Power Relations and Phenomenological Anthropology

Danaé Leitenberg
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale), Germany

In his article, Michael Schnegg provides us with important and helpful tools for conducting phenomenologically informed anthropological research. In an accessible manner, Schnegg captures the essence of complex philosophical concepts, demonstrates how anthropologists have applied them, and guides us through the different analyses and interpretations these allow based on his ethnographic material, collected among Damara pastoralists. These three aptly interwoven aims of his paper lead the reader to the crucial question of the future of phenomenological anthropology and its promising potential to reveal other ways of relating to and being in the world. In my opinion Schnegg's text shows us one of phenomenology's strengths, namely its capacity to account, via the discussion of experience, for what is universal, what is profoundly individual and what is political. We, as humans, all find ourselves in a state of 'being-in-the-world' (Husserl), in a state of 'embodiment' (Merleau-Ponty) or of 'thrownness' (Heidegger) into a world that is alien to us, to cite only a few of the currents that figure in this text. Yet, we are also fundamentally alone in how we experience this condition. At the same time, specific socio-historical contexts shape '*how* and *as what* such objects appear from a first-person perspective' (p. 1).

Although I tend to share Schnegg's hope for phenomenology's potential to 'envision being-together-otherwise' (Zigon 2021), my comment proposes to think about the kinds of relationships between researchers and research partners that allow a phenomenological approach in anthropological research in the first place. These reflections stem from my own research experience on tourism dependency in the Swiss Alps. For more than five years, I followed various inhabitants of a globalized mountain valley to understand what it meant to make a living in a place with no viable alternative to the very demanding economy of tourism. To understand tourism dependency beyond its economic aspect – that is, as a socio-historical as well as an affective and existential category shaping life in an Alpine village where local inhabitants claimed to be 'nothing without tourism' – I deployed a phenomenologically informed research framework. In an international resort that is visited by thousands of tourists every day, I turned to phenomenology [or, rather, existential anthropology as proposed by Jackson and Piette (2015)] in order to deepen my understanding of the place and its inhabitants' experi-

ences and move beyond the touristic, romanticizing narratives on the area. I selected a handful of informants whom I would visit regularly, and we talked for hours about their difficulties, their hopes and fears, for themselves, their children and their valley at a time of global acceleration, of a scarcity of snow and global warming. Thanks to the deployment of phenomenological tools foregrounding subjective experiences (p. 67), many of my interlocutors shared deeply personal experiences – of betrayal, threat, humiliation, disappointment, joy, etc. – with me. Some described these experiences as ordinary or even boring, but others felt that their (usually difficult) life stories needed to be heard or told to a greater audience. All trusted me in ways that I am still deeply grateful for.

In general, ethnographic fieldwork is based on certain levels of proximity between researcher and research participants. Participant observation and repeated, long stays belong to the anthropologists' toolkit precisely because they enable us to get a sense of how people live (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Herzfeld 2015). Yet, the phenomenological approach seems to require a specific closeness, challenging boundaries separating researcher and research partners in particular ways. On the one hand, it requires a deep form of commitment and responsibility, as well as empathy from the side of the ethnographer, to gain a profound understanding of the subjective experiences of others (this is, as Schnegg notes, also an aspect of Husserl and Stein's approaches; see also Sholokova, Bizzari and Fuchs 2022). On the other hand, it rests on the trust and vulnerability of informants, who agree to share their intimate experiences and stories with researchers. This process, as described by various phenomenological or existential anthropologists, requires time, being dynamic and intersubjective (Jackson 2013; Lems 2018). Schnegg's ethnographic material also conveys this sense of trust and proximity, if not intimacy, with his research interlocutors, many of whom he has known for two decades (p. 92).

However, the interpersonal closeness that seems to be the basis of phenomenological approaches also comes with certain limits. During my research, I met with various categories of village dwellers, such as the employees of transporting companies, farmers or migrant hospitality workers, with whom I formed long-lasting relationships. They told me about the complicated relations they had with an industry that was simultaneously creative of jobs, history and identity, as well as threatening for the environment, their heritage and the future. As time went by, it became clear that I also needed to collect the perspectives of those who shaped this industry locally, nationally and transnationally. However, when working with local elites such as hotel owners, tourism lobbyists or political representatives – usually older men – I was repeatedly faced with a certain distance. Our meetings took place in public spaces or offices, they viewed our meetings as very formal, and they expected clear questions to which they could give ready-made answers in a given time-frame. As much as I tried to develop these relationships, my meetings with them remained 'expert' interviews, in which feelings and subjective experiences were carefully avoided or minimized. The closeness and vulnerability that was so crucial when working with other informants seemed impossible to achieve with them. At best, I was a researcher who had to be informed about a given issue, and at worst (although rarely) I was unwelcome. This experience speaks to many

anthropologists' reflections on the difficulties of working with elites, the suspicion they tend to have towards researchers and also their inaccessibility, both practically and on a more interpersonal level (Gusterson 2021; Souleles 2018). As representatives of institutions and interests on a different scale, people in positions of power perform ideals of professionalism and authority where vulnerability is likely to appear as weakness.

I wonder, then, if what Laura Nader famously termed 'studying up' (1973) – i.e. the study of the wealthy, the elites, or of 'those who structure the life of others' (Archer and Souleles 2021) could, broadly speaking, be seen as one phenomenological anthropology's blind spots. This question may very well point to my own incapacity to conduct research with those situated above me in local or national politics with the tools described in Schnegg's article, for instance. However, it is striking that the majority of the scholarship in phenomenological anthropology cited here seems to cover the experiences of the suffering, the dispossessed or the subaltern. Let me emphasize here that I believe that phenomenological anthropology successfully reveals the complexity of experiences that have otherwise often been treated with miserabilism or fascination, such as the migrant condition (Lems 2018) or homelessness (Desjarlais 1997). To be clear, I also do not mean to imply that the powerful are completely absent from phenomenological anthropological scholarship, but that experiences of stability and privilege as such seem rather understudied, whereas the opposite, i.e., experiences of acute marginality and precariousness, are central to the works of many phenomenological anthropologists.

Schnegg's genealogy of phenomenological concepts provides some explanations for this focus, such as the Merleau-Ponty-derived tradition that foregrounds bodily experiences of suffering (p. 78) or the Heideggerian moments of *Störungen* that dramatically interrupt routines and thereby expose the structures of normality when they are no longer present (p. 74). A further explanation could also relate to anthropology's own historical biases and preferences to study the underdog or to insist on the 'dark' or 'harsh' aspects of life in late capitalism, as both Nader (1973) and Ortner (2016) have noted. Yet, I think that another, perhaps more practical reason stems from the difficulties ethnographers can encounter when working with people in positions of power using a phenomenological approach that calls for proximity and vulnerability.

If explicable, this lack of the powerful's experiences in phenomenological anthropology remains questionable. Like Nader and many others, I am convinced it is crucial for anthropologists to consider those who embody and live in 'cultures of affluence' (Nader 1973) and who benefit from structures of inequality being maintained for the development of a critical anthropological scholarship. A growing number of anthropologists have recently successfully accessed spheres of power and influence and revealed the complex social and affective worlds at play in sectors (e.g. banking) that usually present themselves as 'rational' and 'objective', in typically modernist fashion (Ho 2009; Zaloom 2009). Making experiences of privilege, success or entitlement visible could in my opinion also respond to the recent calls for a critical phenomenological anthropology that Schnegg mentions here (e.g. Mattingly 2019), by complexifying our understandings of power (and the lack thereof), its fragility and uncertainty, even for those who live and embody it.

However, as I have experienced myself, the level of interpersonal closeness that phenomenological anthropology requires can often stand in the way of conducting research with CEOs, lobbyists, policy-makers and experts. Should or could alternative tools be developed for a phenomenological study of elites like Nader proposed in her time? Could phenomenologically informed forms of autoethnography, for instance, help us navigate such contexts? I do not have any answer to these questions myself, but I believe that they should push us to reflect on the types of relations, whether of power, proximity or vulnerability, that allow for or impede on the deployment of a phenomenological anthropological approach in given situations.

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