

The Question of Experience

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I welcome the opportunity to reflect on Michael Schnegg's fine article, 'Phenomenological Anthropology: Philosophical Concepts for Ethnographic Use'. Professor Schnegg's comprehensive overview of the intricate relations between phenomenology and anthropology is much-needed one, as it offers significant ways in which anthropologists can draw on phenomenological concepts and modes of thought and analysis in their research and writing. The article also suggests ways in which phenomenology can be informed by anthropology, particularly in expanding the scope, depth and cross-cultural dimensions of phenomenological inquiry in philosophy, the humanities and the social sciences.

There are many fine and highly significant aspects to the article, from the informed articulation of key theoretical concepts established in phenomenology through its history of concepts such as 'intentionality', 'being-in-the-world' and 'embodiment' (to name just a few) to the specific ways in which anthropologists can employ phenomenological modes of inquiry and analysis in their work. These modalities range from specific and highly useful research methods (including 'phenomenological interviews', 'free imaginative variation' and 'opening up') to a more general awareness of the phenomenological dimensions of everyday social life in diverse places in the contemporary world. All told, the article is remarkably perceptive and insightful, and holds out the promise of being read and used by diverse readers. I can readily envision the text being assigned as required reading in any number courses in phenomenological anthropology and critical phenomenology taught by anthropologists and philosophers.

The article has provoked vast swirls of thought and reflection in my own close reading of the text. I would therefore like to describe several thoughts and questions that keep coming into my mind as I reread and rethink certain arguments and conclusions at hand. In doing so I refer to my own first-person, phenomenologically inclined encounter with the text.

First, there is the question of *experience*. Michael Schnegg rightly observes that the gist and purpose of phenomenology are to look at the 'structures of experience' that are evident in how human beings and other life forms perceive the world, as the world and its many diffuse and varied phenomena appear to us and to others. While this claim is indisputable, I do think that we need to consider more closely what we mean by 'ex-

perience' or any given 'structures of experience', As I argued some years ago (Desjarlais 1994, 1997), as a foundational concept in philosophy and the human sciences, as we now know and understand that concept, the concept of experience is a relatively recent one within the history of European thought. And yet experience strikes me as a kind of 'bucket concept' that is used to hold lots of different things, such as apparent forms of perception, consciousness, affect and emotion, corporality, sensate knowing and empathy. However, the very idea and form of the bucket itself is often not considered closely. In other words, it is not enough to stand by the idea that phenomenology is the study of experience and then proceed from there. We need to dig into the implications of this idea and reflect on the many complicated forms that something like 'experience' assumes in our lives and the lives of others. The complications quietly involved are suggested by the fact that in the German language there are two words that are often considered cognate with the English word 'experience': namely, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, with the former suggesting (as I roughly understand it) something like 'to experience something' within the busy stream of life, while the latter indicates an experience that one has gone through and gained something from. This begs the question: would it be said in German that phenomenology involves the study of the structures of *Erlebnis* or of *Erfahrung* or a complicated mix of the two? The point I am trying to make it that there is a whole gamut of connotations, implications and linguistic and conceptual histories in words such as *Erlebnis*, *Erfahrung* and 'experience', or words and concepts in other languages that might resemble (or not quite resemble) these rather European/American terms. It would be good for us to reflect in careful ways on the implications of all this in moving forward with any inquiries in phenomenological anthropology and critical phenomenology. For that matter, the secure and important question, 'How do you experience X?', if posed to interlocuters while doing phenomenologically inclined ethnographic research in non-western settings, might lead to any number of tricky problems and concerns. One is how to parse the verb 'experience' within a local language and how to describe how a person does something like 'experiencing' within the world, or even if there is something like 'experience' going on for any of the given peoples involved. It is not as easy or as straightforward as it might look.

Another concern of mine relates to the genealogy of critical phenomenology, which is outlined in the article. Schnegg notes that 'a new school is emerging that calls itself *critical phenomenology*, reaching out from phenomenology to critical theory' while citing publications by philosophers, the earliest being in 2018. Schnegg goes on to note that these philosophical texts share many of the concerns of 'earlier anthropological attempts to mobilize phenomenological thinking for social critique', as though these earlier attempts were antecedent to a more fully realized critical phenomenology as launched by philosophers. Yet the idea, scope and promise of a 'critical phenomenology' had already been clearly established in the discipline of anthropology by the mid-1990s. Byron Good sketched out the key ideas involved in his book *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience* (1994), while the present author produced a definitive statement in the book *Shelter Blues* (1997):

In my reckoning we need a critical phenomenology that can help us not only to describe what people feel, think, or experience but also to grasp how the processes of feeling or experiencing come about through multiple, interlocking interactions. Such an approach is phenomenological because it would entail a close, unassuming study of ‘phenomena,’ of ‘things themselves’ – how, for instance, people tend to feel in a certain cultural situation. But the approach is also critical in that it tries to go beyond phenomenological description to understand why things are this way: to inquire, for instance, into what we mean by feeling, how it comes about, what it implies, and what broader cultural and political forces are involved. In addition, the phenomenology is a critical one because it tries to take into account the makings of its own perceptions. (Desjarlais 1997:25)

The ethnography in which this statement appears goes on to show the ways in which concepts such as ‘experience,’ ‘agency,’ ‘selfhood,’ ‘personhood,’ ‘mental illness,’ ‘body’ and ‘the senses’ are deeply charged by complex political, social, economic and discursive forces coursing through situations of life in and around a homeless shelter in Boston. It thus calls for critical analyses and reconsiderations of the very forms of thought involved in the social sciences and the humanities, phenomenology included. From the mid-1990s on, a number of writings by anthropologists developed further the conceptual aims and concerns of such engagements in critical phenomenology (as noted, for instance, in Desjarlais and Throop 2011, and Zigon and Throop 2021). It might be that phenomenologists trained in philosophy have not been so aware, understandably, of this in-depth work in anthropology in developing their own recent forms of critical phenomenology. Presently emergent, in any event, is a rich and generative interchange between philosophers and anthropologists when it comes to the critical analysis of life and death in many crucial situations in the contemporary world. Critical phenomenology is in an exciting fecund moment, as Schnegg astutely observes.

Yet another key aspect of Schnegg’s innovative article is the framework in which ‘six phenomenologies’ are highlighted, with salient ethnographic examples situating these ideas in concrete social contexts. *Of-ness, in-ness, embodied-ness, responsive-ness, between-ness, with-ness*. Schnegg’s reflections on these six modalities of phenomenological inquiry are highly incisive and useful. Along with this, I think there is a need to stress the ways in which the tenors of imagining and phantasmal appearance and ghostly spectralities course through many forms of contemporary life and perception, including situations of political violence and oppression, such that a wide-ranging ‘phenomenology’ is called for as much as any given phenomenology (Desjarlais 2017, 2018, Desjarlais and Habrih 2022). Perhaps, then, ‘*imagine-ness*’ might be phantasmally added as an abiding coefficient to the six phenomenologies just noted?

More generally – and I believe that Michael Schnegg would agree with this – my sense is that a next good step would be to draw on these and related orientations in undertaking comprehensive ethnographic research on certain topics within the complexities of intersubjective life, in order to grasp and to show how these orientations

intersect with and inter-affect one another. There is a need to attend to complicated arrangements in life in which many forces are at work at once, with busy interfaces between disparate but interrelated forms of life and consciousness, perception, technology, analogue and virtual media, and organic and non-organic life. The contemporary world implies a close imbrication of technology and consciousness, of technologically mediated forms of consciousness, and various breeds of techno-consciousness and artificial intelligence processors synched into animate fields of human consciousness. We therefore need to develop ways to analyze and grasp what is involved with the charged multiplicities that course through all of this. In my estimation, the future of phenomenological anthropology belongs to a mix of actualities and virtualities, to singular moments and flows of life tied to forms of collective perception and agency and virtual actualities. This future belongs to refractions of multi-vectored temporalities and energies – of affect, perception, memory, imagining, fantasies – which themselves are tied into economies of simulation and virtuality. We are far from Husserl here, far from a ‘transcendental philosophy as the analysis of lived experience in the conscious, living present’ (Stiegler 1998:4). The concept of ‘lived experience’ in itself, by itself, in anything like a discrete living present, in the purity of its claims and dimensions, now strikes one as simple, quaint and anachronistic. The future of phenomenology might well imply a post-phenomenology.

References

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