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sional properties or invariants in further micro-phenomenological analyses. This proposal implies, however, that the underlying categorical content (structure) of such experiences as “getting in contact with my own body” can itself be transformed into an explicit object of experience and analysis. In the philosophical tradition, this capacity is known as intuition. George Bealer, for instance, has defined “intuition” as an intellectual ability to gain access to conceptual, logical, mathematical or modal content on an *evidential basis* that is *independent* of observational (sensory-mediated) experience (Bealer 1999: 249). This approach potentially offers an interesting further ground for the independence claim. If there exists a human faculty allowing access to structural properties, this might help us understand how to begin the initial derivation of categories in the grouping process of the micro-phenomenological interview method. By analyzing the extensional properties (multifarious descriptions of getting in contact with one’s own body, for instance) intuitions are already operative in the way we find suitable intensional properties to *classify* the synchronic and diachronic units of the process. In contrast to fleeting experiences, intuitions enable first-person access to structural content, such as in the mathematics that is required to understand the necessary relations in question.

« 9 » All this leads to interesting research pathways and intriguing questions for further micro-phenomenological studies: is there a faculty of intuition that is related to human thinking and categorical content? And if so, how are the different types of content (structural and non-structural) related to each other in the process of analysis? As we have seen, it is important to make headway with regard to those questions in order to provide a thorough justification of micro-phenomenological findings.

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Epoché, Verbal Descriptions and Corpus Size in the Conduct and Analysis of Explicitation Interviews

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> **Abstract** • Valenzuela-Moguillansky & Vásquez-Rosati have framed out a detailed and meaningful procedure to analyze micro-phenomenological interviews. Here, we comment on two aspects: the place of verbal descriptions during data collection and analysis, and whether the authors’ analytical procedure can be scaled to large sets of interviews.

« 1 » Camila Valenzuela-Moguillansky & Alejandra Vásquez-Rosati have done an excellent job of providing a detailed and meaningful analytical procedure for micro-phenomenological interviews. We find their attempt helpful in providing precise terms – such as descriptemes, grouping, aggregation and other abstraction operations – and clear concepts for the successive steps of the analysis. It is helpful especially because during our own analyses, we have often struggled to clearly grasp the impact apparently small decisions can have on later interpretations. Their target article undoubtedly strengthens the rigorous study of lived experience, and future research will gain in transparency, falsifiability and overall credibility by resting on a well-defined epistemology built on thoroughly justified practices.

« 2 » In this commentary, we reflect on two issues related to micro-phenomenological interviews and their analysis. The first issue relates to the place of language in the successive semiotic transformations taking place between the interviewee’s original lived experience and the final outputs of the analysis. The second issue is the possibility

of applying the proposed procedure to very large sets of interviews.

Epoché and the verbal description of lived experience

« 3 » Occupying a central place in the micro-phenomenological approach, and relating to the description with words of lived experience, epoché – or suspension of judgment – is one of the conditions for turning one's attention towards oneself and then contacting one's lived experience. It comes from the Greek *παύση*, which means “paying attention to a particular phenomenon.” This process has been made accessible to empirical science to study subjective experience (Vermersch 1994, 2012; Petitmengin 2006). Epoché unfolds according to three main phases (Depraz, Varela & Vermersch 2000): (1) suspension of attention, (2) re-direction, and (3) letting go. After this process, allowing contact with the evocation of past experience, comes the moment of the verbal description by the subject of what happens to her, within the limits of language. This step raises significant issues challenging the community of practitioners of micro-phenomenological interviews, during both data collection and analysis.

« 4 » During the verbal description, lived experience is “expressed” with words. What does this operation of expression, etymologically “to put outside,” consist in? Is it a simple translation of lived experience into linguistic productions, or a more interpretative process? This interrogation is also present during data analysis, when the goal is to construct and to name descriptive experiential categories. In our research (Ollagnier-Beldame & Coupé 2019), we rely on the model of semiosis (in French *modèle de la sémiotique*), developed by Pierre Vermersch (2012). This model is a semiotic process of transformation, made of successive resumptions of the research material, for a gradual construction of meaning. It includes several steps through (1) the initial transformations, (2) the organization of data, and (3) the data analysis. Importantly, the model emphasizes the idea that each step is interpretative, and not only those that are part of the analysis.

« 5 » Using language to describe experience raises many questions, related to fundamental properties of language. Depending on different factors – the context, whether a

noun is generic or particular, whether it is used with a definite or an indefinite article etc. – words and especially nouns can refer to collections of things or events rather than to specific instances. For example, the phrase “a dog likes bones” does not point to a specific dog, but rather intensionally to a prototypical dog with its defining attributes, or extensionally to all dogs. Since actions, feelings or thoughts in a singular experience are all specific instances, interviewers conducting explication interviews will be very sensitive to fine details of the verbal descriptions, in order to detect whether the interviewees are focused on the singular, or start to refer to recurring aspects of different experiences, in which case they will need to be brought back to the specific experience under investigation. Beyond that, however, words, as signifiers, never fully convey all the properties of a specific thing or event. They refer rather to an “envelope” of the latter, which is actually what is needed for successful communication. This derives from the inferential nature of our communication system, which differs from a communication code where the message carries all the information to be conveyed (Sperber 1994). Because of this discrepancy between a signifier and its signified, words are never semantically dense enough to fully express a given lived experience. The practitioner of explication interviews will argue that she uses sets of words to increase the overall semantic density of the description. Capturing the whole richness and the subtleties of experience is however more a direction than the assessable achievement of a goal, even with lengthy descriptions. More precisely, language may be said to be partial in two ways. First, since a prototype or a category can create delimitations in an otherwise continuous phenomenon, as do, for example, color terms in the continuous visible spectrum. Second, since these delimitations are partly arbitrary or at least susceptible to variation, as made evident by how cultural diversity is reflected across languages.¹

1 | This echoes the mistrust Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi had regarding language. For him, the Dao, or “reality,” is conceived as a totality, but cannot be expressed as such. Indeed, any discourse introduces human and social “cuts” (“*bian*” in Chinese, a character which can either

« 6 » In their target article, Valenzuela-Moguillansky and Vásquez-Rosati point out the previous problem when they write that “it is important to consider that naming a category is a delicate process since it crystallizes and delimits it, giving it an identity that might not always correspond to the meaning the utterances conveyed” (§63). This difficulty seems to be further compounded by the construction of meta-categories. Although they cannot solve this issue, some strategies can be devised to minimize it. For example, in §51, the authors propose to assign, when necessary, a verbatim statement to several categories, thus offering more flexibility with respect to the meaning of words.

« 7 » In addition to these difficulties, when describing lived experience with language we sometimes also encounter situations in which words fail to express something – rather than “just” not being perfectly appropriate. There are two cases: unspeakable and ineffable. In the case of the unspeakable, “what we absolutely cannot talk about” (Jankélévitch 1983), something, e.g., death, is said to be out of reach of language or in a way “below words.” In the case of the ineffable, something is rather “beyond words,” in the sense that it is too extraordinary to be described with mere words, e.g., deep love. In the former case, something may not be thinkable and, therefore, cannot be said. In the latter case, something may be thinkable and experienced, but would require an “infinite” speech according to Jankélévitch, i.e., a sheer endless amount of words, to be properly conveyed.

« 8 » The limitations of language discussed in §5 and §7 can be seen as “qualitative,” when words do not authentically describe the experience, or “quantitative,” when they do not fully describe the whole experience. Micro-phenomenological interviewers constantly come up against these limitations, both during data collection, when interviewers must not hinder the interviewee's epoché, and later during the analysis of these data, when they must access the reference experience.

be written with a radical for language or a radical for a blade) into this totality, and thus ultimately betrays the “true” nature of Dao (Cheng 1997: 116).

Scaling the analytical procedure to large sets of interviews

« 9 » In their article, for the sake of clarity, Valenzuela-Moguillansky and Vásquez-Rosati apply their procedure to a small set of five interviews. However, they mention that they have actually analyzed a much larger corpus of 55 interviews with the same approach. Readers who use similar methodologies will have in mind the amount of work and time needed to achieve this large-scale investigation. This is due to two factors: first, the iterative nature of several stages of the procedure, involving progressive refinement; and second, the need to regularly come back to the primary descriptemes to assess one's "incipient" categories, whether specific or generic. Furthermore, the target article conveys the impression that a trial-and-error approach always eventually elucidates uncertainties. However, during our analyses (Ollagnier-Beldame & Coupé 2019), we are often left with unresolved issues. Especially when trying to recover the diachronic structure of a lived experience, we often find ourselves unable to satisfyingly order the verbatim statements.

« 10 » Beyond time, one can question the feasibility of applying the whole analytical procedure to several dozens of interviews. Is the shift from five interviews to fifty or more only quantitative? On the one hand, the specific analyses are the same for all interviews. Analyzing fifty interviews thus takes "only" ten times longer than the analysis of five. On the other hand, when it comes to the generic analyses, we argue that the complexity of the task does not increase linearly with the number of interviews. Indeed, as the size of the corpus increases, each additional interview – i.e., its descriptemes and specific units – must to some extent be compared to all other previous interviews, resulting in a quadratic complexity. It seems nearly impossible to pay equal consideration to all sets of specific categories and descriptemes while shaping generic descriptions. This may apply at the operational level, when juggling with computer files, papers etc., but may do even more so at the cognitive level. It is our intuition that at some point the analyst(s) will necessarily give priority to some descriptions over other, and therefore create an asymmetry in the whole process, further compounded by their familiarity

and experience with descriptive categories. This will in turn grant more significance to some specific outputs than others. While this may not lead to drastic analytical issues, it, however, contradicts the principle that more (interviews) is necessarily better.

« 11 » If too few interviews are not enough to grasp the diversity of possible human experiences and too many become intractable, what is the appropriate size of a corpus of micro-phenomenological interviews? (Q1) Analyzing interviews progressively as they are being conducted is a meaningful approach, although one can never be sure whether the next interview will reveal something radically new or only confirm what has been discovered already. While one may hypothesize a reasonable target, the decision, however, probably depends on the situation under investigation and possibly the profiles of the interviewees.

Conclusion

« 12 » Conducting micro-phenomenological interviews and tackling their qualitative analysis are a strong commitment to an innovative epistemological approach. In this light, the value of Valenzuela-Moguillansky and Vásquez-Rosati's contribution should be stressed once again. With respect to the challenges of their methodology, one can raise the question of what could be done to ease the whole analytical procedure. On the one hand, one may cautiously consider certain shortcuts at different stages. On the other hand, alternative analytical techniques can be used, such as the application of text mining tools (Przyrembel & Singer 2018). Also, dedicated software could be developed and tailored to the specific needs of the method, including graphical tools to get a broad view of several semantic networks or sets of dynamic lines, with easy access to the connected descriptemes. Such an approach could partially lift the operational and cognitive limits we mentioned in our commentary.

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