

Microphenomenology of First Encounters: A Sympathetic Critique

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> Abstract • Microphenomenological methods provide important sources of experiential data for the investigation of intersubjectivity. We discuss complementarities with the PRISMA method, and surmise that microphenomenological investigations must be articulated within larger epistemic cycles in conjunction with other disciplines. In particular, we suggest that while a certain interpretive bracketing is needed during the interviews themselves, this is not the case for the analysis of the gathered data, which should rely on more explicit theoretical perspectives. We exemplify this point by suggesting patterns that may be looked for in the data from the perspective of participatory sense-making theory.

« 1 » The last two decades have seen a growing interest in research on embodied intersubjectivity. Much of it has been fuelled by a dissatisfaction with the traditional individualistic and mentalistic premises that have informed the investigation of social cognition in psychology, neuroscience, and cognitive science. Many now question assumptions once held self-evident such as the privacy of mental states, the opacity of others, and the idea that social cognition is in some sense secondary to the development of individual cognitive and affective skills and that much of it indeed occurs within the confines of the individual mind. These are still common assumptions. Methodological individualism informs mainstream research and sometimes also critical projects in embodied cognition and constructivism. But various strands of theoretical and empirical

work have studied human intersubjectivity from an interactive and participatory perspective, moving from artificially circumscribed problems (e.g., how do we figure out the intentions of others?) to more encompassing questions spanning and crisscrossing a number of disciplines, from neuroscience to robotics, from phenomenology to sociology, from developmental psychology to political science. These novel perspectives focus on the embodiment of concrete social interactions, the joint authoring of activities, and the mutual shaping of sensorimotor, cognitive, affective, and social skills during lifetime development. A science of *embodied intersubjectivity* is emerging (De Jaegher 2018; Di Paolo & De Jaegher 2015) and the study of lived experience during social encounters is a fundamental pillar of this new science.

« 2 » In this contemporary context we can only welcome studies like the one offered by Magali Ollagnier-Beldame and Christophe Coupé into the microphenomenology of first-time social encounters. Our involvement in the social world occupies most of our time and energy. Yet, science knows embarrassingly little about what goes on in the fine-grained experience of encountering others. Too closely knit into the fabric of everyday life, we struggle to clarify, systematize, or simply name the experiences of living in a social world. Studies like the present one have started to fill in this gap in knowledge.

« 3 » Ollagnier-Beldame and Coupé investigate, in their words, a first-person epistemology through a second-person methodology. They apply explicitation interview techniques developed by Claire Petitmengin, Paul Vermersch, and colleagues, to the microphenomenology of a first encounter between two people, gleaning insights into the patterns by which different individuals recall and describe their lived experiences.

Comparison with PRISMA

« 4 » PRISMA,¹ like microphenomenology, is an intersubjective method for unfolding the experience of interacting with oth-

1| The name was coined in analogy with prisms refracting light into component colours. This method intends to unfold interactive experience, “fanning out” its “components.”

ers (De Jaegher et al. 2017). But rather than focusing on individual lived experience, PRISMA directly studies interactive experience, that is: what happens *between* people. It relies on individual lived experience for this, and the findings are partly also in terms of individual lived experience, but the methodology is more self-aware of its own inherent intersubjectivity. Participants in PRISMA are at the same time subjects and researchers, explicitly so. This begins in the bodily calibration of the participants who, in the course of a workshop/experiment, also engage in bodily exercises. These are led by the facilitators/lead researchers (they do not require special expertise on the part of participants), and are designed particularly to tune the body to the task at hand. This also makes it an embodied method.

« 5 » The results of a PRISMA workshop/experiment are twofold: it leads to research findings, and it also leads to an increased sensitivity to interactive experience in the participants. This does justice to the fact that experience changes us. It is an explicit aspect of the method that this happens. While Ollagnier-Beldame and Coupé’s phenomenological interview is like an archaeological search for an original experience that should remain as uncontaminated by the method as possible, PRISMA is more like a crash course in attending to experience as it happens together with others and reflecting on the process.

« 6 » Data in PRISMA are, in part, intersubjectively generated. What is investigated are interactive processes, and the initial first raw data come from individual statements on lived experience. These are then looked at with others, noticing commonalities or salencies in these data together. In a next step, the interactive experience is generated anew, now modulated by the commonly assessed previous data. There is thus intersubjective reflexivity at every step of the method. This means that the interactive experience is transformed by the method’s interpersonal processes. A criticism could be that this muddies the experiential waters. But we contend that this is actually characteristic of interactive experience, which is by definition constantly modulated by others. The fact that it is so modulated is an intentional part of the method’s conceptual as well as experiential and systematic reflexivity.

ity. In its refracting of interactive experience, PRISMA approaches the very processes by which interactive experiences are constituted. They never quite resemble the raw, pure individual experiences that classical phenomenology theorizes about.

« 7 » Nevertheless, we do think that PRISMA and microphenomenology of the kind Ollagnier-Beldame and Coupé present are quite complementary as methods for studying interactive experience. The one unfolds interactive experience as it happens, the other goes deep into its individually lived components.

The need for theoretical guidance when analysing results

« 8 » Our second comment regards the need to embed microphenomenological studies within larger epistemic cycles. While Ollagnier-Beldame and Coupé draw from phenomenology in attempting not to induce alterations to the content and structure of individual experience during the interview themselves, we see no need for such restrictions in the analysis phase, where the data may now be “unbracketed” back into a dialogue with other relevant epistemic practices. Notably, in this case, we may think of work in ethnography and sociology studying the organization of interactive patterns, salutations, formalities, protocols, etc. (Goffman 1972; Kendon 1990). We may also include the large body of work in dynamical approaches in psychology that addresses coordination and complex forms of complexity matching during social interactions (e.g., Schmidt & Richardson 2008). If these engagements are absent, the findings of microphenomenological studies remain forever at the exploratory stage. To avoid this, it is important to have a prior theoretical stance at hand.

« 9 » What do we mean by having a prior theoretical stance? Take, for instance, the concept of participatory sense-making (De Jaegher & Di Paolo 2007). This was the first attempt to take enactive ideas developed in terms of the relation between the autonomy of living organisms and the nature of their sense-making and examine their consequences for cases of social interaction. Autonomous individuation, it turns out, can be used to describe social interactions as patterns/events and perform-

ances. A social interaction is not merely the causal coupling of two or more autonomous agents, but, in addition, the emergence of self-sustained patterns of relating through multiple forms of embodied coordination, breakdowns, and recoveries. Both the social patterns and the individual participants remain autonomous, or else the interaction ceases to exist. Participatory sense-making is a direct implication of this situation in the sense that the fact of participating in a social encounter entails an opening to the agency of others having a direct impact on our individual sense-making (hence, also on our lived experience). This can take many forms, e.g., others orienting our attention, changes in our self-understanding through the gaze or utterances of others, learning together, co-authoring acts of remembering, collaborating in jointly constructed activities, and so on. Crucial to this idea is a proposal that joint sense-making “advances” through recovering patterns of coordination after they break down. These can be patterns of all kinds, from (mis)coordination in interactive rhythm (talking over each other, embarrassingly long pauses) to (mis)alignments in meaning, expressivity, and interaction genres.

« 10 » When there is a literal participation in each other’s agency and sense-making, we no longer have a situation of complete opacity of the other. Alterity is fluid and shifting; neither absolute, nor absent. Others are not masks that hide internal states, but patterns that I engage with at the same time as they engage with me and whom I can thus know in the ways they move, how I move myself, and how we move each other. Methodological individualism is thus definitely discarded, but also, importantly, any attempt to sufficiently capture embodied intersubjectivity *only* from an analysis of lived experience. Classical phenomenology, insofar as it primarily seeks constitutional accounts of experience, is necessary but insufficient for a theory of embodied intersubjectivity. It is challenged once we take seriously the materiality of living bodies and social practices. What a purely phenomenological approach misses are the constitutive powers of concrete material processes such as the precarious biochemical self-individuation of living and sensorimotor bodies, their world-involving activities, and the interac-

tive dynamic patterns just described. All of these condition the material possibilities for experiential events. There is simultaneously a need for phenomenological approaches and a need for enlarging the epistemic cycles beyond phenomenology to include other forms of knowledge practices in order to move from intersubjectivity to *embodied intersubjectivity*.

« 11 » It is not our purpose here to defend the enactive perspective of participatory sense-making (see De Jaegher 2018; Di Paolo, Cuffari & De Jaegher 2018 for recent discussions). We only want to show that having a theoretical perspective is important. To see this concretely, we can remark on some specific issues that might contribute to further investigations in the microphenomenology of intersubjectivity. These suggestions entail only minor tweaks to the methodology employed in the target article.

- a Participants were left alone to interact without any recording devices, presumably to put them at ease. While this choice may be appropriate in particular cases, in general, as we argue above, an analysis of embodied aspects of interaction (postures, rhythms, pauses, distances, orientations, gesturing, etc.) is fundamental for guiding the analysis of interview data.
- b Relatedly, we find it surprising that the authors have not reported on correlations between the descriptions and experiential motifs of participants in the same interactive encounter. Instead, they have remained focused on recounting the general kinds of descriptive experiential categories based on the whole ensemble of participants. Whether there are patterns of correlation or disparity between reports in each dyad should be of interest in understanding the lived experience of each individual.
- c Participatory sense-making predicts that periods of coordination, breakdowns (large or small), and repair punctuate the flow of social interactions. Based on the data presented, we think that traces of these patterns might easily be looked for in descriptions of individual experiences. These might then be investigated, both individually and in some way correlated with the interaction partner’s experience.

d Related to the previous observation, participatory sense-making predicts that the spatial, temporal, and affective aspects of interactive experience are modulated by transitions between periods of coordination and periods of dissonance. To the extent that evidence of these transitions emerges in the interviews as the specific moments interviewees spontaneously want to focus on (§24), these could be investigated specifically and contrasting the experience of both participants (for instance, reports concerning tension and release during the encounter).

« 12 » Considering these issues and attending to relational, embodied, and participatory factors of easy empirical access will extend the scope of these studies. Regardless of the theory favoured, attention to interactive factors is vital. Without it, there is a risk of remaining locked within an individualist perspective mediated mainly by linguistic data and only indirectly informed by bodily and relational processes that occur concurrently and are themselves constitutive of lived experience.

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- Hanne De Jaegher, philosopher of mind and cognitive science, is fascinated by how we think, work, and play (basically live and love) together. For studying our rich social lives, she introduced the enactive theory of intersubjectivity called participatory sense-making. Its developing concepts and empirical methods find application in fields like autism research, therapeutic practices, education research, ethics, psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience. Her doctorate is from the University of Sussex (2007), she has held various Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellowships, and is currently Ramón y Cajal Research Fellow at the IAS-Research Centre for Life, Mind, and Society, University of the Basque Country. She is a Visiting Researcher at the Centre of Computational Neuroscience and Robotics at the University of Sussex.

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The Surprise of the Other: What about Radical Asymmetry, Surprise, Passivity and Emotions in Inter-Subjective First Encounters?

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> **Abstract** • I argue that when focusing on first encounters (as the target article does), the unique pristine character of such encounters should be dealt with. In particular, it would be necessary to include as main components surprise, emotions and passivity. Another issue addresses intersubjectivity: While the article considers shared reciprocity as a main invariant feature of intersubjectivity, many phenomenologists have stressed the structural asymmetry of the relation between oneself and the other: am I not the only one who is able to experience (perceive, know) the other? Finally, since the very technique of micro-phenomenological explication interviews is based on a clear asymmetry between the interviewer and the interviewee, one may ask to what extent the model of intersubjectivity presented in the article can be representative of first encounters.

« 1 » Magali Ollagnier-Beldame and Christophe Coupé's target article addresses the rich yet still only partially covered research on intersubjectivity. In particular, they focus on the specific case study of first encounters, which is quite promising, as the newness and freshness of such encounters may reveal the pristine core of intersubjective features in general. Their article shows a remarkable knowledge of the micro-phenomenological techniques, which is put to service quite well in the case study. However, the reader may end up a bit disappointed by the results of the inquiry, which focus on various detailed modes of intersubjectivity, the sense of agency and of self-other interactions. However, these results correspond to rather standard ge-