ONE CANNOT “JUST ASK” ABOUT EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT
The present article concentrates on second-person in-depth phenomenological inquiry (SIPI) into human experience. In order to delineate important characteristics of SIPI we use an example of a phenomenological case study. The study comprised of descriptive experience sampling, writing of diary, and a series of elicitation interviews.

The essential characteristic that we want to point out is a shift from the relationship researcher-subject to a participatory one of two co-researchers. Additionally we want to call attention to required interest and responsibility as well as openness and trust of the two co-researchers involved. We claim that “just ask” approach does not suffice and therefore methodologically most urgent prerequisite of SIPI or any kind of method trying to learn about second person view of cognition should be active and repeated training in observation as well as reporting about it. Such repetition can be achieved with a series of hermeneutical dialogues where “don’t know” attitude is of essential role.

1 INTRODUCTION
Research of human experience, has expanded across various fields of research and practice and progressed noticeably in the recent decades. On one end it extends from purely quantitative approaches where questionaries’ about personal experience complement neuropsychological research (Mason et al., 2007; Parnas, Sass, & Zahavi, 2013; Schooler, Reichle, & Halpern, 2004). On the other it encompasses in-depth qualitative approaches where interview techniques are used to compose profound, detailed and vivid picture of respondent’s experiential landscape (Hurlburt, 1992; Petitmengin, 2006). Most modern methods of researching subjective experience have recently developed within cognitive science. “Capitalizing on the ability of our species for self-reflection and combining it with the detailed measures of brain function that modern technology allows, cognitive neuroscience may be better able to reveal what is unique about the human mind” (Christoff, Smith, Gordon, Smallwood, & Schooler, 2009; p.8723).

The present article concentrates on second-person in-depth phenomenological inquiry (SIPI) into human experience. This is an interview-based approach constructed as a combination of methods originally designed by Hurlburt (1992) and Petitmengin (2006). The purpose is to delineate some important characteristics of SIPI and with this reveal yet another possibility inside phenomenological research that can bring us closer to understanding human cognition. The essential characteristic that we want to point out is a shift from the relationship researcher-subject or researcher-participant to a participatory one of two co-researchers. In examining experience the role of the one experiencing becomes active. He or she is not just a reporter or an information source but must become an active collaborator in the study. To portray such participatory research relationship we will use the term researcher (the person leading and facilitating the interview) and co-researcher (the one researching and reporting on his or her experience). We use the term second-person inquiry (as used by Varela & Shear, 1999 and Petitmengin, 2006) meaning the dialogical research with shared responsibility for conducting the research.

Through the process of this kind of research the co-researcher can expand his or her existential understanding of own experiential landscape. Therefore this technique can be viewed as a kind of self-research process, thus approaching mindfulness and some Husserl based psychotherapies (Giorgi, 2005; Kondratyuk, & Perakyla, 2011).

In order to illustrate the characteristics of SIPI we will use an example of a phenomenological case study. For this aim we selected a case study of suicidal ideation¹. Our basic research question was to learn as much as possible about suicidal ideation related experience. There are varying definitions offered for the concept suicidal ideation but in the present article it is used to refer to our subjects’ experiential world connected to suicide, retreat or nonbeing. Let us emphasize again that this paper’s purpose is not to add to widely researched area of suicidal ideation. We will mostly use the example of a methodologically clear and

¹ The study is presented in detail by Radovanović & Kordeš (2009), for the purpose of this paper we only present a selected part.
well-conducted case study to illuminate interesting and essential characteristics of SIPI.

2 RESEARCH DESIGN

In phenomenological research we never can know into what kind of experiential landscapes we will meander and because of the sensitive matter of this study we had to be very careful in preparing and designing it. Bearing in mind the possible dangers and ethical considerations of such research in suicidal ideation is principal. We have to be very selective in choosing the co-researcher and all possible outcomes have to be weighted out. Nevertheless we were encouraged by other studies with suicidal participants that report benefits to taking part in a research as it enables them to discuss problems (sometimes for the first time), which more often than not brings them some kind of relief (Cukrowicz, Smith, & Poindexter, 2010).

2.1 Co-researcher

The co-researcher was a 32-year-old female, for the purpose of this paper we will call her Mary. At the time of the research she was undergoing her own psychotherapy process and also studying to become a psychotherapist. Occasionally she would experience suicidal thoughts hence her psychotherapist proposed they signed an anti-suicide contract. After signing it Mary “realized her suicidal fantasies comfort her when she is feeling extremely bad, for they represent a possible way out of the hell she is experiencing, although that way out is death”. When she expressed these feelings to her psychotherapist, she received approval that it is all right to be as she is – even if that is suicidal. The response she received from her psychotherapist laid the grounds for her to become intrigued by feelings of anger and her willingness to “fight for the right to have suicidal fantasies”. This eventually led to deeper curiosity to research these suicidal states from a first person perspective. In the time being she did not want to get rid of them rather to understand them better. She approached the phenomenological research group with a suggestion to commence a phenomenological case study of these phenomena. Before the study we made sure that Mary and her therapist understood the nature of phenomenological research. Her psychotherapist evaluated the possible dangers of her entering a self-research process like this and gave the study a green light. It was made clear that Mary or her therapist could stop the research at anytime if needed. Furthermore we had a third person attend the research process as a kind of extra attention and perspective (Cukrowicz, Smith, & Poindexter, 2010).

2.2 Procedure

The whole research was designed as a phenomenological case study (comprehensively described by Kordš, 2009). The research consisted of two phases. In the first phase we used descriptive experience sampling technique (DES; Hurlburt, 1992), which gives an overview or the first outlook of the researched phenomena and trains the co-researcher in observing and reporting on her experience. Practical application of such surveying involves a research subject carrying a device, which emits a discrete signal 7 to 10 times per day at randomly selected moments. The subject attempts to “freeze” the experience just prior to the signal by writing it down into a notebook as precisely as possible. Within the frame of 24 hours an in-depth interview is conducted to thoroughly examine and describe all recorded experiences. The process is repeated several times, until the co-researcher is well trained in observing her own experience and feels that the gathered “samples” give an appropriate depiction of the structure of the entire experiential landscape.

In this case we expected that random sampling might not catch enough moments of experiencing suicidal ideation so we additionally instructed the co-researcher to keep a diary where she noted down every suicide thought throughout the day, with the intent to direct attention to this segment of experience. In-depth interviews were used to investigate diary entries as well.

When enough samples were gathered we introduced the second phase, which consisted of elicitation interview technique (Bitbol, & Petitmengin, 2013; Vermersch, 1994). The basis of elicitation interviews were selected experiential modalities of suicidal ideation found in the first part. We carried out five elicitation interviews in three months time.

In the end we gathered three types of data: transcripts of DES interviews, diary entries and transcripts of elicitation interviews. Content analysis was performed in line with case study methodology. The data was coded and put on the timeline so we could extract the temporal relations. The categories were defined and charted along the timeline.

3 SELECTED RESULTS

The aim of this section is not a presentation of characteristics of suicidal ideation connected experience but more a presentation of a selected theme to serve as an example for subsequent discussion about characteristics of SIPI (we omit the rest of the results in this paper because of the limited space).

Prior to commencing the study Mary was asked about the quantity of her suicidal thoughts and reported of few at the time being. Interviews that included moments gathered with DES sampling and diary entries quickly showed a surprising number of suicidal thoughts, which was contrary to Mary’s initial estimation. A diary excerpt will best portray Mary’s experiential insight into the frequency of her suicidal ideation.

“I cannot believe how often I have suicidal thoughts. I am shocked. Now, when I pay attention to them and observe them, it seems that they are somehow constantly hidden in me. Just below the surface, always ready…”
I thought that they are practically gone. I didn’t realize that they are there also when I am not currently in trouble or feeling bad. Even the smallest criticism I think about, and doesn’t need to come from other people, upsets me and I respond to it with a suicidal thought.”

Mary’s reports before the research started largely underestimated the amount and persistence of suicidal ideation. Therefore “just asking” about the co-researchers experience without repeated observation wouldn’t give us an accurate portrait.

4 DISCUSSION

The aim of the present article is to reveal essential characteristics of second-person phenomenological inquiry on an example of a case study of experiencing suicidal ideation. We will start with a fundamental characteristic of our own knowledge of our experience, which is a vital element to consider when investigating experience and it further impacts the principal characteristics of SIPI.

4.1 We don’t know our experience

Our case study in suicidal ideation is a good example of a case where the “just ask” approach does not suffice (Hurlburt, 1979; Hurlburt & Sipprelle, 1978). When Mary was asked about the frequency of her suicidal thoughts she erroneously reported there were a lot less of them then we later discovered with DES technique and diary writing. Assumptions that people are well acquainted with their experience and therefore need only to be asked about it usually lead to confirmation of our own notions of what experiential landscape should look like (Kordeč, 2013). Therefore methodologically most urgent prerequisite of SIPI or any kind of method trying to learn about human experience should be active and repeated training in observation as well as reporting about it. Such repetition can be achieved with a series of hermeneutical dialogues where “don’t know” attitude is of essential role. Conducting SIPI with suspended judgments reflects the crucial methodological guideline of Husserl’s concept of phenomenological reduction.

For SIPI research to produce any kind of genuine data it has to be iterative which is achieved by repeated interviews with participants. A systematic and persistent training in observation of the experiential landscape is necessary as was suspected by Varela (1996) and later empirically proven by Hurlburt (2009, 2011). Our practice shows that DES is a good starting technique to explore and describe experience. Systematic observation is later achieved by a series of in-depth interviews.

4.2 Interest and responsibility

Genuine interest in the researched phenomena and willingness to take full responsibility for entering as well as making each subsequent step of the research process is in our view essential for any co-researcher before starting phenomenological inquiry. In our case study the co-researcher initiated the study out of her own personal interest and was aware of the uncertain terrain we were walking as well as took responsibility for proceeding or stopping with the research if necessary.

4.3 Openness and trust

For the co-researcher to be able to access her intimate and unknown dimensions, she must abandon her representations and beliefs about herself. She must take off her usual skin, agree to relax without it and enter a state of vulnerability. For her to allow herself to be guided to carry out this intimate effort, she must feel the researcher totally present, attentive, open-minded and humble. The objective is to open up space for the co-researcher and make it possible for her to go into the realms of experience where she normally does not let herself roam to. The co-researchers are bound together by intentions of exploring experience with the focus on “how” rather than “why”. Petitmengin (2006, p.255) stressed the importance of an open-minded position on both sides because “While the interviewee does not know what he knows, the interviewer does not know what he is looking for”. The cornerstone of the dialogue is the relationship of trust between the two people involved (Petitmengin, 2006).

4.4 No expectations

It is of utmost importance to emphasize that Mary did not enter the research process with intent to change her experience (and become less suicidal), on the contrary –she felt she doesn’t have to change which gave her a feeling of security she needed to be able to research a part of her experience that was intimidating and painful. She trusted the researcher to continually re-create an open space of security and acceptance without having any expectations. We believe this is one of the core requirements of these kinds of studies; letting go of all expectations of outcomes by the researcher and co-researchers. It is also vital that a researcher is skilled in putting his or her usual judgments, expectations and desires for change aside – putting them into “brackets” or epoche in Husserlian terms and applying phenomenological reduction – the reduction of the observed phenomena “as the only thing given and certain in experience”.

4.5 Pure observation

Undertaking an attitude of pure observation without the intent to change – gazing into what is already there - is a foundational position upon which the following stages of the study can be built, and only then can true insights arise. It gives the co-researcher an opportunity to learn in a direct experiential way that relating to the world from set preconceptions interferes with open contact with the present moment. Often we try to change or flee our present experience, which we barely even know because it gets obscured by our concepts and fears. Consequently, the space for pure observation is of utmost value. To our great surprise, bringing an open and friendly curiosity to how
(unpleasant) experiences can be ‘felt’ experientially in patterns of ever-changing sensations creates a sense of greater freedom, clarity and choice than we can ever experience when ruminating about or trying to avoid the experience. Boss (1963; p.179) emphasized, “We must be capable of allowing what appears before us to remain intact and as what it immediately shows itself to be... We have to learn again just to look at the things actually confronting us and to let the phenomena, which we encounter, themselves tell us their meaning and content”.

6 CONCLUSION

We are heading into exciting times of growing interest for consciousness research, and above all it is becoming more and more evident that we are shifting our understanding of scientific research and reconsidering the amount of responsibility of all parties involved (researchers and participants). We, the researchers, are starting to realize we cannot assume participants’ responsibility of knowing their own experience (because they clearly don't as was shown in this paper) rather we first have to take the responsibility to provide the space for them to learn how to observe their experience and then give them their full responsibility back and invite them to become equal co-researchers who also become the experts in researching their experience.

SIPI clearly holds the basic features of scientific work: absence of intentionality and judgment, the observation of which is there without trying to escape or change it. It is absence of intentionality and judgment, the observation of which experience can be viewed almost uninterruptedly.

References


