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Assessing Phenomenology in Anthropology

Lessons from the Study of Religion and Experience

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Abstract ■ How did phenomenology inspire anthropology to re-evaluate its principal method: participant observation? This question is answered by exploring how phenomenology has contributed to the anthropological study of religion. The focus in this field is not only on the way people perceive but also how they experience the world. This allows for a view that does not treat experience of the world separately from cognition of the world. Religion can thus be studied as it is lived and acted in concrete situations. By seeing the scholar as part of the life-world of the people in whose lives she participates, phenomenology in anthropology goes against the tendency to privilege 'scientific' knowledge over other kinds of knowledge. This has some important theoretical ramifications, most notably the refusal to transcend lived experience through theory. This discussion will be illustrated from authors' fieldwork. The influence of phenomenology in anthropology also raises some important doubts. At the end of this article, these doubts will be addressed.

Keywords ■ critique of phenomenology in anthropology ■ experience ■ methodology ■ participant observation ■ phenomenology ■ study of religion

In cultural anthropology, research credibility is very much determined by the acknowledgement of researchers having 'been there and done it', rather than by a description of a society or cultural phenomenon on the basis of documents. But why is this the case? Why is it that we think someone who has been to the field knows more, is better able to understand the reality of the people involved, rather than someone who has collected all the statistics, analysed all the texts and knows the exact date of every important historical event? In this article, we will show that, to some extent, phenomenology explains this to us. We will also show how phenomenology contributes to the careful study of religion. Under the label of 'cultural

phenomenology', 'hermeneutic anthropology', 'radical empiricism' and 'existential anthropology', phenomenology continues to inspire renewal in anthropological theory and method, most notably in the fields of medical anthropology, but also in anthropology of religion, as well as theories of embodiment that want to go beyond constructivism (e.g. Csordas, 1990, 1994; Friedson, 1996; Geurts, 2002; Kleinman and Kleinman, 1991). For our own fieldwork, Stoller, Jackson, Csordas and Desjarlais were the most direct sources of inspiration (Csordas, 1994, 1996; Desjarlais, 1992, 1997; Jackson, 1989, 1996, 1998; Stoller, 1989, 1997a, 1997b). In this article we will discuss the way the phenomenological approach, as elaborated by these authors, led us to certain insights during our research, but also led us to realize its limitations.

The attraction of phenomenological approaches for our own work was primarily the emphasis given to experience and the value of the (inter)subjectivity of the people we studied. We wanted to understand the subjectivity of human actors as it is shaped into, experienced and interpreted as an 'objective reality'. To us as anthropologists of religion, one question in particular kept coming back: how can we study religion as a social and cultural phenomenon if we are unable to take seriously the experience of a religious reality, central to the people we study (see Droogers, 1996; Tennekes, 1999)?

The question of how to take the believer's point of view seriously was a central dilemma in both our research projects. In both our projects, the mode of believing was literal and metonymical rather than metaphorical (cf. Poewe, 1989), and contact with God or the divine was physically experienced. We felt that anthropology of religion did not have adequate answers to these questions of representation, or did not bother about the question. The methodology of intersubjectivity, which we encountered in the works of Stoller, Desjarlais and Jackson, proved useful to tackle these dilemmas.

This question summarizes many problems at once: the authority of science, its methodology and pretensions, its relation to the reality of the people it objectifies in order to study them. What is it an anthropologist wants to do in the study of religion if it is not to reduce it to factors alien to religion itself? This question needs to be asked again and again, both during fieldwork and while writing.

In the following, we will first summarize the central approaches and assumptions of phenomenology as they have influenced anthropology and show how they contributed to our own understandings during our research. What attracted us to phenomenology in the first place was the aim of avoiding reductionism and of doing justice to the voice of believers. However, when we deepened our knowledge of the philosophical background of phenomenology, we encountered some serious limitations of its method and aims, which seemed to be just as reductionist toward religious experience as the approaches we criticized, albeit in a different way. In the

final section we will discuss these limitations and propose a critical use of phenomenology in anthropology.

Phenomenology in anthropology

Life-world and the status of 'meaning'

In phenomenological anthropology, cultural reality is understood as a life-world. This means interpreting meanings as a lived intersubjective reality. Symbolic systems, as they are expressed in, for example, rituals and doctrines, can only be understood in relation to the life-world of the people involved. Of course, this insight has also informed the practice approach as developed by Bourdieu (1977), and Geertz's approach to culture as developed in 'the interpretation of culture' (1993). These authors reacted mostly to structuralist and materialist approaches to culture, which, each in their own way, tried to find the underlying structures or dynamics that explain human behaviour.

In phenomenological anthropology, however, there is a much greater emphasis on experience, the ongoing 'flow' of life and the anthropologist as a person who participates 'sensuously' in different life-worlds (see Stoller, 1997b). To participate in this 'flow of life', the phenomenological term *epoché* plays an important role. Epoché means a bracketing of reality, a temporary refraining from any statement on truth or reality. In anthropology this means that views on reality are not evaluated for their truth, or analysed as forms of 'false consciousness', as society worshipping itself or as psychological constructs. Rather, they are understood as *experiences* of reality that arise out of the daily life and practical concerns of people, without reducing them to socio-economic conditions or principles external to the situation itself. So 'religions' or religious experiences do not have to be 'explained', but simply 'understood' as the way of experiencing the world that is natural and unremarkable, strange only to the outsider.

Status of theories and science

This insight is also applied to academic practice itself. Scientific philosophies and theories are part of the world in which we live – i.e. the scientific world and the modern world in which these theories command acceptance – and can, therefore, never represent a transcendent truth that escapes cultural and historical boundedness. As Jackson says:

... [phenomenology] refuses to invoke cultural privilege as a foundation for evaluating worldviews or examining the complex and enigmatic character of the human condition. It is a way of illuminating things by bringing them into the daylight of ordinary understanding. (1996: 1)

Jackson's point here is that we run the risk of mistaking theoretical concepts for the foundation of reality as it is lived instead of as abstractions

of that reality. Phenomenology believes that it is a misconception to see these abstractions as the generative principle of culture and meaning, as in structuralism. Symbolic interpretations of culture are especially suspect, and, by focusing on the construction of the everyday, of 'common sense', phenomenological anthropologists want to show that meanings '*an sich*' are not the foundational system of culture. This viewpoint is stressed by Jackson when he speaks of symbolic reductionism in relation to embodiment: 'the subjugation of the bodily to the semantic is empirically untenable . . . meaning should not be reduced to a sign, which, as it were, lies on a separate plane outside the immediate domain of an act' (Jackson, 1989: 122).

Body in the phenomenological sense is not in the first place a domain which is inscribed by culture, as for example in Foucauldian theories, but primarily 'embodiment' – the fact that human beings are and have bodies, and that meaning is produced through the body (Csordas, 1990, 1994). The field of embodiment, in its lived emotional-cognitive sense, is seen as a mediator between, on the one hand, patterns and structures which can be observed on a societal level and, on the other hand, individual life in its intersubjective shaping of everyday meaning. We are reminded here, of course, of Bourdieu's understanding of the habitus. Bourdieu, however, defines far more strongly the idea of an 'ontological conspiracy' between objective structures and subjective consciousness. In Bourdieu's theorizing, the individual seems to have little freedom or flexibility in the way in which she deals with the objective facts of social structures. Phenomenologists, however, stress the indeterminate, unarticulated and unbounded nature of experience, which can flow into new meanings and different cultural dynamics.

To us as researchers of religion, it seemed that other anthropological approaches often viewed cultural and religious realities in a rather too metaphorical way. Central metaphors, such as culture as text, the body as text, culture as discourse, religions as 'systems of meaning', the 'construction' of bodies and identities, privilege and select certain aspects of cultural reality over other aspects and tend to decontextualize them to prove a theoretical point. In the religious contexts we studied, however, the believers seemed to explicitly protest against relativist understandings of reality. Rather, they emphasized the reality of God, the Holy Spirit and the godly world through demonstrations of 'proof' in various ways. Furthermore, a constructivist approach sometimes seems to unmask reality to the extent that everything seems a lie, strategically used for political gain or to oppress others. This was in stark contrast to the sincerity and intensity of the religiosity of the believers we spoke to.

To the anthropological study of religion the emphasis on 'meaning as it is lived' means a rehabilitation of 'lay' believers. Neither the theology nor the formal prescriptions of what a religion should be like are studied, nor the 'system of meaning' as it is laid down in books, but what beliefs are made to mean, the way reality is perceived and acted upon according to

these perceptions. In studying 'meaning as it is lived', formal texts and discourses would only be included in the way they are referred to and acted upon in daily life, in ritual, in power play. A study of texts, therefore, would not yield the kind of insight that a phenomenological anthropologist is after. Rather, phenomenology emphasizes the 'participating' aspect of the trademark method of anthropology.

Furthermore, the concept of 'bracketing' seems to provide a way out of the eternal dilemma of the anthropologist of religion: how to take seriously the claims about truth and the nature of reality, the existence of supernatural beings that seem antithetical to scholars who are mostly methodological agnostics. 'Bracketing' seems to promise the possibility of participating fully, and thus gaining the 'insider's view' prized by anthropology, without having to take a stand on the truth of statements about angels and demons, good and evil.

Interpretation and representation

In phenomenological anthropology, the focus is on the way in which meanings become and are *reality* to the people themselves: how meanings appear to them and coincide with the practical everyday world in which one needs to survive.

This search for practical meaning is clearly portrayed in a book by Paul Stoller about a possession cult among the Songhay of Niger (1997a). According to Stoller, the worlds that fuse in the Songhay possession cult are the world of humans and the world of imagination. Stoller's description tells of the life and suffering of the people being initiated into the cult, what they have to sacrifice for it; and in this way he clarifies sharply what the importance is of the cult for the people involved. As Stoller says: 'to reduce possession to a theatricalization of cultural history, cultural resistance, or cultural texts is, to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty, to manipulate things and give up living in them' (Stoller, 1989: 209).

The issue here is representation. In other books Stoller has used other ways of representing and talking about the people he has studied with. He has tried not to privilege scientific ways of knowing over other ways of knowing. Instead, he describes and interprets the lived philosophy of a particular life-world.

However, this approach is easier said than done, as most anthropological training aims at students becoming proficient at using alien folk philosophies to understand 'other' people's folk philosophies. According to phenomenological anthropology, we have forgotten to look at what is, so to speak, *revealed* to us, right in front of our eyes, and instead we look beyond and behind the things for their meaning.

In his research in the charismatic Vineyard church in Utrecht, Versteeg encountered this problem of looking in the wrong places (Versteeg, 2001). What makes the Vineyard church charismatic to its members is a belief in the immediate presence of God, which leads to experiences of varying

intensity. Most characteristic of this church's charismatic nature is the emphasis on the worship of God. Worship is most commonly expressed through music, which is characterized by a romantic and sometimes erotic language. God is seen as both a father and a lover; he is a person who embraces, kisses, and who wants to be kissed and hugged as well.

Central to the experience of worship is the constant desire to find fulfillment in God. Given the fact that this experience is sometimes combined with forms of ecstasy, it is tempting to draw on psychological theories that reduce the experience to compensation and sublimation. It is certainly worthwhile to observe the possibility of this interpretation, but it is also possible to listen to how believers legitimize and comment upon this expression of faith. To Vineyard Utrecht believers worship is foremost a feeling of intimacy and surrender. Ignoring its metaphorical nature, construed by the researcher/outsider, they feel that worship language describes this experience as it is, drawing on biblical and historical precedents. For believers intimacy means exposing oneself to another and that is what they feel they are doing when they encounter God in worship.

Intersubjectivity

In phenomenological anthropology, taking the 'apprenticeship' of an anthropologist in a new life-world seriously means looking for meaning as something that appears to our senses, something that anybody can immediately understand because of our shared human nature, but also learn through becoming an insider. Participation in a life-world, through apprenticeship and ultimately as a capable actor, is at the center of the phenomenological method. There are many examples of phenomenological anthropologists who took participation to lengths that would seem to be too extreme to the average 'kitchen and garden' anthropologist. For example, Thomas Ots, an anthropologist who did research on ecstatic *qi gong* groups in China, even rejects the idea of observation as a method in fieldwork and makes a plea for 'experiencing participation' instead (Ots, 1994). Another example is Paul Stoller, who became known through his role as apprentice of a Songhay sorcerer. Stoller has written about this unusual researcher's position in several books and articles, as well as in an ethnographic novel (Stoller and Olkes, 1987).

In a way, this kind of participation would seem to be the logical conclusion, or perhaps a repositioning, of a method that has been at the core of anthropology since Malinowski. Within the discipline, the pretence of objectivity and the collecting of hard 'data' have of course already been criticized and rethought very often. The general consensus in anthropology nowadays is that a fieldworker creates knowledge in interaction with the people in the field: not objectivity, nor pure subjectivity, but intersubjectivity is what an anthropologist should strive for. Phenomenology simply extends the understanding of intersubjectivity beyond that of verbal communication.

In our research, apprenticeship meant, for example, that to understand what is actually happening it could be more worthwhile to help in praying for someone than to record what words were being said during the prayer. Or that it was more important to note, after attending a healing service meeting, that it was impossible to remember any kind of sequence and wonder why this was so, rather than try to squeeze out the report anyway.

We saw it as a given that no one person experiences exactly the same as another person. Nevertheless, a fieldworker can allow herself to be educated to participate in this experiential common ground, how to feel and act and appreciate the life-world of the people she is studying with.

This can imply a conscious choice, as in the case of Knibbe, who was a stranger to the religious context she set out to study. Or it can be a more natural extension of one's own 'habitus', as with Versteeg, who studied a religious context with which he was already more or less familiar and in which he was also involved as a believer. To a cultural outsider, it is never 'simple' to understand the practices of people, and she tends to understand them by explaining them to herself. Even if she simply takes the practices she is trying to understand at face value and tries to imitate them, they will always be integrated into a habitus that has already been formed. As Desjarlais writes about his experience of trance in comparison to the experience of his Nepali respondents:

... I became a strange hybrid, caught in a no-man's-land betwixt and between cultures, learning something of a visited way of life yet relying heavily on my own. But perhaps it is precisely in the clash between world-views, in the tension between symbolic systems (how reality is defined, the body held, experience articulated) that some anthropological insights emerge. (1992: 19)

In our research, we experienced similar feelings of alienation. Versteeg participated in the context of a small charismatic church, the Vineyard, where feeling close to God and the evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit are often mediated bodily. While 'being ministered to in the Holy Spirit' he would experience the same bodily sensations as the other participants, yet he found himself unable to attach the same label to this experience (Versteeg, 2001). Despite sharing a similar background with the other believers, his interpretation of the bodily sensations that shook him was also formed by his anthropological knowledge that these occurrences are not all that rare, and can be interpreted in many different ways. Thus, the radical phenomenological method told us something about what we shared and did not share with other people in the religious contexts we participated in: our similar experiences as well as the things that we, as cultural producers of meaning, were not able to experience.

Although 'experiencing participation' would sometimes lead to an encounter with difference, in other cases it certainly provided us with a deeper insight into the life-world of believers, despite the initial difference.

In the context of the research of Knibbe, much importance was given to signs 'from the other side', transmitted by the spiritualist medium Jomanda. This medium became very famous in the Netherlands in the early 1990s, and would draw large crowds hoping for a miracle cure or a sign from 'the other side' that would reveal something to them about the solution to their predicament: illness, trauma, a family rift, trouble at work, etc. (Knibbe and Westra, 2003). Starting out as an MA student on this research, together with a fellow student, neither Knibbe nor her companion could make sense of the way in which people interpreted these 'signs'. Often, these signs would be in the form of numbers. Jomanda would point to a person in the audience and announce that she saw a number over the head of that person. In her explanation of these numbers, it seemed to us that they could mean anything, and therefore nothing. A number five, for example, could mean that, on the fifth day of the fifth month a solution would present itself, but it could also refer to a house number, to hours of the day, to the number of people present when a solution would present itself, etc. There seemed to be neither rhyme nor reason to interpreting these signs.

Yet, during the interviews it became clear that people saw these signs as very significant and referred to them often as 'evidence' of guidance from the other side. It was only through participating fully during the mass 'healing service meetings' that the researchers began to understand how these apparently meaningless signs could yet be so meaningful.

One day, one of the researchers was called out of the audience to the stage and was asked to light a candle and make a wish. Not reflecting on this proposal she immediately made her wish: that her disappeared foster sister could be found again. Jomanda gave her a number and suddenly the researcher felt the assurance that all would be well.

After this incident it began to occur to the two researchers that a number, or any other sign Jomanda gives, does not in the first place have any 'information' value. Rather, the signs from 'the other side' have an emotional-transforming effect for the people receiving the message. By taking this number as a sign of guidance from 'the other side' they are encouraged to cross over from despair into hope, adopting a belief that all will be well, no matter what hardships will still cross their path.

More importantly, the researchers realized that one did not have to be a committed 'believer' for this cross-over to suddenly just 'happen'. This also influenced their understanding of the fact that people in the interviews would often emphasize that they started to believe *in spite of* their own scepticism. It became clear to us that this scepticism was not merely emphasized as a rhetorical strategy to us as researchers, but reflected the basic attitude of many of Jomanda's visitors. Surprisingly, this was much closer to our own attitude than we had expected.

In fact, a craving for 'further proof' and the intermittent doubting of the reality of the signs they received and their fulfilment were sources of

anxiety to many of Jomanda's visitors. In this light, the dramatic physical manifestations of 'interference' from the 'other side' took on a different meaning as well: not the exuberant expression of the true believer, but the involuntary and sometimes painful loss of control of a sceptic or at most a hesitant believer. During the healing services, people would suddenly fall to the ground, start running around frantically or swing back and forth dangerously on their chair. To outsiders, journalists and first-time visitors, these embarrassing demonstrations of a lack of control caused much controversy and scandal around Jomanda. But to the participants of the healing services, it was precisely this lack of control that was so convincing to them as evidence that, indeed, 'the other side' was working on them, since they would never voluntarily put themselves in such an embarrassing position.

Before 'learning to participate', the researchers tended to give more attention to the individual interpretations that people gave to the messages of Jomanda. However, the level of the individual narrative turned out to be only important in relation to the 'pre-verbal' level of emotions: feelings of peace, discontent, fear, etc. We realized that when the level of these emotions was not taken into consideration, the verbal level was completely incomprehensible.

During our development as anthropologists of religion, the phenomenological approach was helpful in order to develop our personal methodologies for the religious field. It enabled us to clarify our subjection and our resistance to a partly shared religious embodiment – a scarcely documented fact of fieldwork, despite anthropology's reflexive tradition. It pointed the way to becoming a hybrid researcher who may sometimes be a serious, sometimes be an ironic or ludic 'believer' (Droogers, 1996). Ultimately, our interpretations emerged from this site of intersubjectivity and conflict, where roads of meaning meet but may also go off in different directions again. However, they did not lead us to 'things as they are', on the contrary.

Discussion

To understand and assess the influence of phenomenology on the anthropological study of religion, it is helpful to distinguish three ways of considering this influence: phenomenology as an epistemological critique, phenomenology as an area of enquiry (human consciousness and embodiment) and phenomenology as a method.

Phenomenology as epistemology

The basis of phenomenology is an epistemological critique of 'science' as a project to gain knowledge of the world. Phenomenologically inspired anthropologists often explicitly claim that they wish to work without

theories. It would seem that this makes for a very fluid conception of science and a modest view on the status of its 'findings'. Nevertheless, a clear vision of human beings and culture, as well as of the scholarly enterprise itself, informs this 'low-theoretical' stance. In its epistemological critique, phenomenology is clearly a science-theoretical project, and not so modest at all.

Phenomenology has its origins in the study of human consciousness.¹ Edmund Husserl, one of the founding fathers of modern phenomenology, showed how the Cartesian idea of human consciousness as an 'enclosed globe', which receives information only through the senses, distorts our understanding of the way consciousness works. He conceived of consciousness as something that is never anything by itself; consciousness is always 'consciousness of'. Without anything to be conscious of, consciousness does not exist. The sociologist Alfred Schutz linked this insight to the sociology of Weber in his analysis of everyday consciousness. He argued that we can never detach ourselves from the thoughts, things and life-worlds that are created intersubjectively. The distinction between subject and object is itself a distinction made by our subjective consciousness that constitutes objects as things separate from it. 'Objective science', therefore, is an impossible ideal, *except if we try to return human consciousness to its original state by withholding the conviction that what we see is the truth*. By 'bracketing', suppressing not only all theoretical and scientific understanding of an object but also the objectifying assumptions arising out of everyday life, we can see 'things as they are'. In effect, this means apprehending our own consciousness, seeing the ways in which we constitute the world. This was Husserl's strategy to attain a truly objective science, but, as we shall see, this goal has become a problematic heritage.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), a favourite author among phenomenological anthropologists, expanded the study of human consciousness to the role of the body; that is, the body as consciousness-projected-in-the-world. In contrast to Husserl, he did not believe that it was possible to reach a transcendental consciousness of the world through a bracketing of the natural attitude. Rather, he saw all knowledge as socially, culturally and historically situated: there is no position possible outside time, place and relatedness to others and the world.

This critique is of course very familiar to most anthropologists and not very problematic. It would rather seem that it has become one of the politically correct opening strategies of anthropological papers to state with some force that all knowledge is situated and that we should be humble about our claims to knowledge. But, as with Husserl, Merleau-Ponty's ultimate aim of returning to 'pre-reflective experience' in order to apprehend things 'as they are' passes on a problematic heritage.

On the one hand, the motivation of returning to 'things as they are' was an important point of attraction for phenomenological anthropologists, as it was to us, reacting against interpretations of human behaviour

in terms that discount the experience of the people we study. On the other hand, these anthropologists discover, as we did, that 'things as they are' remain forever elusive and changeable. 'Things as they are', but for whom?

Is there any position outside the 'natural attitude', whether transcendental, as Husserl hoped, or pre-reflective, as Merleau-Ponty thought? And in this 'pre-reflective' way of knowing things, are all humans the same? It would seem not. As Desjarlais states explicitly: he was not able to experience trance in the same way as other shamans did. Versteeg, when his body started shaking, also stumbled upon his own inability to go along with the interpretations of the other participants. This conclusion can go for all other domains of life as well: an anthropologist is someone who has knowledge of different worlds, whose bodily being has been shaped by different habitats and as such will always be 'different'. In philosophical terms: she moves from one 'natural attitude' to another and in the process shapes her own, wholly unique, 'natural attitude' in which the world 'reveals' itself unproblematically as real and some things are true, others an illusion.

But then the question remains: what is this domain of pre-reflective experience and how does it help us to return to 'things as they are'? Merleau-Ponty was reacting to an overly 'objectifying' science that aimed to explain all things in term of mechanistic chains of cause and effect. And this is also what phenomenological anthropologists welcomed. As an epistemological critique, it would seem to us that phenomenology has had a pervasive and important influence in social sciences in general, and anthropology in particular. Even when this critique is not explicitly linked to phenomenology, it is impossible to think of anthropology without this fundamental critique of positivist objectifying science. However, it is important to realize that this critique was originally made in the service of the aim to found a *better* science or to return to the domain of pre-reflective experience as a way of knowing the world.

The attempt to return to pre-reflective experience is best elaborated in anthropology by Csordas in his article titled 'Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology' (1990). In this article, he argues that embodiment should be seen as the 'true' ground for cultural phenomena. In considering Csordas, it is hard not to come to the conclusion that his aim is ultimately to 'reduce' all cultural phenomena by tracing them to their embodied roots.

Thus, the conundrum with which our involvement with phenomenological anthropologists started, namely how to study religion without disqualifying the point of view of the believer, in Csordas returns through the back door: everything is embodied experience. This clearly contradicts the experience of the charismatic Christians he describes, who feel that it is the Holy Spirit moving through them, or the experience of Jomanda's visitors, who feel that spirits are operating on them. Ironically, the very problems that phenomenological anthropology seemed to solve are thus introduced again in a different dimension.

In fact, it is only Stoller (1989: 144–5, 152) who explicitly, and intentionally, leaves this problem unsolved. Stoller pleads that anthropologists should have a ‘negative capability’. According to him, this term was used by Keats to describe the difference between Shakespeare and Coleridge. Coleridge would dismiss anything that came into his mind that he could not intellectually justify, whereas Shakespeare simply let himself be carried along by the unfolding of his stories, complete with all their obscurities and ambiguities. In the same way, Stoller recounts his experiences as a sorcerer’s apprentice (Stoller and Olkes, 1987) while admitting that many things he experienced are hard to justify intellectually. In his work, the bracketing of reality has become permanent, and the phenomenological anthropologist has taken up a position between the brackets, never making a claim about reality or truth.

Although the awareness of the special position of the anthropologist is strongly present in phenomenological anthropology, the consequences this has for the kind of knowledge and understanding an anthropologist has are usually not readily admitted. But it has to be said that this understanding is ultimately very different from that of the other participants of the life-world an anthropologist has participated in; it encompasses an understanding of history, politics and economics that are important but invisible to most of the other participants. Therefore, the knowledge of an anthropologist has a different epistemological quality. Rather than berating anthropologists for ‘transcending the lived context’, this quality could be seen as an added value, especially for enabling a critique of power, inequality and oppression.

Phenomenology as a study of experience

It seems that the obsession with phenomenology as an epistemological critique inevitably leads to experience, the senses and embodiment as the main areas of enquiry. This is understandable to the extent that a careful study of these areas can in turn feed and reinforce the epistemological critique. However, how can this epistemological critique ever be communicated across disciplinary boundaries if the terms in which it is set are hardly understood by many other scholars, both within and outside anthropology? Although phenomenological anthropologists want to avoid superimposing theories external to the life-world they describe, they certainly superimpose a jargon that is often alienating and disembodied. In part, this is unavoidable in an approach that wants to do justice to aspects of human life that are normally overlooked in an academic world that is biased towards objectifying social reality. It needs to develop a new language that often uses a lot of hyphens and composites. The suggested alternative to this alienating language might be to render anthropological insights in sensuous art forms, such as narrative, film and poetry. Although this might evoke some ‘sensuous experience’ of the life-world, to us it seems an unsatisfying way of communicating *anthropological* insight. It seems that, ultimately, the aim

of contributing to this epistemological critique is in the service of the ideal of being able, somehow, to uncover some universal truths of what it means to be human. As such, anthropology becomes philosophy by other means, which is readily admitted by anthropologists such as Stoller and Jackson.

To us the question remains whether, and how, a critique of political and socio-economic circumstances can be formulated by focusing on experience and embodiment. The critical aim of phenomenological anthropologists focuses on rehabilitation of the experience of 'others' by criticizing the pretensions of science and the stereotyping of 'others' in the media (Desjarlais, 1997), and by emphasizing that issues of existential power, and therefore the study of them, are just as important as the consideration of political conflict (Jackson, 1996: 22). Focusing on experience is seen as a matter of empowerment in the face of theoretical and political indifference.

The strength of anthropology, after all, is to show the connections between aspects of social and cultural reality that are normally divided by discipline: history, social structure, economy, politics. Although the focus of ethnographic enquiry might be on only one of these fields, the challenge is always to understand such fields in connection to an understanding of the other aspects of social reality. This understanding can only be hinted at through art and narrative; other aspects of social reality might be embodied in the anthropologist conveying sensuous impressions of the life-world she participated in but they are not explicitly shared with the viewer, listener or reader. This evoking, furthermore, also relies on a particular kind of authority that has to be taken on trust and is hardly susceptible to 'peer review'.

In our own work, we also encountered the difficulty of finding the right ways of expressing the insights a focus on experience and embodiment brought us. We were left concluding that an emphasis on lived experience is very helpful in relating the various dimensions of cultural reality (historical, political, etc.) but that it is extremely hard to write about experience as such if the aim is not simply an authoritative 'evoking'. As young researchers, we did not feel justified in 'evoking' while still struggling to understand.

Although, as anthropologists dealing with conflicting interpretations of reality, we learned a lot from our focus on experience, we were also left wondering whether 'experience' – that is, the experiential dimension of the life-world and practices of the people anthropologists study – is in all cases the most interesting thing to study or to know about the life-worlds that anthropologists participate in. Might not other issues be of equal importance? Might they not be better understood by focusing on different aspects of reality?

Interestingly, the unassailable position of the concept of experience has been criticized from within the phenomenological school itself. Desjarlais (1997) deals with the mystification of experience (*Erlebnis*) by tracing the concept to a certain form of consciousness that is closely related to a

dominant Western philosophical tradition.² According to Desjarlais, there is no reason to treat experience as more authentic than other social domains. He makes a plea for a research agenda in which human experience is central, but which also poses the question of how people within given circumstances have the possibility of experiencing something, or may have no possibility of experiencing anything at all.³

Phenomenology as a method

This critique of the reification of experience could be extended to the way the 'life-world' is conceptualized, which is sometimes idealized as something of a warm bath in which an anthropologist can submerge herself and then step out of at will. In this way, life-world replaces the concept of culture without its essentialist or static connotations. However, life-worlds are rarely homogeneous and people usually participate in different spheres, each perhaps constituting its own intersubjectively created and experienced life-world with its own dynamics. This makes the anthropologist's job more difficult. If she cannot participate in all contexts at once, how can she understand the contexts where she does participate in relation to other contexts? In societies with a strong demarcation between public and private, participant observation in the religious sphere often means that the researcher will never see the people she meets in the privacy of their homes. 'Experiencing participation', therefore, may sometimes be simply impossible as a research strategy.

Conclusion

Despite the emphasis on 'things as they are' in phenomenologically inspired anthropology, we should not forget that phenomenology is still interpretation and that it uses referents alien to the local culture. In the act of writing, researchers create and maintain a distance between 'science' and the people they are writing about. They abstract and condense meaning from what they themselves say can only be understood through lived experience. Phenomenology should not try to hide this fact with an overly politically correct emphasis on 'experience' and the anthropologist as a participant. With the exception of Desjarlais' critical approach and Stoller's choice of ethnographic evocation, this pitfall has been hardly recognized by phenomenological researchers.

Although phenomenological anthropologists have moved away from philosophical phenomenology, in particular in their rejection of something like original human consciousness, in their writing they show much more ambivalence, expressing a yearning to reunite with an unproblematized understanding of the world, while, eventually, returning to meta-theory.

The language of phenomenology is clearly a language of the immediate, appearing to our consciousness. This kind of language tends to obscure

the social shaping of lived cultural reality and thereby makes a critical stance towards the conditions that underlie this reality more difficult. Recognizing that anthropologists create their own unique position, and thereby inevitably move away from the experience and understanding of the people they have studied with, should lead to the realization that a critical stance, not only towards the pretensions of science, is both possible and necessary. Why not a critical phenomenology of power?

Nevertheless, the epistemological critique, and the contribution to the understanding of human agency and intentionality as the site of the creation and recreation of society, culture and religion, make phenomenology and phenomenological anthropology an important contribution to the discipline of cultural anthropology.

Notes

- 1 The following summaries of the contributions of Husserl, Schutz and Merleau-Ponty are taken from Sokolowski (2002) and Moran (2000).
- 2 The distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* as two modes of consciousness is important here. *Erfahrung* refers to the everyday stream of consciousness, whereas *Erlebnis* refers to experience as an event that stands out in time.
- 3 In his ethnography on homeless people, Desjarlais has shown how the (im-)possibility of experiencing is related to structural inequalities.

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