Bracketing

Transpersonal Reflexivity for a Phenomenological Inquiry in an Interpretivist Framework

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The basis of this study are two underlying empirical projects. In the first one Viktor interviewed 17 Nobel Laureates trying to understand their cognitive complexity. (Dörfler & Eden, 2014a, 2017) In the second one Marc interviewed 18 top chefs trying to understand their creativity. (Stierand, 2015; Stierand & Dörfler, 2016; Stierand et al., 2014) Hence, both studies aimed at a high-complexity phenomenon in a well-defined context (science and haute cuisine respectively) and aimed at understanding the experiences of extraordinary achievers in these contexts. (Dörfler & Stierand, forthcoming) Both studies have been grounded in an interpretivist stance, and in both cases we were trying to collect thick data and achieve deep and insightful learning; this led us to develop a new method for each of the studies. The method developed for the Nobel Laureates project is called Intuitive Cyclic Phenomenology (Dörfler & Eden, 2014b), as it explicitly incorporates the intuition of the researchers and it has a number of embedded cycles in the process. The method developed for the top chef project is called Insider Explanatory Phenomenology (Stierand & Dörfler, 2014), as it explicitly incorporates the insider view of the researcher, who previously worked as a chef in Michelin starred restaurants and the purpose was to develop an interpretive-explanatory model. Naturally, in both projects the notion of bracketing came up as an important consideration, and we have developed a way of implementing bracketing through transpersonal reflexivity. The aim of this study is to unpack this view of bracketing as we believe that doing it well can substantially increase the quality of the findings and it has relevance to many other inquiries conducted following similar research philosophies. Important to mention is that we do not see the use of intuition and the insider view as a limitation; to the contrary, we believe that these were indispensable and key for achieving significant and game-changing findings. Thus, the notion bracketing, as we describe it here and as we have applied it, is not about getting rid of subjective components and removing pre-understandings but raising awareness of them and explicitly incorporating them.

As we were primarily interested in the personal experiences of our interviewees, we needed to deal with the fact that these personal experiences cannot be separated from the context of the experience. Therefore, we considered the interviewees' immediate context, their Dasein, as well as their broader spatio-temporal Lebenswelt that also accounts for the intellectual tradition and domain knowledge of the interviewees' field of practice. In a sense, the Nobel Laureates projects also made use of the insider view as Viktor as a researcher is naturally part of the Lebenswelt of Scientists at large. Yet, having not been awarded a Nobel Prize himself, Viktor needed to prepare for each interview meticulously in order to rapidly win the trust of the interviewees in the first few minutes of the interview. This is only a little glimpse into two extremely enriching and fascinating research experiences that both continuously challenged our personal worldviews and required from us to revise some of the fundamental notions of phenomenology, particularly the issue of bracketing.

In its original form, phenomenology came about in a profoundly positivist-dominated world of science and philosophy. Husserl, the founding father of phenomenology and student of Brentano, faced

strong opposition from the heavily positivist academic world when he attempted to establish new foundations of scientific inquiry by focusing on the notion of lived experience. For a long time, scholars understood Husserl's notion of bracketing as an attempt to approximate the positivist ideal of objectivity, because they believe that any form of scientific inquiry needs to remove the researcher from the findings. We believe that this was not Husserl's intention.

Husserl (1913) talked about three forms of bracketing: the *epoché* or *phenomenological attitude*; the *phenomenological psychological reduction*; and the *transcendental phenomenological reduction*. Epoché describes the mode in which the researcher refrains from explanations, scientific conceptions and knowledge so as to "return to the unreflective apprehension of the lived, everyday world". (Finlay, 2008: 3) This is a critical position where nothing is taken for granted (Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Zaner, 1975), beliefs, values, or knowledge about the phenomenon are "put out of play" (Husserl, 1936: 237); the researcher refrains from judgment (Husserl, 1913, 1936; Moran, 2000). Phenomenological psychological reduction, in turn, only requires the researchers (Giorgi, 1997) to suspend their "belief in the existence of what presents itself in the life-world. Instead the focus is on the subjective appearances and meanings" (Finlay, 2008: 3). So, the researcher brackets the world but not the empirical subject, to experience the natural attitude of the person in all its mundanity (Giorgi, 1997; Husserl, 1936). Transcendental phenomenological reduction is "a more radical version of the epoché where a 'God's eye view' is attempted" (Finlay, 2008: 3); Husserl argued that it allows the philosopher to be "above his own natural being and above the natural world" (Husserl, 1936: 152).

Some later interpretations of the notion of bracketing shifted towards what we wanted to achieve; for instance Giorgi (1994: 212) considers it as a process whereby "one looks at the data with the attitude of relative openness" and Finlay (2009: 13) talks about a "dialectic movement between bracketing preunderstandings and exploiting them reflexively as a source of insight". Similarly, the approach in these cases is aligned with our intentions to understand the interviewees' perspective including the identification of elements that blur the invariant but essential nature of interviewees' experiences (Giorgi, 1994; Husserl, 1931). This is also the reason for the numerous iterative cycles in both studies, treading a fine line between "knowing and not-knowing". (Gioia et al., 2012: 21) These conceptualisations, however, say little about the implementation.

In conclusion, we have implemented bracketing in two stages in both studies, although the order of these stages was different. One stage, primarily corresponding to epoché, was practiced by the interviewer; this stage was primarily focused on suspending the judgement in order to arrive at an intuitive understanding of the interviewees' subjective accounts. The other stage was practiced in the interaction between the interviewer and the co-researcher; this mainly corresponds to the phenomenological psychological reduction. The purpose of this stage was raising the awareness of presumptions, previous knowledge and beliefs that the interviewer is not aware of; this has been achieved by practicing transpersonal reflexivity. (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Hibbert et al., 2014) By this we mean that the co-researcher, who was not involved in the interviews and did not read them, holds a mirror to the interviewer in support of the reflexive process. Going through the cycles present in both methods also meant going back and forth between the two forms of bracketing, thus achieving the above mentioned 'attitude of relative openness'.

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