Mind, the Gap (and Other Cracks)

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Abstract

Field of empirical research of lived experience is a field with many gaping unknowns, starting with the hard problem of explaining the subjective aspects of consciousness. The knowledge of *what is it like* to be another living organism lies on the other side of the chasm that is first-person experience. In an effort of bridging this chasm researchers are developing approaches and practices of first-person observation which are combined with second-person investigations through descriptions of lived experience and interview methods. In the following article we emphasize the translation aspect of both first and second-person research approaches and problematize some of the implications that accompany translation of experience. With each translation comes interpretation, which we believe is important to note and document, as it co-defines not only experiential phenomena that end up being observed and reported, but also the concepts and categories that researchers create based on the reported phenomena. We also believe that in the process of translating first-person experience into verbalized description, information is lost, yet what survives the transference is informative nevertheless and can help advance the translating process itself.

Keywords

Background experience, Lived experience, First-person research, Second-person research, Experiential translation.

1 Introduction

Upon delving into topics and discussions regarding our understanding of the mind, we inevitably reach at least one gaping breach that is hard to bridge – the most gaping one is famously named the hard problem of consciousness. Chalmers [1] points out that there is nothing we know more intimately than conscious experience but there is also nothing harder to explain. The subjective aspects of thinking, perceiving and feeling are all states of experience that have a certain way in which we experience them. As Nagel [2] pointed out, there is *something it is like* to be a conscious organism, and this *what is it like* to be another organism is, most likely always, over an insurmountable gap between one conscious organism and another.

To add to the gaping field of the investigation of lived experience, we note the layer of experience, which is not in the focus of our attention but rather on the brink of it and to which James [3] refers as the *fringe of consciousness.* To the fringe belong experiences that lack specific, sensory qualities, like the tip-of-the-tongue state (the intention to seek a missing word), feelings of knowing, familiarity and plausibility, intuitive judgments and numerous other conscious or quasi-conscious events that can be reported on with low sensory specificity. *What is it like* aspect of those experience is hard to capture and convey, but Petitmengin [4] describes certain internal gestures, which serve, in the language of our analogy, as bridges that enable us to become aware of the *source dimension* of our experience, which is usually *pre-reflective.* This unarticulated dimension is considered as core due to its ever-present nature, and because it is pre-conceptual and pre-discursive, it seems to be situated at the source of our thoughts. Although it constantly accompanies us, we need particular circumstances to become aware of it and/or special training in first-person observation.

In the realm of emotion, Damasio [5] calls a group of fleeting and hard-to-name feelings '*background feelings*', because they are not in the foreground of our mind, yet they help define our mental state and color our lives. They arise from background emotions, which are directed more internally than externally, but can nevertheless be observable to others in several ways: tone of our voice, prosody of our speech, the speed and design of our movements. According to Damasio, prominent background feelings include fatigue, energy, excitement, tension, relaxation, stability, instability, etc. The relation between background feelings and our drives and moods is intimate and close, but the relation between background feelings and consciousness is just as close, if not more. Ratcliffe [6] similarly develops the term *existential feeling* as a background which comprises the very sense of 'being' or 'reality' that attaches to world experiences. Specifically directed emotions presuppose this background, so regardless of the structure of such emotion, existential feelings are a more fundamental feature of world-experience. A few examples of such feelings are the feeling of being 'complete', 'unworthy', 'at home', 'abandoned' – all being descriptions of one's relationship with the world.

Hopefully we have now outlined the gap between our focal awareness and the experiences on the fringe of consciousness, where perhaps one of the keys to understanding our mind lies hidden (maybe even in plain sight). This gap was one of the points we tried to address in our recent project [7], in which we investigated the feelings of atmosphere with the presupposition that they are in the background of our mind. We will briefly

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present the context of our empirical investigations in order to use it as the reference point for our observations regarding the numerous gaps and blind spots our methodological approach and epistemological premises.

2 Empirical context

In the aforementioned project, 'Unveiling of the Atmosphere – Etnophenomenological exploration of experiential background in relation to space', we aimed to investigate background experience which we have defined as feelings that weave the foundation on which foreground phenomena of consciousness unfold (such as emotions, thoughts and perceptions). We presupposed that feelings of atmosphere are by their nature affective, so we focused on the affective layer of experience. These feelings usually lack specific sensory attributes and are hard to pinpoint and often notice and/or name. We tried to capture and convey such background feelings with an empirical approach and a qualitative research design in which we combined approaches of first-person research such as Descriptive Experience Sampling Method (DES) [8], and ethnographical tools such as *in situ* diary entries. Our study was conducted in three phases, the first being the pilot study. We recruited three participants, previously trained in DES and first-person research, which we deemed important for a study that aims to research pre-reflective dimensions of experience.

Our participants reported about their experience in three ways: 1) through short written reports about randomly sampled moments during the day, 2) with diary entries on multiple occasions during the day of sampling, in which they situated randomly sampled moments in the context of their moods and behaviors, 3) in interview sessions in which we explored and expanded previous two types of data. The aim was to map our participants' affective experiential landscapes and to contextualize their experiences with the information about their activities, environment and social interactions. We have analyzed the data according to the principles of qualitative analysis [9], which produced a list of experiential categories divided into two (vaguely distinct yet obviously separate) groups of *foreground* and *background affective experience.* In the background we situated categories such as *background mood*, *ambiental atmosphere* and *deep atmosphere*.

1. *Background mood* is felt as all-encompassing and includes different ways of receiving, creating and experiencing foreground experiences (affects, thoughts and percepts), which we call different attitudes. We found three subcategories of background mood: open, closed and numb.
2. *Ambiental atmosphere* includes experiences that are not clear and separate, but pervasive and ubiquitous. It represents feelings, which we feel originate from the world, and we are entangled with it either as their co-creator or merely as an observer.
3. *Deep atmosphere* includes experiences that we feel as deeply our own and private. Imprint of *deep atmosphere* marks the way of foreground affects as well as other background feelings. Phenomenologically it is harder to reach and observe, as it usually changes its character less or more slowly. When captured, we observed two distinct subcategories of feelings: *deep perturbation* and *deep unconcern*, the former connected to the feelings of danger and the latter to the feelings of safety.

3 Experiential translation

Phenomenology, by origin a philosophical discipline, is trying to investigate concrete experiential phenomena and encourages detailed analysis of different aspects of consciousness. As such it has also been described as "a first-person description of 'what it is like' of experience" [10]. This subjective dimension 'as it is lived from the inside' is essential to consider in the field of scientific investigation of cognition [11].

Petitmengin [11] warns us that describing one's own subjective experience is not merely hard, but extremely difficult, because a substantial proportion of our subjective experience unfolds below the threshold of consciousness. Turning our attention to our consciousness, and *a fortiori* describing it, requires inner effort and a specific kind of skillset. We believe that we can find in just this initial obstacle in the field of first-person research two important gaps.

1. The first being the gap between our threshold of consciousness, above which we can observe our subjective experience, and the dimensions below which elude our reflective thoughts. This is the gap that denotes the difficulties of becoming aware of our background feelings and core dimensions of our experience.
2. The second gap is the gap between subjective observations of lived experience and descriptions of observed experience, which are most often verbal. This is perhaps at times an even more frustrating gap, because in an instance when one has become aware of an experience, they must now try to find the right words and gestures to convey and verbalize a description that captures the nature of the subjective experience in question.

Subjective, or first-person research transfers to second-person research when we not only try to surmount the second gap, but we also convey this description to a researcher interested in exploring structures of lived experiences. Empirical, or second-person research usually involves interviewing human participants about *their* experience. In the context of our paper, we call the interview method a rather wobbly bridge that tries to connect participants' lived experience with researcher's understanding *via* the participants' description of experience.

3. With this bridge we mark the third gap in the premise of empirical research of subjective experience – the gap between the second-person investigation and first-person report about the experience.

3.1 First-person translation

Boer [12] argues that the process of describing first-person experience is an act of experiential translation, with which we are inclined to very strongly agree. We believe that the act of describing subjective experience is an act of translation (latin *transfero*, "I convey", from prefix *trans-*, "across, beyond" and participle *latus* "borne, carried").

This premise assumes that lived experience is in nature distinct from linguistic form, and that in the act of verbalizing we carry certain aspects across the gap between experience and

description. In the act of translating our lived experiences into words, concepts and categories we inherently imbue chosen meanings with our interpretation, which is perhaps inseparable from the way we become aware of our experience. We relate this intrinsic interpretation to *horizons of attending to experience*, as explained by Kordeš and Demšar [13], who argue that this co-defines experiential phenomena that end up being observed and reported.

3.2 Second-person translation

In the previous section we compared the process of describing one's lived experience to the process of translation. We continue with this analogy in the case of second-person research, when such translation is perchance more intuitive, because the 'input' – verbal report – comes in form of language. The researcher that receives the report proceeds with translating it in more than one way. First and foremost, the translation happens instantaneously, as it does every time we speak to another human being – we translate the words into our own known concepts and position them in our pre-existent field of knowledge.

Even more importantly, we aim to frame in the context of translation the subsequent process of analysing, categorizing and forming conclusions on the structure of experience, drawing attention once more to the notion that with translation always comes interpretation. As such we want to note and warn that becoming aware of your own *horizons of attending to experience* is a crucial step for every second-person researcher of consciousness, which inherently makes them a first-person researcher as well.

4 Observational interstices

In the previous section we addressed the epistemological gaps in the field of empirical research of consciousness. In this section we aim to address some methodological cracks and to note our observations from our research project on background feelings [7].

4.1 Becoming aware

In our study participants were prompted with a signal which conveyed to them that they should observe and report on their experience of the moment right before the signal. During the interviews they oftentimes reported that after the signal there was a brief state of feeling 'blank', as if the moment before the signal was empty and void of any experience whatsoever. But this feeling soon passed, and they started to remember and find words to describe the moment before the signal. We interpret this feeling of 'blankness' as a type of gap between being immersed in the *natural attitude* [14] and adapting the *phenomenological attitude*. To put it differently – we believe that the act of *epoché* is both and act of opening a gap and of bridging it. We argue that each time we try to bracket our trust in the objectivity of the world, we reveal and/or create a chasm in the fluidity and continuity of the flow of our conscious experience.

4.2 Observing experiential background

As mentioned in the section 2, we tried to observe and capture background feelings with the intention of mapping participants' experiential landscapes of affects. Based on the literature and preliminary observations we presupposed that background feelings change less frequently, which is one of the reasons they are more elusive and harder to notice, as opposed to the foreground experiences which change from moment to moment and require most of our attention.

Our findings support our claim that one way to notice the ever present is by gaps in continuity. Such a way requires regular first-person observation, optimally supported by a second-person approach (dialogue). Noting one's experience often over a longer period can bring to light changes that unravel slowly. To explain this with a more concrete and visual analogy – when a person on a diet is losing weight (if they are doing it in a healthy and sustainable way) they won't see any progress from day to day, but if they observe and measure themselves methodically throughout the whole year, they can notice a vast difference from their starting point.

4.3 Describing lived experience

Tying to the conclusion of the previous paragraph is a very concrete observation based on our research methodology. As described in section 2, we gathered reports on our participants' experience in three ways (short notes on experience of moments during the day, diary entries and interview insights). What we noticed is that often in the descriptions of a singular moment there was a lot of emphasis on the foreground experiences and less so on the background feelings. When participants weaved those moments in the experiential timeline of their whole day (and in the interviews of their whole week) more background feelings came into light – even in the moments which we had detailed descriptions of. We would like to note that minimising the effect of memory on reports is important, but that sometimes in this effort we miss something because it is 'right under our nose'. And on another note – the signature our memory leaves on our reports of experience might also be very telling of our structural nature of attending to our own experience.

5 Conclusion

Delving into the field of empirical phenomenology is a courageous act, because there are few, if any, clear and firm climbing holds. We understand why scientific discourse steers toward replicable and third-person tested approaches, yet we believe that exploration of lived experienced cannot (at least as of yet) be accessed any other way than through subjective observation first. And even if the act of bridging the subjective with intersubjective is full of gaps and other cracks, we stay positive that the descriptions and interpretations produced in this process lead to better understanding of how to approach empirical research of subjective experience. In the analogy of translation as the act of describing one's own experience, we aim to paint the following picture. In the gap that lurks between experiencing, becoming aware and describing, many pieces of the original experience are most likely lost in translation, yet by persistently and methodically carrying over the pieces that remain, we are building better and more reliable bridges.

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