

LOOKING INTO SELF-EXPLORATION ATTITUDES AND WAYS OF CONSTRUCTING EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Empirical phenomenology – study of lived subjective experience is the latest addition to the interdisciplinary efforts aiming at understanding the human mind. We present the research, which was originally aimed at investigating the experiences of Holotropic Breathwork, however, results of the analysis convinced us to move the focus of our interest to differences between individual ways of constructing experience. We have identified three types of personal epistemologies (i.e. ways of constructing the subjective experience) and found the correlation with individual attitudes towards self-exploration. The paper aims at providing a novel model with regard to how experience is constructed and expands the understanding of the limitations of the phenomenological interview techniques.

KEY WORDS

empirical phenomenology, explicative interview, constructing experiences, personal epistemology

CLASSIFICATION

APA: 2260, 2340, 2630

JEL: D83, D84, Z19

INTRODUCTION

Last decade was marked by an apparent integration of experiential research as a valid methodology for investigating consciousness, and an active effort is made to build the ever-so-necessary bridge between the natural sciences and phenomenology. Third person research of cognition and consciousness seems to have reached an impasse, and the need for a different, rather novel perspective has become obvious to researchers from various disciplines, such as neuroscience, artificial intelligence and cognitive psychology; However, even after admitting that studying consciousness and inner experience by means of ‘classical’, third person methodologies has not brought much insight into the matter, and that a first person approach would be much better suited for such experiential research, phenomenology still remains the ‘helping cousin’ of quantitative research. Nonetheless, it appears that phenomenology is here to stay, claiming its rightful position among the cognitive sciences.

Observing inner processes and then reporting on them as accurately as possible involves not only great curiosity from the participants, but also patience and dedication to the cause. [In other words, looking into subjective experience in an objective way is challenging for both the researcher and the co-researcher (participant) for a number of reasons, which will become transparent in the following paragraphs.

We set out with great eagerness to investigate the experiential landscape emerging from a Holotropic Breathwork (HB) session, which has indeed brought much interesting insight into the experience of our co-researchers rising from this meditation technique; However, as it often happens when using a qualitative approach, another dimension has caught our attention, leading us to a whole new topic, which became the center of our research. We realized, upon close analysis of the experiential data, that the participants’ inner experience was closely linked to their personal models of connecting with the world (which we then named personal epistemologies), as well as to their attitudes toward self-investigation and being interviewed.

Our focus quickly turned toward investigating within the phenomenological discourse *how much* and *in what way* are participants interested in their own experience, *how* they construct their experiences and how these might be related.

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

The protocol of the HB workshop consisted of 2 days of sessions of accelerated breathing, loud evocative music and process-oriented body work, followed by expressive drawing and integration processes, all done in pairs and under the close supervision of two trained specialists [1]. This technique was developed by Stanislav Grof as an alternative to psychedelic psychotherapy (which was banned in the early 70s) and is now used worldwide as an autonomous psychotherapeutic practice due to its profound emotional release and physical relaxation [2].

The participants were previously familiarized with the explicative interviewing technique, and were selected on the base of their prior experience with to phenomenological interviews. Due to their active collaborative role in the investigation and their self-search oriented attitudes, they will, from this point on be regarded as co-researchers.

Three co-researchers have been recruited and further informed on the specifics of *phenomenological interviews*, more precisely previously briefly acquainted with Hurlburt’s Descriptive Experience Sampling method (DES) [3], after which each of them underwent two explicative interviews [4, 5]: one precisely after the HB session, and another a week later, to check if and how they have integrated the experience into their everyday lives.

The approach selected for the purpose of this qualitative research is the one of *empirical phenomenology*. In a nutshell, this approach postulates the idea of scientific explanations being “grounded in the first-order construction of the actors, [...] and then related to the second-order constructions of the scientist” [6]. It entails seven steps which guide the researcher to formulate her assumptions in such way that the readers would be able to see the philosophical roots of the scientific explanation derived from the first-order constructs [7].

The explicative interview, the used method of data acquisition, is a form of guided retrospective introspection [8], which supports the interviewee in accessing her passive, continuous, involuntary memory synthesis [9]. According to Husserl, much of the autobiographical memory is pre-reflective, meaning that it occurs without the person being aware of it. Within the course of the explication interview, this information becomes available to the interviewee, and pre-reflexive transitions into reflexive consciousness. This interviewing technique creates the special framework in which recalling lived experience becomes accessible to the interviewee. The markedly feature of the explication interview is that it seeks to *evoke a present relation* to the lived experience [10]. In this process it is crucial that the subject does not *think* of the lived experience in a reflective, recollective manner, for these two approaches being very different from one another [5].

Hereby we outline the procedure of the phenomenological inquiry:

1. As mentioned before, although prior knowledge about the phenomenological approach was an inclusion criteria of our participants, once they agreed to become co-researchers, they were introduced to the philosophical perspectives, attitudes and concepts behind the approach used in the experiential research.
2. The co-researchers were encouraged to ask questions before beginning the interviews to clarify any uncertainties they might have, either regarding the method or the tone in which the interview will take place.
3. The co-researchers were asked to attempt getting back in the moment of the experience about which they were going to report. They were instructed to focus on the experience itself, setting aside, as much as possible, explanations, contexts, knowledge, constructs and comparisons¹. They were instructed repeatedly to explicate how they think/feel in the most direct way possible, and try to present it in natural, free language “what goes on inside” [11]. These instructions have been given out separately to each co-researcher.
4. Each interview was audio-recorded, with the consent of each participant, while the researcher had been taking notes [12]. The recordings were stored on an iPad under suggestive names (see next paragraph). Each interview had an approximate duration of 60 minutes².
5. The data collected from the interviews was subsequently transcribed by the investigators, and the raw material was coded, analyzed and categorized, in accordance with qualitative text analysis methodology [13].

DEFINING RELEVANT CATEGORIES

Before setting out to present the categories that have emerged from the analysis of the interviews, it needs to be clarified that only those which were relevant for the discussion of our topic were selected and mentioned below. In order to prevent confusion and misapprehension, we ought to explicitly state that the aim of this paper is not to illustrate verbal case descriptions, neither is it to offer a detailed review of the analytical data obtained through the explicative interviews.

In the following paragraphs, we will shortly present the abbreviations used in the coding phase, without going into detail, for this would exceed the purpose of our current article.

What we are trying to do here is merely offer some clarifications, so that the reader would better comprehend the model which we propose in relation to our findings. This being said, we will further present three main groups of categories, each consisting of subcategories which we will attempt to explain and briefly exemplify where needed, but not before shortly presenting a few of our coding techniques³.

Our three Co-Researchers have been coded with CoR1, CoR2 and CoR3. Each interview was assigned the code I1 or I2, 1 referring to the first interview, and 2 referring to the follow-up interview. Also, to keep track of the location of the construct mentioned within the interview, the corresponding digits have been assigned in brackets. So, as an example, supposing a construct was identified in the first co-researcher's follow-up interview at the time of $t = 17 \text{ min } 49 \text{ s}$, the corresponding code's mark would be, intuitively, CoR1.I2.(t17.49). We introduce these codes just to offer a sense to the reader of how we kept track of our data, so that when revisiting the interviews we would know which construct belongs where.

As mentioned above, three relevant categories have been identified, and they are as follows:

- A. Ways of Constructing Experience (C.E.)
 - B. Attitudes toward Self-Exploration (S.E.)
 - C. Findings about Personal Epistemologies (P.E.)
- A. Under the 'umbrella' term of C.E. we have included the following sub-categories
 - A1. Manner of Manifesting Thoughts (Inner Speech, Imagery, Sounds and Voices, (Un)Worded Thinking)
 - A2. Feelings (Fear, Joy, Sadness)
 - A3. Mental Processes (Competing thoughts, Conceptualizations, Attributions, Rationalizations, Censorship, Inhibitions, Time Perception)
 - A4. Bodily Sensations (Temperature, Vibrations, Pulsations, Pain)
 - A5. Disturbances (External Voices, Music, Light, Content, Thought Flow)
 - B. Amongst the attitudes of S.E. we count the sub-categories:
 - B1. Perceived Self-Image (self-confidence, contempt, misunderstood ?)
 - B2. Expectations (Comparison, Previous Experience, Assumptions, Contradictions)
 - B3. General manifested attitudes (Argumentative, Suggestible, Detached, Dismissive, Research-Oriented/Curios, Avoidance)
 - C. The findings about P.E. include
 - C1. Thinking styles ("Magical Thinking", "New Age Thinking", "Pragmatic Thinking")
 - C2. Interpretations

All of the above have been coded in such way to facilitate the investigators' keeping track of the data within the transcripts. A conclusive example shall be presented, for purely demonstrative purposes.

Within the first interview, the first co-researcher reported: "the boundaries between body and mind started to disappear, the perception of 'me' was unclear, [...] I was in an empty space, I visualized myself in a rough form of who I am, with a blurred body and felt a spiraling effect. Then I went into my inner space, and that inner space became the Universe, because it was all there is for me at that moment". These statements have been assigned the label consistent with the "New age thinking" category, and the code corresponding to the episode appears like this: C1:NewAgeThi – CoR1.I1.(t48.24 – t51.03). This particular code was encountered in other parts of the interview, as well as in the follow-up, and has consequently been used

throughout the transcripts. The overall moment was experienced as an Unworded Thought, with nuances of Curiosity and traces of Fear, in a generalized Avoidance attitude.

A great deal of the constructs identified throughout the explicative interviews have anchors in all three categories, which is why we took the liberty to propose a model of the lived experience of our co-researchers.

We thus continue with assessing and discussing whether these constructs have any relation with one another, and whether they can be clustered into a relational structure.

CLUSTERS OF INSIGHTS

CONSTRUCTED EXPERIENCES AND PERSONAL EPISTEMOLOGIES SHAPE ONE ANOTHER

Based on the processed data, there are multiple dimensions of constructed experience, beginning with how thoughts are manifested and processed, what sensations arise, are consciously perceived and then interrupted throughout the body, and culminating with how feelings intervene in the experiential scheme, Figure 1. It is suspected that these constructs are rooted into deeper experiences. Our findings suggest a co-dependent relation between the categories pointing to Constructed Experience (C.E.) and Personal Epistemologies (P.E.), namely the P.E. ‘dictate’ how the experience will be created, while the newly formed structures serve as reinforcement to the P.E.

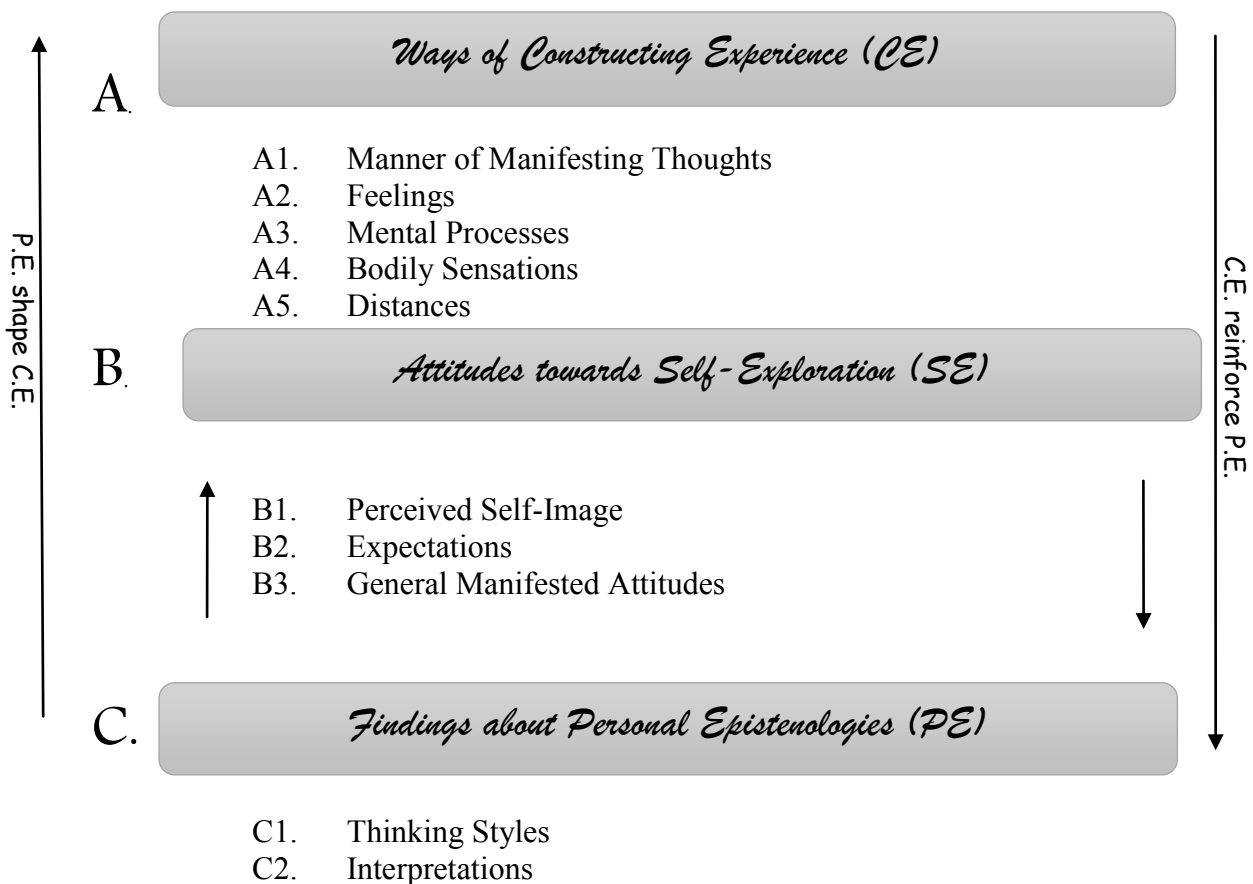


Figure 1. Dimensions of constructed experience.

ATTITUDES FOR SELF INVESTIGATION ARE CONSISTENT WITH CORRESPONDING PERSONAL EPISTEMOLOGIES. AND VICEVERSA

According to the findings of this research project, the level of interest co-researchers show varies greatly, revealing different attitudes and stands they have taken towards self-investigation. As our research shows, three participants revealed three completely distinct types of attitudes; on a first glance, it would appear that all three co-researchers were curious to look into their inner experience. However, upon closer inspection and through insisting in the narrative discourse, we observed anxious behaviour on behalf of one of the co-researchers (CoR2), which was triggered by fear of in-depth investigation. The participant refused to make an effort to verbalize the issue. Ultimately, he would defer questions and would repeat multiple times the same phrases, without truly investigating the actual core experience.

In contrast, another co-researcher (CoR1) presented explicit and implicit desire to find out about details and nuances of novel experiences, and would frequently get frustrated when not able to fully express the desired nuance of the phenomenon discussed. Some inconsistencies were however found even within the same individual, who at one point seemed to have briefly lost interest in investigating and reporting on a rather “overwhelming” experience over where he felt no control was possible.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

CONTRADICTIONARY STATEMENTS

The explicative interviews have brought to light surprising details about the co-researchers, who set out with a certain mind-frame, only to realize that they had misinterpreted or never even gave serious thought to alternatives. A pertinent example would be the case of one of the co-researchers in particular, who upon having repeatedly verbalized his desire to investigate novel sides of his experience quickly came to the limit of his self-directed interest. He was not bothered that his report was logically incoherent and became anxious, annoyed upon being asked to observe, explore, define and articulate his experience. He would then refuse to challenge his views, taking a step back and changing the subject when his beliefs came to be questioned and possibly defeated.

Such contradictory statements emerged with repeatedly during interviews, and have put on display the co-researchers’ rigidity towards going deeper into their constructs, and losing the control over a well-known conglomerate of convictions.

Put into the terms of our current research interests, this issue might hint that better reports might arise from interviewing more inquisitive individuals, and that not all personifications are adequate for conducting phenomenological interviews and studying experience.

A VARIETY OF EXPERIENCES

This, however, poses a serious question, namely: Does this mean that certain experiences can simply not be properly investigated? Can we perhaps not learn about some intimate realities due to phenomenologically undesired approaches? If some realities are indeed so unpleasant that none of the available co-researchers come through, would we not be able to gather reports and problematize it? Also, is it perhaps the case that exactly due to different ways of approaching an experience, the entire experience is perceived differently, thus changing the experience itself? Or the other way around, that would well imply that people might have just different attitudes when approaching a phenomenon and not a distinct, separate experience altogether.

We have worked alongside three different co-researchers concerning their attitude toward self-investigation. Further broader qualitative research would naturally be needed to confirm the typologies identified by our investigation.

If we were to offer a relevant example, two of the co-researchers reported having anxieties during their HB experience, CoR1 stating: “my upper half if the body started spinning, spiraling; it got overwhelming and I had to take a step back”, while the CoR2 reported: “My body is vibrating at a totally different frequency. The cramps were painful and I was feeling pressure on my chest. I wanted to stop”. While CoR2 would only return to the same description and reformulate the same idea without further questioning the experience, CoR1 went back to the moment and offered valuable additional details: “my attention was directed inward, towards my energetic body. I had a mental image of a rocket launching. And then I felt it. I felt the fear of the unknown”. Through this comparison of the two experiences, we come to wonder whether CoR2’s fear was so much more intense as to not want to observe and investigate it, or is it perhaps the case that the experience of CoR1 changed with his decision to observe it?

If enough co-researcher reports would be gathered and thoroughly analyzed, a topology of different experiences and different nuances might arise, case in which it would be very desirable to go even further and quantify the results, perhaps even build a map to compare and make sense of the co-researchers’ experiences.

LIMITATIONS OF THE CURRENT RESEARCH

While conducting the interviews, the very real challenge of setting aside our own expectations came forth, as trying not to bias or lead the co-researchers was highly important for the purpose of capturing the core experience.

While accessing the lived experience, the co-researchers had to rely on their memory in order to report, even though the first set of interviews was conducted immediately after the HB session. This poses a series of questions related to the role of memory, its biases and reliability. Such an example would be the fact that all of the co-researchers reported having trouble pin-pointing the exact time of their experience, and even reported struggling with remembering the sequence in which their experience occurred.

REMARKS

¹Husserl called the inquiry made from a researcher’s perspective “bracketing”. In this study, bracketing involved setting aside the co-researchers’ beliefs, feelings, prior experiences, expectations and convictions.

²Due to time-frame constraints, namely returning to the workshop after the first interview.

³The data analysis procedure is sketched in Figure 2.

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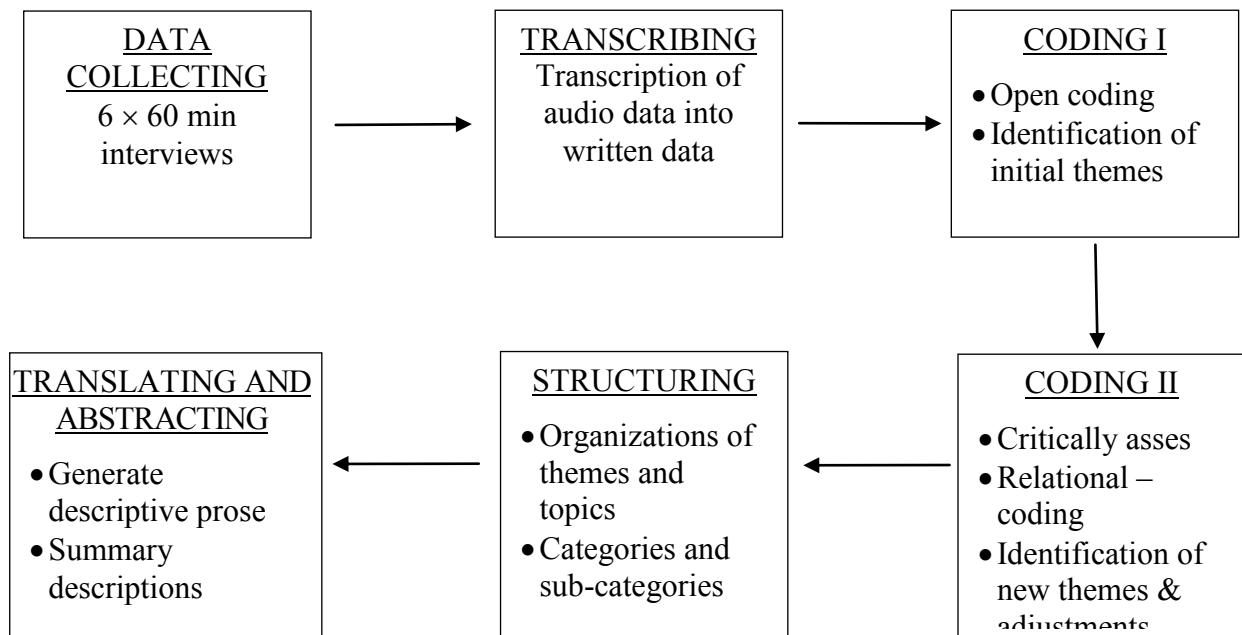


Figure 2. Data analysis procedure.

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POGLED U STAVOVE ISTRAŽIVANJA SEBE I U NAČINE KONSTRUKCIJE ISKUSTVA

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SAŽETAK

Empirijska fenomenologija – priučavanja proživljenih subjektivnih iskustava – zadnji je dodatak interdisciplinarnim nastojanjima razumijevanja ljudskog uma. Prikazujemo istraživanja koja su prvotno težila istraživanju iskustava holotropskog disanja, međutim rezultati kojih su upućivali na potrebu stavljanja fokusa naših interesa na razlike između individualnih načina konstrukcije iskustva. Izdvojili smo tri vrste osobnih epistemologija (tj. načina konstruiranja subjektivnog iskustva) i pronašli korelacije s individualnim stavovima o istraživanju sebe. Rad teži prikazati novi model konstruiranja iskustva te proširuje razumijevanje ograničenja tehnika fenomenoloških intervjua.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

empirijska fenomenologija, objašnjavajući intervju, konstruiranje iskustva, osobna epistemologija