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EMPIRICAL PHENOMENOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

by

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ABSTRACT

Phenomenology is a powerful, yet underused method in the study of religion—in part because too many scholars misunderstand what it entails. In its pure form, phenomenology seeks to describe experience as it presents itself to subjective consciousness. It is thus distinct from—and conceptually prior to—a subject’s interpretations of that experience, though experiences and interpretations inevitably collide. Conscious bracketing allows at least a partial separation, which lets experience-near descriptions of religious phenomena emerge.

This chapter outlines an empirical phenomenological method for exploring subjective experiences in religious settings. This method does not allow one to weigh the ‘truth’ of such experiences, much less gauge their ‘real’ referent. Instead, it allows one to enter into an aspect of the informants’ religious world as it presents itself to their consciousness. From this, one may draw conclusions about their religion as it is actually lived.

Introduction

The most important, yet overlooked, question in social research is a simple one: “What is the nature of the thing one seeks?” Different research projects look for different kinds of things. These can be simple or complex, shallow or deep, observable or matters of inference. They can lie on the surface of reality, so to speak, or they can be hidden patterns invisible to ordinary insight. Whatever the case, this nature stands at the junction of two key relationships that structure all research. One’s research question specifies what one is looking for; that looked-for object determines how one must try to find it. In shorthand, Question determines Object and Object determines Method. For researchers, this is the Law and the Prophets.

One might, for example, be interested in people’s religious affiliations. Depending on how strongly these are held, they could be matters of allegiance, of core identity, or just of preference. One could tap them at a relatively shallow level by means of two survey questions:

- “What is your religious affiliation? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?”
- “Would you call yourself a strong [*name of religion*], a moderate [*name of religion*], or a not very strong [*name of religion*]?”

Most Americans (and many others) could answer these questions easily. Indeed, this is why they work well on social surveys, which cannot have people confused about what is being asked. Getting a more nuanced picture, however, calls for much more penetrating questions and a lot of them. In fact, it calls for a reflective interview, which allows its respondents to qualify their attitudes toward their religious affiliations in much greater detail. Such interviews provide rich data, capable of distinguishing between such things as ‘allegiance’, ‘identity’, and ‘preference’ along multiple dimensions. (I may, for example, be ‘Catholic’ by allegiance, ‘Christian’ by identity, and ‘pantheist’ by preference.) In-depth interviews allow us to collect a complex picture, but at the cost of covering a much smaller segment of the population.

Either research project is interesting. What differentiates them is the depth of view that is sought. Shallow and deep views are different research objects, which call for different research techniques—surveys and interviews, respectively.

The first question to ask about phenomenology in the study of religion, then, is “What sort of thing does phenomenology seek?” If Question drives Object and Object drives Method, what kind of research object do phenomenological methods produce? And what sorts of research questions call for this kind of object? I shall start with a discussion of these matters, then I shall provide some examples that show how phenomenology works.

Finally, I shall explore some of the current controversies surrounding this method for the study of religions.

Toward Subjective Experience

I must begin with a caveat: the term 'phenomenology' has been wildly misused, and not just in religious studies. Indeed, I am periodically tempted to abandon it altogether, much as Charles Sanders Peirce abandoned "pragmatism" for "pragmaticism", a term he called "ugly enough to be safe from kidnapers" (Peirce 1934: 414).¹ Still, it is worth exploring its history, if only to let us specify what can and cannot be accomplished with this research tool.

In the study of religion, the term 'phenomenology' draws us toward the experiences that are supposed to underlie religious life. The call to experience gained scholarly prominence in the late 17th century, with Friedrich Schleiermacher's (1799) attempt to justify Christianity against Enlightenment rationalism. Roughly put, he argued that religion is best grounded in emotional experiences, not in ideas. Some experiences point beyond the natural realm. People experience, for example, a sense of utter dependence—something that cannot be comprehended within the bounds of the everyday world. As they reflect on this experience, they develop the idea of an all-powerful, benevolent God, the only possible source such an experience might have. This idea is an "over-belief", to use William James's later term: an intellectual deduction from and elaboration of the experience itself. In James's (1903: 424) words, religious ideas "presuppose immediate experiences as their subject matter. They are ... consequent upon religious feeling, not coordinate with it, not independent of what it ascertains".

Unlike Schleiermacher, James tried to describe people's religious experiences without regard for their truth—the basic phenomenological technique of 'bracketing' or *epoché*. His psychological phenomenology continues to be a significant influence on the American study of religion, but philosophical phenomenology—and the empirical phenomenology based on it—is better traced to the work of Edmund Husserl (1900-1901, 1913), writing in the same period.

Husserl began his philosophy with conscious experience. He noted that consciousness is lived rather than just thought—i.e., that it has duration. He also noted that consciousness is always consciousness of something, whether it be a tree, playing chess, a lover's kiss, or a memory of things past. Phenomenology involves the thick description of such subjective experiences in order to locate their structures. We may find, for example, that playing chess involves, for most of us, imagining future moves, thinking through al-

ternatives, and, ultimately, losing track of them before making what seems the best move at the time. Chess masters, on the other hand, visualize directly the line of play without focusing on individual pieces. To quote one such master, if one does see the pieces during play, then

the bright arcs of relations that weld the pieces into a phalanx, that make one's defense a poison-tipped porcupine shiver into filaments. The chords dissolve. The pawn in one's sweating hand withers to mere wood or plastic. A tunnel of inanity yawns, boring and bottomless. As from another world comes the appalling suggestion ... that this is, after all, "only a game." If one entertains that annihilating proposition even for an instant, one is done for. (Csikszentmihalyi 1975: 45, quoting Steiner)

This describes subjective experience. Phenomenology seeks patterns in such descriptions, without imagining that they refer to anything but subjective consciousness.

Husserl's student Martin Heidegger developed phenomenology in a somewhat different direction, by noting that subjective experience is not isolated. Instead, it is always situated in a pre-existing world. Not only is experience always of something, but the things presented to the experiencer are always presented in a context that shapes both parties to the action. Most of us, for example, experience a hammer not as a wooden object with a metal cross-piece, but as a tool with which to pound a nail. We do not experience the wooden-object-with-metal first, then label it "a hammer" later; we experience it as a hammer unreflectively, because that is the context in which both we and it exist. Thus both the phenomena and the being experiencing them are constituted, at least in part, by their contexts, including by their histories. Heideggerian phenomenology explores the role that such contexts play in constituting both the experience and the experiencer.

Where Heidegger focused on context, Maurice Merleau-Ponty focused on the experiencing body. Like context, the body is a permanent, unavoidable condition of experiencing. Because the body is both the mechanism of consciousness and one of its objects, inextricably, bodily perception is the one point at which consciousness *per se* cannot be separated from consciousness-of-something. Subjective consciousness is always filtered through the body's state of being-in-the-world—whatever that state happens to be.

A passage by the psychologist (and non-phenomenologist) Susan Blackmore (1986: 83) makes Merleau-Ponty's point concretely. As I sit at my desk in ordinary consciousness, she says, my experience

consists of self and the world—well divided from each other. "I" consist of a stable body image with arms and legs, a model of myself as someone working, a lot of modeling of the substance of what I am

¹ This may be the impetus for the new term "phenomenography"; see Svensson (1997).

writing. "I" have plans for future actions (I must tidy up) and wishes that things were different (I wish I could concentrate harder) ... The world around consists of the room, the sounds outside; the birds (Oh there are some birds singing. Don't they sound nice? I wonder what sort of birds they are. ...); children [playing] (I wish they'd be quiet), the radio (I hate the noise) ...

Here, world, body, and mind present themselves to consciousness as separate, though in a rather jumbled state. Blackmore's description highlights this jumble, and shows how body and mind interact to present it. Now, she says, see me meditating:

I am still. The birds are singing outside, there are sounds of children playing a long way away, and a distant radio. The muddle on my desk and the room full of things are filled with stillness. There is me sitting. The sounds are full of silence. I hear a woodlouse crawl across the floor.

This time, body-mind-world presents itself to consciousness unitarily. The difference is striking. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology seeks to describe such differences, seeing them as differences in what we might call 'the lived body'. Experience is always an embodied experience, embedded in a lived, embodied world. This form of phenomenology inevitably places the body at the center of religious life

From the foregoing, it should be obvious that the work of Religious Studies scholars like Mircea Eliade and Ninian Smart was not "phenomenology" in any rigorous sense of the term. As James Cox (2006: 204-5) points out, they and others used "themes that have been associated with phenomenology—bracketing out prior assumptions, employing a fully empathetic approach, identifying typologies, ..., and insisting that religion comprises a category in its own right." They advocated the systematic study of religions, emphasized that religion involved more than just ideas, and treated it as something that needed to be lived. But their approach did not focus on the subjective experiences of religious subjects, bracketed from all interpretation. Instead, their approach might be better seen as describing the religions of various times and places really really well. Its bracketing involves an abstention from judging the truth or falsity of various religious worlds.²

Contemporary empirical phenomenology seeks to do something quite different. It seeks to grasp the world as people experience it, shorn of their interpretations of those experiences. Those who follow Husserl emphasize the dynamic of consciousness and consciousness-of. Heidegger's fol-

² Social scientists have made similarly partial appropriations of the phenomenological project, missing its central focus on subjective experience. See, for example, Knibbe and Versteeg (2008), Moustakas (1994).

lowers emphasize the simultaneous experience of object and context. Merleau-Ponty's emphasize the embodied nature of all experiencing. All, however, seek to capture subjective consciousness. This is the Object toward which the phenomenological method is directed.

How To Do It

Psychologists Amedeo and Barbro Giorgi (2003) have developed a clear model of how to use phenomenological methods in empirical research. As the Giorgis point out, this calls for a translation of (mainly) Husserlian and Pontian methods of philosophical description into a form suitable for social-scientific investigation. Otherwise, one would be producing philosophical rather than empirical description, which is not quite the same thing.

For the scientific analysis, one first obtains descriptions of experiences from others, then one enters into a scientific phenomenological reduction while simultaneously adopting a psychological perspective³ of the experience, then one analyzes the raw data to come up with the essential structure of the experience, which is then carefully described at a level other than that of the original description. (2003: 247)

Stripped of its abstractness, the process goes as follows.

Step one: one needs data from a reasonable number of individuals about a particular experience. Seeking testimony from a number of people who are familiar with a particular experience avoids accusations of bias—a justifiable concern. How can I guarantee that my reflections on my own experiences are not unconsciously shaped by what I hope to find? Interviewing a number of others may not protect one from error, but it can help. It also allows outside review of the data, which is crucial to the scientific process.

Step two: one engages in "phenomenological reduction". Concretely, this means that the described experiences "are taken exactly as they present themselves [to consciousness] except that ... the claim that what is

Overview of the Four Steps:

- 1) Locate and interview informants who have shared a particular experience.
- 2) Help your informants focus on exactly how this experience presented itself to their consciousness, leaving aside what they (or you) think was 'really' happening.
- 3) Compare and analyze these accounts to identify the basic structures of the experience.
- 4) Redescribe/summarize the experience, boiled down to these basic structures.

³ The Giorgis are psychologists, though they argue that a parallel approach would work as well for sociological, anthropological, and other researchers (2003: 250).

present ... actually exists ... is not affirmed" (2003: 249). To take a trivial example: I can describe how I experience holding my morning cup of coffee, and my interviewee can help me delve into how that experience presents itself to my consciousness, without either one of us worrying about whether the coffee or my cup actually exists. Beyond the warmth of the porcelain, its heft in my hands, there is the slip of warm liquid down my throat, the slight but growing buzz as the caffeine enters my system, and so on. I can describe this without ever postulating that I, the cup, or the coffee are 'real'. The goal is to describe pure experiencing.

Let me take an example from my own early fieldwork, with the American members of the Church of World Messianity in San Francisco, California, in the mid-1970s.⁴ As I have written elsewhere (Spickard 1991a, 1995, 2004b), the chief sacred activity of this Japanese new religion is *johrei*, the channeling of "divine light" to clean the clouds from people's spiritual bodies. Phenomenally, the channeler perceives a slight tingling in the middle of the palm, often a bit of warmth, somewhat similar to the feeling a qigong or tai-chi practitioner has when holding a ball of chi-energy. Some, not all, also feel a sense of warmth at the top of the head and a sense of opening in the chest. The recipient may feel nothing, may feel warmth or pressure at the point where the light is "aimed", or may feel oneself to be sitting more erect. Those who have experienced particularly strong channelers report more sensations; one of my informants described the *johrei* he received from the head of the Japanese church as "like being hit on the head by a board".

Note that these descriptions do not say what is 'really' happening. Nor are they concerned with the participants' theological views about what is happening. These are different research objects. Personally, I found it fascinating that the members of the San Francisco church placed *johrei* at the center of three overlapping but different theologies, but this discovery was ethnographic, not phenomenological (Spickard 1991a, 1995). Phenomenology is concerned to describe subjective experience, without regard to its 'reality' and without regard to its interpretation.

Step three: once one has collected descriptions, one analyzes them to come up with the basic structures of the experience—something that I have just done for holding coffee and channeling *johrei*. This is harder than it seems, because one needs to have good enough interview material to deter-

⁴ *Sekai Kyusei-kyo* is one of some 700 new religions founded in Japan during the 20th century. Part of the Omoto group of religions, it emphasizes spiritual healing and the cultivation of beauty as means for aiding the transition to the coming "Age of Fire". Over the last twenty years, the American organization has split into several groups, including the Johrei Centers, the Izunome Foundation, and the Mokichi Okada Association. See Spickard (2004b) for information about these organization shifts.

mine which features of the experience are idiosyncratic and which are central. One must read beneath each person's account, to find the patterns that it represents. Some accounts will have extra material in them; other accounts may use idiosyncratic language while still exhibiting a common structure. One must decide which elements are central and which are not, and must be able to justify this by reference to one's data.

Step four involves a re-description of the experience focused on this common structure. This abstracts from each individual description, without losing the common thread. The point is to describe the experience so that a 'native' can recognize it, without taking onboard any of those natives' particular interpretations of what is going on. The description must be "experience-near", though one is not limited to using just the informants' own words.⁵

Throughout this process, one must be alert to the possibility that one is dealing with two or more different phenomena rather than with a single one. As Roger Walsh (1995) points out, psychologists long equated shamanic spirit-flight with schizophrenia because they never examined the experiences closely enough to see their clear differences. Phenomenology is designed to avoid such mistakes, which means the analysis must be done very carefully. Thus, I can describe the *johrei* experience with some confidence, but I cannot say that it is the same as experiencing *reiki* (another Japanese healing technique). I have not done sufficient research on the latter to know whether their basic structures converge.

Some Examples

Walsh's (1995) article provides a useful, if partially rendered, example of how empirical phenomenology works. He focused on mapping the experiences encountered during various forms of the "shamanic journey" and distinguishing that journey from other states of consciousness. For data, he used descriptions from the literature on shamanism, interviews with native Balinese and Basque practitioners, interviews with Westerners who were trained by shamans from various traditions, and several years of personal experiences under the guidance of Michael Harner, a former anthropologist well-versed in South American shamanism. Elements on Walsh's map included the entrance into a trance state, an experience of separating from the body, vivid sensory input in the spirit world, a partial ability to control the altered state of consciousness (especially entering and leaving it), and a continuing

⁵ This is a different "experience-near" approach than the one advocated by Clifford Geertz (1974). In his words, "'Love' is an experience-near concept, 'object cathexis' is an experience-distant one." True, but from the phenomenological point of view, both are concepts, not experiences *per se*.

sense of a separate self. He did not walk the reader through all steps of his analysis, but he did provide enough details to differentiate the experience of the shamanic journey from schizophrenia, on the one hand, and from various Buddhist and yogic meditation states on the other.

Put briefly, Walsh's study showed that schizophrenic experiences lack the sense of control common in shamanic journeys, are typically disorganized rather than organized, and exhibit the dissolution of the ego rather than an enhancement of it. The meditation states he reviewed share the sense of control, but do not involve out-of-body experiences, nor do they maintain a separable sense of self. There are similarities, of course, but these states' basic structures differ enough that they can only be called different experiences.

Note that Walsh nowhere said what is 'really' happening in any of these states. He did not reduce schizophrenia to brain-wave malfunction, nor did he claim that the shaman 'really' leaves her or his body during trance. His phenomenological exercise focused on mapping and comparing the basic structures of the various experiences he reviewed. That is the point of empirical phenomenology: to chart subjective experience with as much discipline as possible.

Phenomenology need not be a purely psychological exercise, however; it can also have sociological uses. My own investigations of how people experience religious rituals highlight certain patterns that can reveal a good deal about those rituals' workings (Spickard 1991b, 2005).

My first (1991b) foray into the phenomenological analysis of ritual involved analyzing Navajo healing ceremonies through the lens of Alfred Schutz's (1951) account of experiencing music. I argued that these ceremonies are like music and poetry, in that they cannot be grasped conceptually. Instead, they are experienced polythetically as they unfold in time. Over five, seven, or nine days, they lead participants from disorder to order, from sickness to healing, by guiding participants' sensory experiences. The repetition of words, the rhythm of the ceremony, and the flow of attention shape an experience in which harmony—the Navajo source of healing—is restored. This takes place within a Navajo conceptual universe, but the rituals cannot be reduced to that universe. They are matters of experience, rather than just of thought.

My second ritual analysis was based on thirteen years of part-time ethnographic fieldwork in and around a Los Angeles radical Catholic community (Spickard 2005). The question that posed itself was how these activists maintain their social commitment in the face of near constant failure. From their point of view, the world is beset with greed and violence, their own Church is corrupt, and God's work does not seem to be making much

headway in the world. How do they maintain their sense of pursuing a worthy cause in this situation?

I found that the community's Wednesday evening masses provided an experience of healing that went beyond mere symbolism. Seen as events unfolding in time, these masses shaped participants' attention, leading them from discouragement to renewal—and they did so experientially and emotionally, not just conceptually. Sticking to the highlights, the mass began with an extended conversation, opened by the prayer leader, about the horrible things happening in the world. This reminded people of what was going wrong. It produced a sense of depression, but also an emotional link to the community: here was the faithful remnant, gathered together to celebrate God's Will in the midst of the chaos. The readings continued this spiral, as did a group homily, but the mood changed at the Passing of the Peace, when the ritual stopped for a full ten minutes while each person in the room hugged every other person present. This was no symbolic greeting. It actually produced an experience of communal solidarity. This grew during the rest of the ceremony, during the potluck dinner that followed, and during the after-dinner trip to the streets, to serve soup to homeless people living on Los Angeles' Skid Row. As I describe in my 2005 article, the whole evening became in effect a double-mass, in the second part of which the community became priests distributing the Body and Blood of Christ—as soup, bread, and water—to the multitudes. But it was the experiential dimension that mattered. The event took community members from an emotional low point to a high point and subsequently to a point of inward reflection, reminding them of their togetherness and the reason for their service. It structured their attention in the flow of time. It heartened them for their further journey.

Where is the phenomenology in this? You have gotten it. My account, here, is actually Step Four in the Giorgis' analysis: the redescription of the basic structure of the ritual, based on years of observation and interviews with participants. I have, in fact, presented an ideal-typical model of the ritual, as it was experienced during the years I attended. As reported in my article, I continued my fieldwork for an additional year after the ritual began to change shape, just to make sure that I had gotten the (now former) structure right.

The point is that the phenomenological analysis of rituals like these sheds light on an aspect of religious life that is often ignored. Religion is more than just concepts; it has an experiential dimension as well.

A Different Approach

Anthropologist Thomas Csordas (1994, 1997, 2002) has developed a different sort of phenomenology, based in Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the lived body. Bodily experience is based in perception, and perception is not some-

thing static, an interior grasping of a pre-existing 'out-there', as was the case for Cartesian philosophy. Instead, perception is a constitutive process, which creates objects as end-points rather than assuming them as beginnings. Experience is primary; it

is concrete, material, embodied, and not abstract, interior, or mentalistic. It is immediate both in the sense of its concreteness, its subjective openness, its breakthrough to the sensory, emotional, intersubjective reality of right now; and in the sense in which it is unmediated, unpremeditated, spontaneous, or unrehearsed upwelling of raw existence. (Csordas 2004: 5)

This is not to say that perception is somehow pre-cultural. The point of phenomenology, for Csordas, is not to get 'behind' culture, as if culture were a screen that separated us from objects that existed independently of our perceiving them. Instead, phenomenology asks us to start where we in fact do start: as socially and personally habituated bodies that encounter a world with our senses, turning that world into a set of culturally elaborated objects. Csordas cites Merleau-Ponty's example of a boulder, which perception grasps not in-itself but as a culturally defined object—e.g., as something to be climbed over. It

is already there to be encountered, but [it] is not perceived as an obstacle until it is there to be surmounted. Constitution of the cultural object is thus dependent on intentionality (what would make one want to surmount the boulder?), but also upon the givenness of our upright posture, which makes clambering over the boulder a particular way of negotiating it (an option even if one could walk around it). (Csordas 2002: 62)

Members of more aesthetically oriented cultures than our own may encounter boulders as pleasing shapes and textures rather than as climbing structures, but a close examination of experience shows us that this happens in the perceiving moment, not as a conceptual afterthought. For Csordas and Merleau-Ponty, perception is always tentative, partial, and indeterminate; there is always more present than we realize. But our perceptions nonetheless present us with a facticity that we cannot deny.

Anthropologists are notoriously interested in understanding 'culture'—the socially learned, habitual patterns that differ from society to society. Csordas argues that culture is not some superorganic entity (Kroeber 1917), which acts itself out through human automatons. Neither is it a mere toolkit, on which people draw to understand and guide their experiences (Swidler 2000: 39). Culture does shape our perceptions, but it does not do so, as it were, behind our backs. Csordas's contribution is to note that culture is embedded and sustained in our body-bound perceptual experiences. We do

not first perceive, and then interpret, as William James' (1903) 'over-belief' model supposes. Instead we perceive-interpret simultaneously. Put otherwise, we are not science-fiction homunculi operating passive/receptive sense-machinery from deep inside our heads. Instead, we perceive preobjectively—i.e., spontaneously and without preordained content—but in a form constituted by our cultural way-of-being (Csordas 2002: 66).

Csordas uses this approach to examine two areas of religious experience: Charismatic ritual healing and Navajo healing, both of which operate at the intersection of religion and the body. His work is too extensive to do more than illustrate here, but it is well worth serious study.

Take, for example, his study of a Navajo man with a cancerous brain lesion (Csordas 2002: 219-237). Unable to speak after his injury, this man experienced his struggle to regain speech as a religious quest—one which he understood in traditionally Navajo terms. The Navajo sense of the holiness of exact language (Witherspoon 1977) led him to experience his recovery as something holy—a hard-fought return to a socially valued state of being. Csordas describes how this man's efforts to heal himself into speech grew into a wish to become a medicine man or a minister and thus heal others. This was not, at root, a *post hoc* cultural interpretation laid over an experience. Nor, as Csordas put it, was "the patient's search for words ...thematized as religious ... because religious experience is reducible to a neurological discharge [in a particular brain region]" (287). Instead, the man grasped his bodily experience as religious in itself, fixing its inherent indeterminacy, as "a strategy of the self in need of a powerful idiom for orientation in the world" (287).

Similarly, Csordas' (2002: 58-87) study of Charismatic rituals of deliverance from evil spirits shows how these spirits are not over-beliefs or labels (mis)attributed to bodily arousal, as Wayne Proudfoot (1985) claimed.⁶ Based on both observations and interviews, Csordas concludes that:

the preobjective element of this [spirit deliverance] rests in the fact that participants ... experience these manifestations as spontaneous and without preordained content. The manifestations are original acts of communication which nevertheless take a limited number of common forms because they emerge from a shared *habitus*. (2002: 66)

This, says Csordas, explains the healers' stress on the "release" from bondage to the evil spirit rather than the language of demonic "expulsion" common in the European Christian tradition. North American culture emphasizes control in many areas of life. Charismatic healers promote images of "loss of control to demonic influence, healing as a release from bondage to that influence, and health as surrender to the will of God, whose strength helps restore

⁶ For a critique, see Spickard (2004a).

self-control" (67). This is a matter of perception, not attribution, and is experienced as spontaneous, not contrived. Culture and bodily sensation work together to constitute an experienced world.

How can we fit this into the Giorgis' methodological framework, outlined above? Their second step calls for the analyst to "enter into a scientific phenomenological reduction while simultaneously adopting a *psychological* perspective of the experience" (Giorgi and Giorgi 2003: 247, *emphasis added*). They expect other disciplines to take other perspectives (250). Thus Csordas focuses on the anthropological elements in perception while I focus on the sociological ones. We are not viewing perception (as experience) through particular lenses, as some sort of analytic over-belief. Instead, experiences (including perceptions) are multi-faceted in their very constitution.

A simple example shows how cultural habits help constitute our perceptions. When Americans of my generation hear Rossini's "The William Tell Overture", we can't help but envision horse-riders galloping through the deserts and plains of the American Southwest. That music was the theme of "The Lone Ranger" television series, a fact now embedded my generational culture. It's not that we hear the music, then think, "Oh yes! That reminds me of the Lone Ranger." Instead, music and image occur simultaneously, viscerally.⁷ Cultural habits shapes perception, prereflectively, even before we have had time to turn our perceptions into objects. One of the strengths of Csordas' work is to demonstrate how this happens in the religious realm.⁸

Problems

Careful readers will have noticed something odd about the last few paragraphs. There seems to be a contradiction at the heart of the phenomenological project. On the one hand, phenomenology is supposed to investigate pure experiences, bracketing away the interpretations that people make of them. On the other hand, anthropological, psychological, and sociological phenomenologies produce different accounts of these experiences. How do we know that these three approaches—and potentially others—are not just (possibly) conflicting interpretations?

⁷ This is not true for later generations. Nor do all members of my age cohort share this particular prereflective response. A portion of that cohort, however, also has a visceral response to the first ten notes of Cream's "Sunshine"—though with a different content.

⁸ I noted that Catholic colleagues who attended the Los Angeles house masses responded differently than did Protestants to certain ritual prayers. Their later reports lead me to believe that this was a matter of perceptual culture, but one which I, as a non-Catholic, could not personally explore.

Csordas' answer—and Merleau-Ponty's—is a philosophical one. They point out that to claim that we first experience phenomena, then interpret them, presupposes an insupportable dualism between subject and object. It requires that the world be made up of preexisting objects and subjects, the former of which present the latter with sense data, out of which the latter construct an image of the world. Both Csordas and Merleau-Ponty deny this dualism, arguing that we have no actual evidence for it. Indeed, the close analysis of experience shows no such separation. For them, both subjects and objects are constructed in the process of perception. Phenomenology shows that this construction has cultural, psychological, social, and perhaps other dimensions. It is, indeed, multi-faceted. Why posit preexisting subjects and objects, in a philosophically questionable attempt to reduce those facets to one?

I shall not pursue this question here, in part because I may lack the philosophic skill to do so. I note, however, that it raises a second issue that is of real concern to practical researchers. As David Yamane (2000) noted in a trenchant critique of my work on Navajo rituals, researchers do not have unmediated access to other people's experiences. What they have—what any interview study has—is a set of narratives about experience. That is, phenomenological researchers get their data by interviewing informants about what has happened to them. In response, they get stories. People say "This happened, then this happened, it took such-and-such shape, etc." This is not direct experience; it is narrative. And we know that people are highly susceptible to narratives, often retrospectively retelling their experiences according to culturally valued scripts of one kind or another. David Bromley (1998) and Sarah Pike (2009), among others, have noted how Americans often construct "captivity narratives" to explain supposedly normal people's participation in so-called 'cults', shootings, etc. How do we know that our informants are not reconstructing the experiences about which they tell us in their phenomenological interviews?

The short answer is "We don't", though the care with which the Giorgis' ask us to bracket our informants' interpretations of their own experiences is designed to minimize such problems. Indeed, all serious phenomenological researchers wrestle with this issue—one of the reasons that phenomenology is one of the hardest research methods to use properly. We must always be alert to narratives getting in the way. Titus Hjelm's chapter in this volume shows us some of the ways that we can learn to detect narratives (or "discourses") in operation. Every budding phenomenologist should read his article with care—and then dive in, for the phenomenological project is still possible.

The fact remains that phenomenology is the only research technique that seeks to understand experience *per se*—as something separate from the

interpretations that people place on it. If that is the Object that will answer one's research Question, then phenomenology is the right Method to use.

FOR FURTHER READING

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An extended study of Charismatic healing and ritual, from an experiential point of view..
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A collection of Csordas' most significant articles on embodiment, on Charismatic healing, and on Navajo healing.
- Giorgi, Amedeo P. *The Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology: A Modified Husserlian Approach*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2009.
A recently published how-to oriented elaboration of Giorgi's approach to phenomenology. Crucial reading.
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- Vaitkus, Steven. "Phenomenology and Sociology". Pp. 270-298 in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, 2nd edition. Edited by Bryan S. Turner. Blackwell, 2000.
A theoretically rich but dense outline of phenomenology as it has influenced the social sciences. A useful corrective to lesser work.
- Van Manen, Max. *Researching Lived Experience*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.
An accessible approach, useful for practical researchers, though with occasional conceptual missteps.
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An accessible example of phenomenology applied to states of consciousness.

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