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# Exploring the Social Worlds of Autism

## Introduction

In recent years, a renewed interest in sociality has flourished within the phenomenological research community (Fuchs 2016; Gallagher 2012; Szanto, forthcoming; Szanto & Moran 2016; Zahavi 2016). Phenomenological analyses of social reality are presently evolving into a growing area of exploration that provides valuable perspectives on themes relevant to empirical disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, and anthropology. However, the question remains of how to engage phenomenological philosophy with empirical research within these disciplines. Taking the case of autism as my point of departure, I approach this issue by discussing how phenomenology can contribute to methodological discussions within the fields of qualitative research and autism studies.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has assumed the status of a paradigmatic case for the idea that the cognitive development of theory of mind is the core of social understanding. Although this idea has dominated the field of social and cognitive psychology for roughly three decades, it continues to spark controversy in the phenomenological community (Gallagher 2013, 2012; Zahavi and Parnas 2003; Zahavi 2005; Dant 2015; Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009; Fuchs 2015). Nonetheless, the phenomenological criticism of theory of mind has largely remained on a philosophical level, and it has yet to be explored how to translate the phenomenological perspective on social reality to alternative research strategies within the field of autism research.

The purpose of this paper is to help fill this gap and contribute to the discussion of how phenomenology can engage in a productive and mutual exchange with empirical research. First, I briefly summarize the theory of mind hypothesis of autism and the phenomenological objections to this account. Second, I will explore existing phenomenological approaches to qualitative data collection in terms of their potential as methodological extensions of a phenomenology of sociality. Finally, I will argue that phenomenological analyses of social encounters can contribute to empirical research methodology by clarifying the intersubjective processes at play in qualitative data collection. As a context for these discussions, I will first introduce my own research project on sense of togetherness between young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

**Experience and practice of togetherness in young adults with ASD**

In my research, I explore experiences and practices of 'togetherness' between young people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The empirical part of the project is based on ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interviews at the Danish Autism Centre's youth socializing and networking groups. The overall aim of these social network groups is to help adolescents and young adults with autism to create and maintain friendships with peers. Throughout a period of one year, I participate in two social network groups that each consists of 10-15 adolescents and young adults with autism: one mixed-gender group for adolescents between the ages of 15 and 21, and one group for women between the ages of 18 and 27.

The groups meet biweekly at the Autism Centre. They arrive late in the afternoon and spend the evening chatting, playing games, doing creative activities, cooking and eating dinner, watching movies, etc. Occasionally, the employees have also prepared an autism-related theme (such as anxiety, unwritten social rules, or adolescence) to discuss in a conversation group after dinner. I conduct the ethnographic part of my empirical study by participating in and recording my observations of all these social activities. Furthermore, I carry out an interview study that addresses the group participants' bodily, affective, and lived experience of being and doing together (e.g. being in a room together, playing games, talking with each other, or engaging in other joint activities). By combining ethnographic and interview-based qualitative data, the project pursues the experiential, reciprocal, and practical aspects of autistic togetherness.

In the following, I will briefly introduce the dominant explanatory and methodological paradigm in autism research, theory of mind, and the phenomenological response to this framework.

**Social life in autism: Theory of mind and phenomenology**

Theory of mind proceeds from the idea that cognition allows us to interpret other people's behavior in terms of mental state concepts, thus enabling an understanding of their psychological states, such as beliefs, intentions, and emotions (Carruthers and Smith 1996). This theory has achieved its uncontested status in autism research by developing an experimental paradigm that tests for impairment in the distinct cognitive mechanism arguably responsible for social deficits in autism. By measuring children's emerging ability to exert cognition about other people's cognition, this paradigm has grown into an immense empirical research area centered primarily on varieties of the so-called 'false belief task' (Wimmer and Perner 1983; Baron-Cohen, Leslie, and Frith 1985).

The idea of the false-belief task is to design an experimental situation that isolates and measures the exact cognitive mechanism of interest and yields clear observational data devoid of any situational or subjective elements, thus allowing the researcher to focus solely on the object of study. The original study by Simon Baron-Cohen, Alan Leslie and Uta Frith (1985), which since then has been reproduced innumerable times, revealed striking results: 80% of autistic children failed the false-belief task, and are consequently, in the words of Baron-Cohen (1995), *mindblind.*

Contemporary phenomenologists have offered substantial conceptual and philosophical criticism of the notion of sociality underlying theory of mind (Gallagher 2012; Zahavi and Parnas 2003; Fuchs 2015; Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009). This criticism primarily demonstrates the inadequacy of framing social understanding as a higher-order cognitive achievement. We do not need processes of inference and metarepresentation to understand the minds of others. In everyday social encounters, the emotions and intentions of other people are not hidden and unobservable entities as theory of mind would have it, but apparent and accessible in the other's facial expressions, movements, gestures, and body posture. Consequently, social cognition as described by theory of mind is in no way our primary mode of social understanding. Rather, we understand and interact with each other immediately and fluently based on a primary form of embodied intersubjectivity.

**Phenomenological philosophy and empirical research methodology**

Contemporary phenomenological criticism of theory of mind offers an appealing alternative conception of sociality based on intersubjectivity rather than social cognition. However, this criticism has largely remained on a conceptual and philosophical level, which is entirely understandable since the métier of philosophers is, naturally, to perform philosophical analyses. Nonetheless, given the intensity of philosophical controversy that theory of mind has raised in the phenomenological community, it is striking that there are only few suggestions for designing empirical studies that address sociality as conceived by phenomenological philosophy. Furthermore, given that theory of mind has built its empire on the power of empirical studies, it is unlikely that the mainstream understanding of autism will change without alternative empirical research strategies.

Although philosophers rarely venture into the particulars of empirical research, discussions of how to apply philosophical phenomenology as a methodological approach have abounded for decades within the field of psychology (Finlay 2009, 2013). Below, I will review how existing phenomenological research methodologies approach the process of data collection, and discuss them in terms of their adequacy for studying sociality as conceived by phenomenology.

**Exploring sociality through subjective experience**

One version of exchange between phenomenology and psychology is the discipline of phenomenological psychology initiated by Amedeo Giorgi in the 1970's. As a response to his search for an adequate philosophical foundation for a human scientific psychology, Giorgi (2009) envisioned a methodology strictly guided by the premises and method of Husserlian phenomenology. Phenomenological psychologists are interested in how people experience psychological phenomena and, as Magnus Englander (2012) argues, this requires thorough descriptions of such experiences obtained through qualitative interviews. The phenomenological interview thus provides a research situation that allows for mutual immersion in a given subjective experience that the participant has had and that the researcher is interested in studying.

The phenomenological interview is one way of creating what Giorgi (2009, 57) terms a research situation, where "the phenomenon can occur with some degree of control." What Giorgi points to is a gap between the research situation and the situation in which the experience of interest naturally occurs. However, it is not entirely clear how this gap is closed by favoring the interview over, for instance, a psychological experiment. The interview situation is exactly what the name suggests: A situation within which an interview can occur. In this situation, the researcher and the research participant can explore an experience that takes place outside of the interview. Consequently, the experience in question is separated from its 'natural setting'.

In the case of exploring sociality, the interview could provide access to the ways in which the research participant experiences other people. However, sociality is not a phenomenon that is reducible to one person's experiences of another; it is not a unidirectional phenomenon. On the contrary, sociality is reciprocal. It is a bodily being with others, not an experience of another's body. Social interaction is not merely an experience of one's own and the Other's movements, but is co-constituted between interacting subjects in their situated and bodily engagement. I argue that grasping the reciprocity, embodiment, and material situatedness of social encounters requires the phenomenological psychologist to move out of the interview situation and insert him- or herself into the social world of the research participant. One way to achieve this is for psychology to engage and exchange with the field of ethnographic research.

**Exploring sociality through shared practices**

Through exploring the everyday life, social, and cultural context of participants in social groups, ethnography could provide a suitable extension to phenomenological psychology.

Anne Honer and Ronald Hitzler (2015) propose a 'life-world-analytical' approach to phenomenological ethnography. Like phenomenological psychologists, phenomenological ethnographers are interested in understanding and describing the subjective experiences that people have, but to "understand them in their original living context." (Honer and Hitzler 2015, 545). Honer and Hitzler (2015, 548) argue that exploring the life-worlds of others implies describing the world as it is experienced from a first person perspective and to see "the world with the eyes of the other person." This requires the researcher to engage him- or herself completely and unconditionally in the social contexts, practices, and worldviews of the participants. Arguably, this enables the researcher to "actually [co-experience] their own meanings (or sense); and that, in this way, he undertakes a (temporary) shift in perspective." (Honer and Hitzler 2015, 549).

The assumption seems to be that the researcher's participatory experience is equivalent to the experience of the participants. Concerning the case of autism, the argument would be that the (typically non-autistic) researcher, by participating intensively in social situations with autistic people, could have an autistic experience. In my view, this disregards the difference between understanding another's perspective and directly experiencing it. As Dan Zahavi (2012, 227) emphasizes, intersubjectivity does not give us access to the experience of the Other 'in the first person'. In this way, life-world-analytical ethnography introduces an urgent tension between, on the one hand, assuming identity between the researcher's and participants' experiences and, on the other hand, assuming their radical difference.

It is productive to pursue this tension between identity and difference further. What characterizes both ethnographic and qualitative psychological research is that the researcher draws on his or her own interaction with the research participants and thus employs ordinary ways of encountering other people as a method for collecting data. I will argue that such encounters rely on both sharedness and otherness. In the following, I will examine these two aspects of intersubjective encounters as two distinct (yet interdependent) methodological attitudes toward the Other in ethnographic and psychological research. Following Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I will refer to these processes as approaching the Other in terms of interiority and exteriority.

**Interiority and exteriority in intersubjective encounters**
According to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, encountering the Other as a subject 'like myself' and encountering the Other as a subject 'other than myself' are two intertwined moments in any intersubjective encounter. For Husserl (1982, 118), when I experience the Other, I experience his or her subjectivity as appresented by his or her body. In empathy, the Other

is given to me as a locus of intentionality: A 'there', which is simultaneously another 'here'; another perspective on a shared world. From experiencing his body as a body like my own and his world as a shared world, the Other is immediately sensible to me. I understand, "[…] his members as hands groping or functioning in pushing, as feet functioning in walking, as eyes functioning in seeing, and so forth." (Husserl 1982, 119).

By extending Husserl's analysis of double sensation, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that there is a reversibility between the body as subject and object, or in Zahavi's words (2001, 161), "between ipseity and alterity". Thus, in self-experience I am already other to myself and outside of myself. According to Merleau-Ponty, the experience of the Other is exactly an extension of that co-presence of subjectivity and objectivity in double sensation:

> My two hands "coexist" or are "compresent" because they are one single body's hands. The other person appears through an extension of that compresence; he and I are like organs of one single intercorporeality. (1964, 168)

That subjectivity is constituted as a co-presence of what we could call 'interiority' and 'exteriority' anticipates the experience of the alterity of the Other. In the same way that I experience my hand as both touching and touched, I encounter the Other's body as both experienced and experiencing. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty describes ego and alter ego as organs of one single intercorporeality. Thus, intersubjectivity is characterized by a process where my body and the Other's intertwine in a chiasmic structure, where it is "[…] as if the other person's intention inhabited my body, or as if my intentions inhabited his body." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 191).

What emerges from Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's analyses is that the Other is both strange and familiar at the same time. Although the Other's familiarity and otherness are as inseparable as the sense of interiority and exteriority of one's own body in double sensation, I argue that it is productive to employ these two modes as distinct attitudes in empirical research. Construing interiority and exteriority as stances toward the Other in qualitative data collection illustrates how different data collection methods represent different approaches to the subjectivity of the research participants that, in combination, are complementary ways of studying social life.

**Pursuing interiority: Ethnography and 'implicit' subjectivity**
Participant observation is characterized by the researcher becoming immersed in the everyday practices of participants in a social group. Thus, ethnographic studies are based

on the researcher's own embodied and practical engagement in the social world of the participants. What occurs is not that the researcher gains direct (first person) access to the Other's experience, but that the research participant's *interiority* is co-present to the researcher in their interaction. As Merleau-Ponty (2012, 369) emphasizes, intersubjectivity proceeds through encountering the Other's body in action. Through this embodied interaction, I encounter his or her perspective on a shared world. Thus, participant observation is a qualitative data collection method that capitalizes on the ordinary, everyday, pre-reflective way we encounter the subjectivity of the Other through embodied interaction and shared engagement. In other words, it pursues the subjectivity of the Other as co-present interiority in the interaction between researcher and participant.

One potential of this approach is observing how young people with autism practice 'being together' and what material and bodily practices shape a sense of community for them. It could be argued that this knowledge builds on my embodied engagement in and tacit understanding of the joint activities in the group: by engaging in social environments that are meaningful to them, their subjective perspectives on social reality would be implicitly present to and pre-reflectively grasped by me. On closer inspection, it is obvious that what I am participating in is not an autistic sense of togetherness. Although I encounter the participants in the social groups with the attitude of 'interiority', the sense of togetherness that young people with autism experience in social situations is a togetherness that is likely other to my experience. What I experience is exactly the Other's subjectivity *as other.* Concerning the case of autistic sociality, it might make sense to speak of a *more other* otherness.

**Pursuing exteriority: Interviews and 'explicit' subjectivity**

As opposed to the method of participant observation, the phenomenological interview approaches the research participants' experiences in a somewhat controlled rather than 'natural' setting, which enables the researcher to explore the normally tacit and taken-for-granted aspects of those experiences. Englander (2012) emphasizes the importance of obtaining as detailed and fine-grained experiential descriptions as possible and to ask for further descriptions in cases of ambiguity. Although somewhat counter-intuitive, I argue that this approach highlights the *exteriority* of the Other. Usually, we only resort to reflection on and verbal descriptions of each other's experiences in cases where the ordinary embodied and mutual understanding has broken down and the Other's behavior or verbal expressions become puzzling to us. In this way, phenomenological interviewing can be construed as a form of deliberate making the Other puzzling, strange, or taking the Other's otherness as a methodological starting point.

Approaching the Other in this way can be useful as it allows the researcher to actively pursue and explicate the ordinarily implicit and pre-reflective aspects of social experiences. When studying autistic sociality, this method enables a grasp of the aspects of autistic togetherness that are intangible to the researcher. Furthermore, it allows the researcher to explore potential differences between his or her experiences of social situations and those of the research participants. Susanne Ravn (2017, 210) advises the phenomenological researcher to prepare brief sketches of situations that the researcher's has observed that can be used to elicit experiential descriptions from the interviewee. According to the framework presented above, this knowledge builds on encountering the Other through the mode of exteriority. Yet, a sense of sharedness has slipped through from the researcher's ethnographic engagement in the social practices of the research participants. Although the interviewer approaches the interviewee through the mode of curiosity or deliberate puzzlement, the joint exploration of the participant's experience proceeds from a common experiential background.

It should be recognized that the above distinction between ethnography and interviewing as exploiting two "modes" through which the Other appears is to a large extend artificial. Just as there is plenty of alterity to be encountered in participant observation, there is also plenty of familiarity in the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. However, the distinction does enlighten us as to the potentials of these methodological attitudes that I argue represent complementary ways of studying social life. Thus, I have illustrated how the process of qualitative data collection can be structured and conceptualized as different modes of encountering the Other, namely through the attitudes of interiority and exteriority. Furthermore, I have argued that the combination of these methodological attitudes enables them to draw from and spill into each other in productive ways and that the researcher can actively negotiate his or her mode of encountering the Other in phenomenological research.

**Discussion**

So far, this paper has addressed how phenomenology can inform empirical research methodologies within the field of qualitative research and autism studies. Nonetheless, Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi (2013, 19) argue that the goal of phenomenology is not to arrive at descriptions of people's subjective and 'actual' experiences, but to give an account of the structures of subjective experience *as such*. Similarly, Zahavi (2018, 93) emphasizes that Husserl did not intend his phenomenological psychology to work as a research manual for qualitative psychologists, but rather, "to facilitate the entry into proper philosophical

thinking." This raises the question of how the case of autism can be used to further phenomenological analyses on the nature of sociality.

Phenomenologists have historically used concrete examples to flesh out how phenomena appear to us in experience. A classical example is Jean-Paul Sartre's (1956) use of the "voyeur vignette" to provide an account of the structure of intersubjectivity or Merleau-Ponty's analysis (2012) of the Schneider-case. Furthermore, contemporary phenomenological thinkers have engaged with empirical research to advance philosophical reflection (Gallagher 2005; Krueger 2012). Ravn and Høffding (2016, 6) argue that using empirical cases (or "factual variations") in phenomenological analysis requires a "direct, thorough, and methodologically transparent engagement with the variation under question […]" An important additional point is that empirical methodologies, if they are to be useful to phenomenology, must reveal aspects of the world that are phenomenologically interesting. This point is in many ways parallel to Gallagher and Sørensen's idea (2006) of front-loading phenomenological insights in empirical research designs.

If qualitative data is to be useful to phenomenology, it should communicate what is phenomenologically salient. In interview studies, this translates to a demand on the part of the researcher of eliciting rich descriptions from the interviewee, and in ethnographic fieldwork, it urges the researcher to describe the bodily, material, atmospheric and situational aspects of the social interactions taking place. In this paper, I have demonstrated how phenomenological concepts can help clarify the crucial intersubjective processes at play in collecting such qualitative data.

Although often overlooked in qualitative phenomenological research, ethnography produces data that is essential to a phenomenological understanding of sociality. It does so by capturing that which extends beyond one person's experience of another and reaches the practical, material, and bodily nature of our social world. In combination, ethnographic and interview-based data form a basis for exploring the intimate relation between subjective experience and its everyday, mundane context. In the case of autism research, this approach departs from the idea that autistic sociality can be adequately studied apart from the social and experiential situation within which it occurs. Rather, autistic sociality, like any form of sociality, is embodied, situational, and reciprocal, and should be studied on those premises rather than in the vacuum of an experiment or an interview room.

In conclusion, I have argued that if we want to bridge the gap between empirical research and phenomenological philosophy, we need to examine more closely how phenomenology can contribute to empirical research methodology, and conversely, how empirical cases can enrich and nuance phenomenological analyses. By taking the initial

steps in developing a methodology suitable for studying social life in autism, I have tried to do just that.

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