we cannot ignore the criticism and a wide array of scepticism that surrounds this field of research. Varela [2, 4] inspects the list of negative attitudes and objections in detail, especially the ones from the area of philosophy of mind and hardcore cognitive science. In both of his works he gives extensive answers, so let me at this point merely enumerate some of the most common areas or rather arguments of the critics from this field.

Perhaps the most common, even though rarely properly articulated, is a lack of interest for in-depth research of experience. There is a common naturalistic presupposition that consciousness is but an epiphenomenon and that it is essential to explain its neurological

basis. Once we reach that goal, first-person research will become obsolete.

*Introspection changes experience (or rather, it is itself a form of experience).*

This argument presented by Varela through Searle's words has already been mentioned above: it is quite problematic to (scientifically) study something that changes through the very act of observing it. It is a problem which all so-called non-trivial areas of research (should) face [11], from quantum mechanics to ethnology. In many areas we encounter a circular bond between observation/research and the observed/researched: In the area of experience research this bond is so immediate that there is absolutely no way to ignore it.

*The subjective simply cannot be objectivised.*

This is essentially a methodological problem. Many authors tend to be very sceptical about the usefulness of experiential data in understanding human psyche. Varela [2] quotes an example of Searle's findings that in all the years we have been endeavouring to study experience, no agreement about a valid method has been reached. While Searle's assessment is based on a rather superficial and naive overview of the history of first-person research, it is nevertheless correct to a certain point. But the conclusion drawn from it by Searle is problematic, to say the least. If we can agree that the knowledge about lived experience is important, this should motivate us to search for new, more viable methods instead of giving up hope altogether.

*Understanding experience is being taken care of by psychology.*

The final chapters of *The View from Within* [4] include an overview of responses of representatives from the fields of cognitive science and philosophy of mind to the described attempts of establishing a field of research dealing with experience. The title of Baars' article for example is most telling: The field of systematic phenomenology already exists. It is called psychology [4; p.216, 10]. The idea that there is nothing in the area of experience which psychology (or some other science) had not yet discovered was apparently still present at the turn of the century. Now, fifteen years later, it is virtually non-existent.

As already mentioned, in his articles Varela deals extensively with criticism from the side of cognitive science and philosophy of mind. Interestingly though, he does not mention the critiques from the opposite field, i.e. phenomenologists themselves. Varela [2] positions his own view of the meaning and role of experience research into the framework of continental phenomenology, which indicates that he planned for his neurophenomenological project believing to follow its phenomenological guidelines. It is a fact that during the preparation of *The View from Within* he collaborated with several important representatives of the French phenomenological movement (for example Natalie Depraz). It would seem that he received a positive reaction to his idea of the neurophenomenological project from these circles, even though such an attempt is very remote from Husserl's opinions and the viewpoints of many younger phenomenologists following in his stead, who directly oppose collecting empirical data about experience. Is the goal of empirical phenomenology as described here (and as described by Varela) exactly what Husserl tried to overcome in his later work? Husserl (following the publication of *Logische Untersuchungen* [12, 13]) noticed in his epistemological research the inconsistency of psychology which makes use of the laws of logic in its research while at the same time attempting to prove these very laws stem from the nature of the psyche, i.e. its field of research. In other words, how is it possible to study a concept if it is at the same time used as a tool?

But Husserl would not settle for leaving his phenomenological project in the unclear waters of the epistemological paradox. He strived to elevate phenomenology out of shallow

empiricism and make it into a primary (eidetic) science. Hribar [14; p.56] writes that Husserl denounced all his former work as being in general empirically oriented. In the *Idea of Phenomenology* Husserl wrote: In *Logische Untersuchungen* phenomenology is presented as *descriptive psychology* (even though epistemological interests prevail in it). But this descriptive phenomenology, which could be understood as empirical phenomenology, should not be confused with transcendental phenomenology. Phenomenology which desires to be an essential, epistemic (*a priori*) science of cognition excludes the empirical attitude. (Quoted after Husserl's '*Die Idee der Phaenomenologie*' in [14; p.56]).

For those who endeavour to study experience, this critique from our own ranks is much stronger and more poignant. Interestingly, Varela does not address this problem. As mentioned above, this might be due to the fact that he collaborated with a circle of phenomenologists who themselves flirted with empiricism and tried to apply philosophical insights in practice, such as the psychiatrist Jean Naudin, for example.

## **THE SPECTRUM OF DIFFERENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS EMPIRICAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH**

As we have seen, there is no lack of epistemological-methodological problems in the field of experience research. Nevertheless, in recent years this line of research has become a prominent feature of the patchwork of cognitive science. In the follow-up I intend to review some of the most promising contemporary approaches and try to determine how their advocates deal with the above mentioned problems.

### *The 'just ask' approach (quantitative research)*

The most common way of dealing with the epistemological-methodological problems of first-person research in the context of cognitive science is to simply ignore the issue.

In 1972 Heinz von Foerster half jokingly penned down the so-called 'first theorem': 'The more profound the problem we ignore, the better our chances for glory and success' [15; p.1]. Cynical and mocking as it may seem, it is nevertheless true. Cognitive neuroscience (and all other natural sciences before it, of course) has been able to achieve its immense progress exclusively by refusing to pose the questions about the fundamentals of the phenomenon it is researching, i.e. what is consciousness, what is experience and what is the relationship between the experiential and the corporeal. The same goes for most of the quantitative studies of experience. As mentioned above, the majority of cognitive scientists tend to view the research of experience as a means to gain additional data for the study of the physiological basis of the psyche, i.e. as a kind of sidekick support. Fortunately, one does not have to delve too deep to meet this demand.

In this type of studies psychological methods are being used. In gaining experiential data they mostly rely on questionnaires offering participants multiple choice answers or scales by which they have to assess the degree of intensity of a given experiential modality (e.g. How happy do you feel? Pick a number between 1 and 10!). In the field of experience research, it is of course much harder to assure the reliability of data gathering – after all, its area of research is subjectivity itself. Despite that problem, this approach to research has been flourishing in recent years. The research connected to low brain activity (i.e. to what the brain does when not occupied by a concrete task) may serve as a good example. At the level of experience this activity is associated with the so-called mind wandering, the study of which makes good use of the above mentioned methods. The questionnaire-type of research in the field of quantitative empirical phenomenology is usually carried out in the form of experience sampling – the participants are asked to answer a set of questions at selected moments (for an

example of such studies see [16, 17].

The data gained in this way offer a good supplement to neurophysiological studies. They answer the questions of the frequency of given experiential categories, their intensity and the relation of (pre-selected) categories to (selected) contexts. It does not however enable us to check the adequacy of the selected options. This kind of research is therefore based on the assumption that we already know the structure of the experiential landscape – the task of first-person science is merely to determine its quantitative details.

The problem lies in the fact that all researchers dealing with more in-depth observation of experience (e.g. [4, 18]) find that our intuitive assumptions about this area are to a very large degree incorrect. Paradoxically, we see time and again that participants are not familiar with their (our) experience at all (the same being true for researchers, of course). The ‘just ask’ approach, as some designate it, is thus simply not viable. As suspected by Varela [2] and later empirically proven by Hurlburt [19, 20] a systematic and persistent training in observation of the experiential landscape is necessary. The studies which assume that their participants are well acquainted with their experience and therefore need only to be asked about it thus usually demonstrate little more than our own notions of what experiential landscape should look like. The same goes for philosophical arguments based on ‘self-evident’ examples in experience.

#### *Dialogic quantitative methods*

Experience – the area most intimate to us – appears to be at the same time the most opaque one. How can that be? Our awareness is virtually utterly unused to being directed at the how? of experience, due to its constant dealing with (being interested in, creating, manipulating) the contents of experience (the what?). Similarly to cinema, where the standard for a good film is to enable the audience to get completely sucked into the projected story and at the same time forget about the screen, the film projector etc., our everyday existential intentionality draws us into complete identification with the story, or rather, the so-called reality (in the everyday sense of the word). Husserl’s notion of *natural standpoint* appears to be quite adequate a description of this essential and very pervasive feature of our psyche.

We are used to directing all of our attention to the results of ordering, interpreting, highlighting, categorizing and making sense of experience, and none at all to the process of doing so itself. The realization that we are poorly acquainted with our direct experience [10] could be transformed into a methodological guideline in the research of experience: the natural standpoint needs to be put into brackets. Since this action opposes our habits, or rather our natural standpoint, the observation of experience calls for systematic and persistent training.

It is not hard to notice that such insight into the nature of experience and the methodological guidelines for acquiring data on experience bear a striking resemblance to the fundamental concepts of Husserl’s phenomenology: the natural standpoint, *epoché* and phenomenological reduction. But despite these allusions to Husserl’s terminology, we must remember that in empirical research of experience all of these concepts are used in a more lax and wider scope than originally intended by the author of phenomenology.

It is not wrong to say that the skill of observing experience is actually the skill of defying the natural standpoint, or rather of bracketing its effects. Besides, phenomenological *reduction* appears to be an apt term for doing so [21]. But as mentioned above, the use of such terms is wider than intended by Husserl. The meaning of phenomenological reduction as a method of introspection in practice is twofold. The first aspect is the bracketing of assumptions, interpretations etc., i.e. the observation of experience as it shows itself to us. In order to achieve this, we must employ the other aspect: turn our attention to the structure of experience itself, exploring the area we have been neglecting for so long – the screen and the

projection mechanism. For example: instead of paying attention to the content of our thoughts, we should try to notice *how* we think. Do we quietly talk to ourselves or do we see images or do we simply know the content without any other symbolic experiential representation? Perhaps in empirical gathering of first-person data this second aspect is even more important.

Most of the contemporary schools of empirical research of experience have been developed basing on these methodological foundations. All of them share some common methodological guidelines:

- the simple principle of ‘just ask’ does not work. In order to study experience, one needs extensive training in the skill of introspection. Due to this, research has to be iterative,
- most of contemporary methods are dialogic. This means that the above mentioned iteration is achieved by repeated interviews with participants.

Other methodological guidelines stem from Husserl’s phenomenology:

- the focus on phenomena (things as they show themselves in our experience) and bracketing of all habitual assumptions about things. The reduction of everything observed into phenomena as the only thing in our experience that is really given and certain,
- the search for as detailed descriptions of experience as possible and giving up interpretation. The training in describing experience (and in asking about such descriptions) without classifying it in any way, positioning it into theoretical frameworks, highlighting it etc. This includes also giving up any assessments about the ‘reality’ of the observed phenomena.

I will now present in more detail two methodological schools of empirical phenomenology, which are today probably most widespread and recognized: descriptive experience sampling and explicitation interview. A major difference between these two approaches lies in their attitudes towards retrospection. As seen in the previous chapter, the research of experience (with the exception of mindful observation of experience here-and-now) is in its essence a study of *memories* about past experience. In phenomenological research, memory is the basic medium that allows us to access our field of research. Undoubtedly, memory is not exactly an ideal interface; due to that one of the crucial questions any method needs to address is how to approach lived experience as precisely as possible. How to preserve past insights intact?

The biggest difference between the two schools of empirical phenomenological research that will be mentioned here lies exactly in their attitudes towards the problem of ‘purity’ of memory. The difference being that one of them tries to reduce retrospection to the minimum, while the other one strives to train the interviewer in the dialogic skill of ‘purifying’ the constructs induced by memory.

In Paris, a new methodological approach has formed around the phenomenologist and psychotherapist Pierre Vermersch. Its most prominent representative is Varela’s assistant Claire Petitmengin. The researchers in this approach devised a dialogic method known as the explicitation interview [22]. Its major feature is the attempt to polish the art of interviewing so far that it might access even more remote memories and release them of the constructs deposited in the meantime. It appears that such ‘purification’ (which is of course an iterative process) is indeed possible and often quite successful. Petitmengin’s research in the field of experiencing the self proved to be most insightful [23]. There is also the slightly older work from the area of the so-called preconscious states (e.g. [24]). She was also a member of the group, which pursued with the work in the field of neurophenomenology after Varela’s untimely death. The group eventually dissolved, since participating neurologists did not perceive phenomenological work to be relevant enough.

The concept of the explicitation interview has gained some ground in recent years. Different derivations of this approach are being used in the study of experiential patterns, i.e. recurring elements of experiential landscape. An example of this is the emergence of thought [24] or the research of the experiential aspects of intuition [25].

A different approach to this problem is the one taken by Russell Hurlburt, the inventor of the descriptive experience sampling technique (DES) [26]. DES could be compared to geological probing of the ground: samples are taken at random points and later purified and analyzed in a laboratory. Similarly, DES probes (samples) experience at randomly selected moments. The probing is carried out with the help of research subjects who carry with them a special device, which emits a gentle signal at randomly selected moments. The subject then tries to ‘freeze’ his or her experience just prior to the beep. Unlike simply answering questions about experience (as with the quantitative experience sampling mentioned above), here we are dealing with free descriptions of experience, made in a handy notebook, or lately more often a portable recording device. As all other methods, this one is also based on repetition and interviews. No later than 24 hours after probing, the participant must meet with the researcher who tries to gain as much exact data about the experience as possible through a discussion of the samples. Unlike the explicitation interview, Hurlburt’s technique is not directed into purifying the constructs of retrospection. Its power lies in the large number of collected samples and the reduction of the consequences of retrospection to the minimum. Hurlburt teaches that the researcher should give up the discussion of a selected sample as soon as one gets the feeling that the participant has passed from exploring his or her memories to pondering or construction. The principal training in this technique consists of the skill of ‘open’ interview and recognizing and avoiding interpretation (e.g. [19]).

The results of DES provide us with a kind of map of a participant’s experiential landscape. The technique has been in use for almost forty years now and it is probably the most widespread and methodical version of contemporary first-person research. Ever since it appeared, researchers have gathered an astounding amount of data about experience, so that they were able to put together a kind of encyclopedia of basic experiential elements (the so-called *codebook*).

As we can see, these two approaches to experience research are complementary. Techniques such as DES are useful for ‘drawing out’ a map of everyday experience, while dialogic methods of explicitation can delve into more specific (selected) aspects of experience. So while contemporary empirical methods of experience research are to a large extent based on the guidelines of Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, their research nevertheless remains at the level of gathering descriptive data - which is exactly the level Husserl tried to avoid. It is a fact that research of experience in the context of cognitive science does not share Husserl’s ambition of being a primary eidetic science. One of the critiques of DES is that it remains on the surface of experience all the time. But Hurlburt is not discouraged by such comments [18]. He claims that this level is exactly what he is aiming at in his research. He even likes to pass the ball back by attacking the so-called armchair introspection [20], philosophical debates which do not base their arguments on systematic training of introspection but rather on self-evident knowledge about experience.

#### *In-depth first-person research*

Despite the fact that the most first-person research does not intend to answer deep epistemic questions, there are some (of us) who aim at a higher goal. For example, already the title of Varela’s [2] article reveals his expectations that empirical phenomenology should bring (or at least help in bringing) the solution to the ‘hard problem’, i.e. the mind-body relationship problem.

Husserl clearly demonstrated the contradictory assumptions on which psychology is based (in

its role of a theoretical science). The vicious circle between exploring the psyche as the origin of rational argumentation and using rational argumentation as a tool to explore the psyche probably does seal the door of classic empiricism to understanding the nature of thrownness into experience. While we can use the methods of natural science to study the properties of our existential state, we can by no means do that in the research of its fundamentals.

On the other hand it has to be said that Husserl's hopes for the emergence of a new, primary science did not come true. While phenomenology did become a well appreciated branch of philosophy, it never managed to gain the privileged position its author was hoping for.

But perhaps there is a way between the rock of naturalistic reductionism and the hard place of sterile logical argumentation. Varela and Hurlburt clearly demonstrated the impotence of bringing conclusions without basing them on systematic checking. Husserl on the other hand demonstrated the limitations of the power of empirical results, included in the network of classic psychological science (or the naturalistic method). Husserl – as most philosophers with education in mathematics do – had a negative attitude towards any kind of circularity, but he never demonstrated any weaknesses of empirical research itself. Due to his fear of paradox, he failed to notice the possibility for mutual (creative) circular inspiring between concepts and empirical findings. Inspiring in which each side slightly changes at every step, according to the results of the previous iteration (in contemporary qualitative research this process is called *sequential analysis*).

Perhaps it is necessary to take an earnest look at both sides: Husserl's theoretical warnings as well as Hurlburt's criticism of couch introspection. Is it possible to achieve so thorough an empirical research of experience that it will actually become fundamental? I believe that is so. I also believe that that is a kind of research Varela was aiming at.

## **EXISTENTIALLY BINDING SELF-OBSERVATION**

As seen from the presented overview, the empirical research of experience is alive and gaining ground. So far we have yet to see some revolutionary breakthrough in this field, though. The gathering of data is still in its initial phase, approximately at the stage biology was in Humboldt's era: the phase of collecting samples and finding out the basic forms of organization of the researched area. But there is hope that at some point quantity will transform into quality and new, unexpected insights will emerge from the accumulated data.

Besides the lateral gathering of data there is another option: the in-depth training of self-observation; thorough first-person exploration (in the narrow sense of the word), which does not draw back before self-questioning and includes also an awareness of its assumptions and limitations (and searches for the still unreflected ones). Here I am referring to a type of research in which the researcher and the researched are one and the same person.

Some authors believe phenomenological reduction in the deepest sense of the word to be exactly this kind of a persistent and systematic surveying of one's experiential landscape (in [27] Cogan poses his argument drawing on Fink [28]). As mentioned above, it would be wrong to ignore the similarities between the basic principles of phenomenological reduction and mindfulness training (with the help of techniques such as vipassana or zen Buddhism). The possibilities presented by the research of consciousness with the help of such meditation techniques have been addressed by Varela and his collaborators in two major works [4, 10].

The idea of researching experience through an intimate in-depth self-research is thus by no means a new one. The real question being how come that it has never really took root – at least in the framework of contemporary science. In a way, the answer is obvious: meditative delving into oneself does not accord with the notions of contemporary science. The idea of a

researcher rummaging through his or her personal experience is in direct opposition to the demand for objectivity (intersubjectivity) of scientific discovery. Nevertheless, this argument is not sound. First of all, it is perfectly clear that the findings of in-depth self-research could become part of the scientific corpus only when confirmed by several researchers. Secondly, in the so-called in-depth qualitative research we are lately encountering an interesting paradox: the more intimate we get, the more general our findings are becoming. In other words, there is a real possibility that in-depth self-research will in the end bring us to a level transcending individual specificity.

Another reason why systematic self-reflection has not yet become part of the canonical science of consciousness is that (contemporary) scientists refuse to indulge into existentially binding research. Varela [2] stated intimacy to be one of the necessary conditions for successful research of experience. Any researcher who earnestly ventures into the area of observing his or her own experience can expect this enterprise to change him or her. And this poses a crucial difference between this type of research and other methodological approaches – in this case personal involvement is not only allowed but indeed inevitable. Scientists embarking on in-depth first-person research of their experience find themselves in a similar situation as researchers of drugs in the 70s, i.e. in the times when most of them tried them out on themselves. And such research cannot be merely a job. The only possibility to achieve this is to make it into a kind of lifestyle. And that is very remote from contemporary role of researchers.

In spite of these almost insurmountable obstacles I believe that in-depth first-person and – most importantly – existentially binding research is the only chance for truly in-depth insights into our consciousness, experience and human existential condition in general. Perhaps we should start this line of research by an in-depth critical study of the experience of people, who have dedicated their lives to the training of diverse techniques of mindfulness (in his work, Varela hinted at this step). Basing on that, we should then search for methodologically sound ways of tracking and recording the process of self-observation.

Besides this, it is essential to explore the backgrounds of selected methods of self-observation. It is well known that the answer to any question depends on the way of posing it. Any observation is to a certain degree also a construction, depending on the presuppositions, intentions etc. of the researcher. This cannot be avoided. But it is perhaps not impossible to capture this usually unreflected part into the observation itself.

The final step would thus be to offer space for systematic, recorded and, above all, existentially binding scientific self-observation. By this I aim at physical as well as social and scientific space. I hope for this paper to be a small contribution in this direction.

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## PROBLEMI I MOGUĆNOSTI ISTRAŽIVANJA U PRVOM LICU

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### SAŽETAK

Cilj ovog rada je dvojak. Prvo, radu daje pregled aktualnih empirijskih metoda u području istraživanja u prvom licu. Takav pregled ne može previdjeti epistemološka i ontološka pitanja, ali istovremeno mora razmatrati na umu metodološku i gotovo tehničku prirodu problema. Empirijsko istraživanje iskustva smješteno je u okviru kognitivne znanosti. Dan je pregled pristupa i tehnika empirijske fenomenologije zajedno s epistemološkim razmatranjima. Kao drugo, rad se bavi budućnošću istraživanja u razmatranom području. Rad upućuje da dubinska, egzistencijalno odgovorna introspekcija i preispitivanje nas samih treba smatrati alatima ozbiljnih znanstvenih istraživanja.

### KLJUČNE RIJEČI

empirijska fenomenologija, metode prvog lica, kognitivna znanost, pomnost