

Affective Lives: A Critical Pheno|Psycho|Anthro Lens on the Arduousness of Experience

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For my commentary, I would like to take up Michael Schnegg's question 'what does the context add [to experience, A.v.P], and how?' I deliberately take the example of a feeling-state as a phenomenon to explore, simply because I am both a sociocultural and a psychological anthropologist who, up until now, has mostly been interested in understanding the entanglements of culture, society and the human psyche (Stodulka, von Poser, Scheidecker and Bens 2023). In order to discuss the above question, I offer a brief ethnographic glimpse into a re-occurring contextual experience that, in my view, is both charged with affects and telling in terms of affective resonance across times and spaces:

'How are you?', I usually ask Mrs. N. whenever we meet. Mrs. N. is a woman over sixty, whose name I anonymize here. Mrs. N. is a social worker who, before migrating to Germany, had been born and raised in Vietnam. In a socially highly committed way, she works in an urban psychosocial carescape in Berlin, which has been a site of my anthropological and continuous engaged research since 2015 (Ta et al. 2021, von Poser 2023, von Poser and Willamowski 2020). 'I am still alive' is the answer I usually get from her, and every time I hear these words, I feel that she utters them in a slightly moving voice. At least, and speaking in terms of 'affective scholarship' (Davies and Stodulka 2019, Stodulka, Selim and Mattes 2018), I sense that the moving voice as it appears to me epistemically affects me as a researcher. In the beginning of our ethnographic encounters, I therefore pondered why Mrs. N. framed her answer in the way she did. Why was she always saying that she was 'still alive'?

Only years later – experiential years of walking and talking together, of visiting places and people together, of sensing, silencing, and reflecting felt irritations in the relational encounters that are hers (into which I am allowed to delve to a certain degree), of walking and hanging around together without talking, of preparing and eating meals together, of touching plants together, picking strawberries together and sharing melon seeds, of sensing how eyes get widened, how eyes get filled with tears, how tears dry, how, first, a smile and, then, a laughter re-emerges – I dare to say that I am almost able to comprehend and contextualize what Mrs. N. has, in intersecting intensities,

experienced throughout her life and why the words ‘I am still alive’ truly have a serious weight. I am now aware that Mrs. N.’s embodied and emplaced memories entail existentially fraught experiences of war, hunger, repression and poverty, of displacement and inequality in migration, of discrimination, cultural ostracism and racism, as well as existentially mobilizing experiences of re-orientation, re-empowerment, hope, joy and success, all phenomenal layers that are repeatedly mixed with a feeling-state she describes as being ‘still alive’. I am also aware that there are situations that lead Mrs. N. to enter states of remembering and even re-experiencing these multiple layers of her life in multiple affective ways.

My encounters with Mrs. N. are situated in the wider context of a collaborative research project between psychological anthropologists and cultural psychiatrists and psychologists (Heyken et al. 2019, Nguyen et al. 2021), who have jointly taken inspiration from the field of a global and interdisciplinary critical phenomenology of health (e.g., Kirmayer, Lemelson and Cummings 2015). Based primarily on a sensorially immersive ethnography (Pink 2015) of this context, I have conceptualized the arduousness of experience as a prism, which elsewhere I have called *Affective Lives* (von Poser 2018). This prism encapsulates the idea that emotional experiences are the result of complex, overlapping, sometimes exceptionally arduous and affective processes of coping with the felt irritations that shape and shake feelings of non/belonging and in/exclusion over the entire course of life. Moreover, this shaping and shaking always occurs situationally, with different intensities on the level of felt experience and in relation to people’s temporal, spatial and sensorial emplacements and relational encounters in and with the world. Here, I wish to reveal this prism as a critical Pheno|Psycho|Anthro lens since, in condensing the perspective of experience as a literally ‘lived’ and thus much more complex, complicated and, in fact, ‘abjective’ (Willen 2007, 2021) experience, phenomenological and psychological anthropologists are required to be extremely cautious in their choice and use of a particular methodology.

Of course, Schnegg does hint at the aspect of ‘lived’ experience in his article by means of a detailed reference to a number of scholars who have been at the forefront of a critical phenomenology in anthropology (Desjarlais 1994; see also Willen 2007, Zigon 2007, Desjarlais and Throop 2011, Mattingly 2019). In my opinion, however, the very ‘lived-ness’ of experience, which posits complexity, ambivalence, conflict and arduousness, remains rather under-examined, at least clearly, in his *methodological* reflections. I basically share Schnegg’s general observation that phenomenology is an integrative and salient anthropological approach to the theoretical and empirical study of experience. In fact, my own previous and current ethnographic works on foodways, empathy and relatedness in a rural Ramu River society of Papua New Guinea (von Poser 2013, 2017), as well as the affective efforts of migration in Viet-German car-escapes, would not have been possible had I not taken a general phenomenological stance towards the experiential dimensions of societal and subjective life and of social conduct in these settings. I also basically agree that tinkering variously with the ‘of-ness’, ‘in-ness’, ‘embodied-ness’, ‘responsive-ness’, ‘between-ness’ and the ‘with-ness’ of

the experience of (certain) phenomena might be helpful in sharpening our awareness as situated and socially committed researchers with regard to the analytical potential that is obviously inherent in phenomenology and anthropology.

I do think, however, that there is not only a need to ‘defrost’ *concepts* in this context, as Schnegg convincingly emphasizes with reference to a recent claim made by Cheryl Mattingly (2019), but to ‘defrost’ *methods* as well, depending on what kinds of ‘livedness’ we aim at investigating as anthropologists. Also, I think it is worth reflecting on what interests us most as phenomenological anthropologists and whether there are differences in the ways we categorize certain phenomena and approach them in terms of methodology. To me, wanting to know how phenomena such as a rain shower, a glass, water, a coffee machine, a soccer match or even the ritualized practice of a cockfight appear is quite different from wanting to know how individuals and collectives deal with the phenomena that appear as severe ruptures in their lives. I am quite confident that it is easier to ask someone to remember, re-experience and describe feelings related to situations that involve a rain shower, a glass, water, a coffee machine, a soccer match or even the ritualized practice of the cockfight.

Things are completely different, though, when it comes to, for instance, severe illness and suffering or feeling-states, which involve experiences of war, violence, or death, the loss of beloved ones, loneliness, discrimination, poverty and racialization, to name just a few scenarios of ‘struggling along’ (Desjarlais 1994), into which individuals as well as collectives can become enmeshed over the courses of their lives. In phenomenological encounters, in which such experiences take center stage, it is sometimes of the utmost importance not to ask questions in ways that might lead people to the re-experience of experience. It can likewise become mandatory to ask questions only in the company of others who are part of one’s multi-perspectival research team and who can jointly (and hopefully better) approximate to an encounter. Finally, actively staying silent and perhaps even taking into account the possibility that one will not find out how things appear to others can be crucial.

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