time of the explicitation. It is these latter acts that are the object of elicitation during a V3 interview, in order to better understand the practice of explicitation itself.

13 However, by setting up this system of notation, we create a database on subjectivity concerning the practice of stimulating intentions, the effects of words on guidance and the maintenance of focused attention, the various forms of memory and recall.

14 Husserl himself clearly recognized that in order to develop phenomenology, it would be necessary to engage in the phenomenology of phenomenological practice itself; but in fact he did not advance very far in this direction. This idea of a coupling between the tool and the study of its actual deployment seems to me to be crucial in order to evaluate the research methods mobilized in the study of subjectivity. Now one cannot correctly study subjectivity without studying the subjectivity deployed in the means of studying subjectivity. Or yet again, subjectivity can only be properly targeted by a subjectivity that is itself expert, educated, conscious of what it does to the subject when it intervenes. And for that, the tool itself must become an object of study, which leads to a virtuous circle since in order to study the tool it must be used! I cannot study subjectivity without also studying the way in which my own subjectivity aims at subjectivity.

15 From this point of view, the experiments carried out by Nisbett & Wilson (1977) and those who have followed, are exemplary in their total ignorance of subjectivity, all the while pretending to study it and to be able to come to conclusions (they claim that the subject does not have access to her own subjectivity, “there you are, we have shown it!”). Now it is sufficient to add into the experimental protocol an a posteriori guidance by an elicitation interview concerning the lived experience of the decision-making for the results to be massively reversed (cf. the replication of these experiments by Petitmengin et al. 2013, and in the same vein another replication realized under another paradigm by Camila Valenzuela-Moguillansky, Kevin O’Regan and Claire Petitmengin 2013); in this case, the subjects detect the trick employed by the experimenter and are able to provide a fine-grained description of how they made their choices.

Blog entries


B3. “How to describe the lived-experience for research: Meditation, meditators, explicitation-interview?” by Pierre Vermersch, 2015.


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Intersubjectivity in the Study of Experience
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> Upshot • I propose that getting the empirical study of subjective experience off to a good start requires an intersubjective approach, in both theory and method, where intersubjectivity is understood not in the standard science way of verification by others, but rather as participation in the investigation of how experience transforms when examining it together. I argue that this will greatly help do justice to and respect experience’s special transforming and transformative nature.

1 In his target article, Urban Kordeš brings to bear radical constructivism’s epistemological framework on transcendental phenomenology, and calls for combining the two into an empirical constructivist investigation of experience. Experience is the ideal study-subject for radical constructivism, and the latter’s epistemology should be able to undergird transcendental phenomenology’s empirical side.

2 Currently, subjective experience is empirically studied in close connection with cognitive science. But, according to Kordeš, the validity criteria of standard science prevent experience from being researched in such a way as to do justice to its nature. Experience is characterized by several aspects (§36). The two most important ones are, firstly, when investigating it, experience at the same time underlies the framework of the research, is the object of investigation, and is the “observing eye.” Secondly, experience changes all the time, also – and especially – when investigating it. This special nature of experience in terms of its ’ungobehindabelness’ and its transformation under scrutiny make it too intangible, too shifty a subject for natural science, with its concern for stability and objectivity.

3 A constructivist epistemology is pertinent to the empirical investigation of experience, because of its premise that the act of observing changes what is being observed. Conversely, experience by its nature alters when being observed, and thus forms the ideal subject of a constructivist investigation. Hence Kordeš’s proposal for bringing constructivism and phenomenology together in an empirical science of experience.

But Kordeš also puts forward a double-edged worry about the specification and possible future of such a science (§43f). On the one hand, if experience changes while being researched, this means that the person whose experience is being researched also changes. Experience research thus always has an existential counterpart. Not only does the experience change, so does the person. On the other hand, how can research on experience give us intersubjectively verifiable results? How can we expect to draw conclusions on universal or...
generalized characteristics of this evasive thing that is lived experience?

5) Kordéš’s prudent first step for constructivist experience research consists in the “systematic, meticulously recorded gathering of samples,” without fear of the “fluidity and uncertainty” of experience (Heinz von Forster’s “non-trivial”) (§62).

6) But I wonder if the proposed research programme could not get off to a more ambitious start.

7) Indeed, following natural science’s standards of validation will cause researchers to walk blindly past experience’s observer-dependent, and transformative nature. Research on the subjective certainly deserves better than a “methodological toolbox based on eliminating the subjective element” (§36). However, there is one element of standard science that escapes Kordéš’s critical eye: its idea of intersubjectivity. This – intersubjectivity as the verification of findings by others – is rightly there to safeguard the validity, repeatability, and generalizability or universality of findings. But in the case of examining experience, intersubjectivity understood in this narrow way may not be sufficiently sophisticated to do the job.

8) Apart from the transforming and the transformative, existential nature of experience, we also know that experience changes when we interact with others. There are participatory aspects to experience: it is not purely individual, but transforms in and through engagements with others, it transforms intersubjectively. The “observer” of experience is often an other, whether it is someone close to us (a parent, friend, partner), or more distant (a reader, an audience). An observer of our experiences is more often than not a co-experiencer. We are not unaffected by each other’s experiences. Several authors suggest that experience is intersubjective (Thompson 2001, 2005; Stawarska 2008a, 2008b; Satne & Roepstorff 2015). Even if basic experience or the minimal self is considered purely self-immanent (e.g., Henry 1973; Zahavi 1999), at least minimal levels self and experience are mediated and inflicted by others (Stawarska 2009; Di Paolo 2015, 2016), and even basic self-affection can be argued to be intersubjectively affected (de Haan 2010; Cuffari & Jensen 2014; Kyselo 2014; De Jaegher 2015).

9) What are the implications of this for the empirical investigation of experience? What would a broadly construed intersubjective method for empirically studying experience be like – one that heed the constructivist, phenomenologist, and intersubjective points?

10) Well, to begin with, its research object, rather than “experience,” should perhaps be: “how experience is transformed through investigating it together with others.” How can this experiential transformation and its investigation be done?

11) We need to imagine better ways to engage multiple persons in the investigation of experience. Other ways to intersubjectively validate such research could be by systematically elaborating the experience together. This entails having an experience together, processing it together, and analysing it together. Experience could, for instance, be further transformed together in a systematic way. Such an intersubjective process of transforming experience then coheres with the transformative nature of experience, doing justice to it and respecting it as a phenomenon, while also, at the same time, offering a way to probe that process itself, through and with others. Having a protocol or manual for the systematic transformation, investigation, and recording of such an investigation will ensure repeatability. A method based on these principles already exists and is being continuously further developed (Pieper & Clénin 2010; see also the TESIS summer school, http://tesis2012.wordpress.com/programme/prisma-workshop).

12) Nathalie Depraz (2012) shows how a second-person approach to studying experience lies in between and makes contact with both the first-person and the third-person requirements of an empirical study of experience, and thereby aims beyond each of them. The second person, she says, opens up at once to empathy, or a close relation to first-person experience through strong affective resonance, and

13) Add to this the ideas of the enactive theory of intersubjectivity. The most pertinent points of this are, first, its premise that experience is both a topic and a tool for investigation (Di Paolo, Rohde & De Jaegher 2010). Second, its non-trivial notion of embodiment, connected to the concept of autonomy – i.e., the particular, living, and lived processes of precarious self-production and self-distinction, in their energetic and material workings – determine a creature’s perspective, and what makes sense to it (Di Paolo 2005; Thompson 2007). Third, its conception of social interaction processes as autonomous, i.e., as taking on a life of their own, while not destroying the autonomy of the individuals engaging in them (De Jaegher & Di Paolo 2007; De Jaegher, Di Paolo & Gallagher 2010). And fourth, conceiving social understanding as participatory sense-making, or the way in which agents engaging in interactions with each other participate in each other’s sense-making and in through moving together, i.e., affecting each other mutually (De Jaegher & Di Paolo 2007).

14) Taking these enactive principles into account, an intersubjective method for the empirical study of subjective experience can be – literally, not just textually – embodied in participative research. The intersubjective modulation and co-investigation of experience can rest on principles of how individual and interactional autonomy interplay with each other and play out when engaging in transformative processes together.

15) The full toolbox for studying experience, then, includes ways to study experience with others, to do so systematically, and in line with the idea that the researcher is transformed, as Kordéš suggests, in a non-trivial research strategy that includes observation, intersubjectivity, and transformation (§37). I propose that these three elements, like the object of study, the “observing eye,” and the framework of research are all intertwined and mutually support each other.

16) Pierre Vermersch (1999) hints that we may need a better theory of intersubjectivity if we want to have a better science of experience. I would add to this that we need an intersubjective methodology,
not in the simple verification sense, but in the transformative sense. This, I think, will certainly make a “transformation science” of experience possible. For researchers to “become methodologically calibrated instruments” (§55) forms part of this. Taking the enactive logic of values being determined by a creature’s embodiment and self-organization to its logical conclusion also means that researchers should become participants (though in the right circumstances – not in every piece of research: research on functional elements of cognition is still justified, and will not require this kind of approach). Perhaps even, the existential, unsettling involvement that researchers may shy away from (§54) may be easier to bear if it is done together with others and it is clear that all participants/researchers in such an experiment will be transformed.

« 17 » Thus, while the author’s proposal to start with systematically gathering samples, or to do the “butterfly collection stage of scientific development,” is necessary and important, we may already have ways to detect patterns emerging in the samples too, especially if we dive into the collecting together. My point is that, when Kordeš says that “the person whose experience is being observed can no longer be treated as a mere subject – she must become a researcher herself (or at least a co-researcher)” (§61), this means not only that she cannot just passively have her experience examined, but also has to accept being transformed in the process (this is the sense of “becoming a researcher” here), but also that she will inevitably have to be “a co-researcher” (ibid, my emphasis). After all, a systematic investigation of subjective experience is by its very nature always-already a systematic investigation of the transformations undergone by the experiencing body/person as we attempt to probe it from the first, second, and even third personal perspectives.

« 18 » For investigating experience then, Goethe’s poetic science could perhaps be re-envisioned as a co-poetic science. Or – with a more poetic description – as a convivial science of experience. Convivial not in the sense of “happily living together,” but in the rawer sense in which life is basic to the enactive understanding of sense-making: with its needful freedom, its precariousness, and its throes and thrusts, all the more so when living and experiencing with others.

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The Many Faces of Experience
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> Upshot • The priority Kordeš gives to empirical phenomenology in the empirical assessment and grounding of constructivism stems from a restrictive conception of experience that has been questioned by other proponents of what he calls the “phenomenological attitude.”

« 1 » In his rich target article, Urban Kordeš argues for the need for an evolution of constructivism, and defines a very concrete possibility of evolution: instead of being confined to a meta-scientific stance, it would be time for constructivism to become more empirical and practical, up to the point of becoming an “empirical research discipline” (§42). In virtue of which is sometimes named a fusion (§30, §61) and in other places a complementarity relation (§59) between constructivism and first-person/second-person studies (or empirical phenomenology (§30)) on lived experience, constructivist ideas might be grounded and tested empirically, and constructivism could offer an appropriate epistemological framework for these studies.

« 2 » I will not discuss here the suggestion of using constructivism as an epistemological framework for first-person/second-person studies on lived experience, since I am in basic agreement with it. As Kordeš notes, these studies still often rely on objectivist presuppositions, such as the idea that lived experience is a substance waiting to be discovered, undisturbed by the observer and by the very process of observation and description. Proponents of these studies hasten to look for invariants and repetability, without taking the time to question the very orthodox picture of scientific inquiry they take for granted in order to defend the scientific respectability of their approach. As Kordeš acknowledges, Claire Pettit menuhine and Michel Bitbol (2009) might be considered as the first defenders of the suitability of assuming a non-objectivist stance when one studies consciousness using first-person and second-person methods.

« 3 » My commentary will be targeted at the unclear character of what Kordeš means by “experience” when he defines constructivism as an epistemological position that would be in need of empirical testing. If his reasoning is valid (as he believes it is, §6), I am afraid it is at the expense of important theoretical ambiguities on the meaning of “experience.” For Kordeš, most constructivists would have arrived at what he calls “the phenomenological attitude,” namely “the view that experience is primary” (§§18, 21, 22). Very well, but what is experience here? He does not explicitly answer the question. He rather quotes various authors who, beyond their dismissal of objectivism, realism and scientism, have nevertheless entertained different conceptions of experience and knowledge. Quoting Francisco Varela (himself leaning on Edmund Husserl), we learn that “experience” is “human experience,” and that it has a “direct, lived quality” (§18). Agreed. According to the phenomenological attitude as Kordeš defines it, experience is not only the terminus a quo, but also the terminus ad quem of knowledge, since for Kordeš the phenomenological attitude includes the endorsement of the idea that it is impossible to “rationally know a reality beyond our experience” (§20). There is