

Mind, the Gap, and Other Cracks

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Abstract

With this paper we aim to outline numerous gaps and other cracks that emerge when we start researching conscious experience through first and second-person research approaches. The terms used to name various gaps were chosen for the sake of coherence (with a pinch of playfulness). The main gap is the *chasm between two consciousnesses* which we are trying to bridge by an exchange of descriptions of our lived experiences. When we begin to turn our awareness to *what it is like* to be we begin to develop the skill and way of observing in which experience is created. We call this gap between our everyday attitude and phenomenological observation the *crevice of awareness* in which lies the act of becoming aware of an experience. After becoming aware of a certain layer of experience we reach the *fissure of description*, which represents the crack between the actual experience as perceived and the constructed linguistic concepts in which we try to convey what and how we perceived the experience. When a description of an experience has been produced, the researcher interested in investigating human experience is confronted with the *cranny of comprehension*. We relate this process of conveying our experience to another conscious being to the processes of translation and remind researchers of lived experience to be careful and weary of the interpretation that inherently shadows every translation.

Keywords

Background experience, Conscious 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 one or another gaping chasm – the most notorious is even named the hard problem of consciousness. David Chalmers [1] points out that there is nothing we know more intimately than conscious experience but there is also nothing harder to explain. In this article we are not trying to explain conscious experience, but we are interested in exploring the process of explaining and

describing our conscious experience to another human being – in this paper we call this process of reporting our subjective experiences *experiential translation*. The subjective aspects of thinking, perceiving and feeling are all states of experience that have a certain way in which we experience them. As Thomas Nagel [2] puts it, 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 chasm between one conscious organism and another.

We aim to address this chasm that extends from one experiential being to another and explore the cracks that emerge when trying to explore and extend from one ridge to another. In this analogy the ridges of the *chasm between two consciousnesses* represent different conscious organisms, each with their own *what it is like* to be, and the chasm is the impossibility of reaching the exact *what is it like* of another being. In the field of first and second-person research of lived experiences, researchers are trying to bridge this chasm by collecting detailed descriptions of experience. We will argue that in the act of producing and collecting such descriptions we stumble upon many cracks, located on both sides of what we call *the chasm between two consciousnesses*. Starting from first-person view (as one should, when going about empirical phenomenology) we stumble upon a crevice that is becoming aware of *what is it like* to be – the most intimate experience, yet often hidden behind a wall of what Edmund Husserl [3] calls our *natural attitude*.

In this paper we also touch another, an even more veiled dimension of experience that we call *background experience* (explained further in the section 3) but most importantly we state that there is a gap between what we can easily consciously perceive and what we cannot – which, for the sake of clarity, we call *the crevice of awareness*. When trying to convey one's experience to another we stumble upon the next gap in the act of translating the experience into concepts, categories and linguistic forms. We believe that there is a gap between our perceived experience and its description, which we name *the fissure of description*. When trying to fill this fissure we believe the experience conveyed is flattened and reduced. The description produced in this effort then becomes the main building block of the bridge we are building from one side of the chasm and what we can offer to the conscious being reaching out from the other side. In this paper we compare this act of describing on one side and comprehending on another as a process of translation and that practicing experiential translation is the way to more valid and richer descriptions.

2 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” [4]. This subjective dimension ‘as it is lived from the inside’ is essential to consider in the field of scientific investigation of cognition and not be constrained merely to the data that can be observed and measured from the outside [5].

Claire Petitmengin [5] warns us that describing one’s own subjective experience is not merely hard, but extremely difficult, mostly because turning our attention to our consciousness, and *a fortiori* describing it, requires inner effort and a specific kind of skillset. Her assumption is that a substantial proportion of our subjective experience unfolds below the threshold of consciousness. We question what her assumption presupposes - that our consciousness is something “in there” to be observed and we only need a better instrument to see further and better. We, on the other hand, are more inclined to view conscious phenomena as something co-created with and by the act of observation. In either case we believe that in the field of first-person research the two initial steps – becoming aware of our experience and then describing it - include two important gaps.

1. *The crevice of awareness* is the crack between what our “view from within” knows how to observe and what eludes our reflective thoughts. It denotes the difficulties of becoming aware of our background feelings and core dimensions of our experience.
2. *The fissure of description* is the gap between subjective observations of lived experience and descriptions of observed experience, which are most often verbal. This is perhaps at times even more frustrating, 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 fissure of description*, 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 cranny of comprehension* – which spans between the second-person investigator and first-person report about the experience. It is a gap each researcher must fill and bridge when trying to comprehend and analyze the descriptive data on experience of others. We differentiate this cranny from the *chasm between two consciousnesses* because it is focused on the description and comprehension, not the entirety of another conscious experience.

We note that all three cracks are part of the greater *chasm between two consciousnesses*, which refers to the impossibility of experiencing as another being.

2.1 First-person translation

Jakob Boer [6] 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 *transfere*, “I convey”, from prefix *trans-*, “across, beyond” and participle *latus* “borne, carried”). We will describe an example of a process of translating an ancient Greek text to a modern language. The underlying assumption is that without an observer there is no meaning, and thus the nature and skill of the observer influence the source text immensely. Firstly, one must be able to see the Greek alphabet and know the symbols to perceive anything more than mere scribbles. Secondly, one must understand what a specific set of symbols denotes and relate to it a previously known meaning - one must understand the word. This step alone is complex and multidimensional, because one Greek word can have numerous possible translations and the meaning that stands out to the translator is tied to many factors, such as context and previous knowledge. Thirdly, one must understand the grammar and syntax to make sense of a sentence. With this we want to show how the meaning of a text is co-defined by the observer. The translator must then choose an accurate set of words in another language to convey his interpretation of the sentence. With this example we tried to show the complexity of our influences on what we perceive and how we leave a mark on both our perception and our description.

Experiential translation 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 Urban Kordeš and Ema Demšar [7], who argue that this co-defines experiential phenomena that end up being observed and reported. The *horizon* is the way in which we perceive, by which we mean co-create, our experience. This is enacted both when we try to observe and when we try to describe our experience.

2.2 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-existing field of knowledge.

Even more importantly, we aim to compare the subsequent process of analysing, categorizing and forming conclusions on the structure of experience to the process of translating, 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.

3 Background experience

In this paper we turn our attention to a layer of experience which is, ironically, not in the focus of our attention but rather on the brink of it. William James [8] refers to this as the *fringe of consciousness*. To this 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 perceive and convey, but Petitmengin [9] 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 special circumstances to become aware of it and/or specific training in first-person observation.

In the realm of emotion, Antonio Damasio [10] 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. We relate the foreground of our mind with the experiences on which we can easily focus our attention (such as thoughts, perceptions and loud emotions). Background feelings 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. Matthew Ratcliffe [11] 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. This gap was one of the points we tried to address in our recent project [12], in which we investigated the feelings of atmosphere with the presupposition that they are in the background of our mind. We will briefly present the context of our empirical investigations to use it as the reference point for our observations regarding the numerous gaps and blind spots of our methodological approach and epistemological premises.

4 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 experiences 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) [13], 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 information about their activities, environment and social interactions. We have analyzed the data according to the principles of qualitative analysis [14], 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*, *ambient 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. *Ambient 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.

5 Observational interstices

In this section we aim to address some methodological cracks and to note our observations from our research project on background feelings [12].

5.1 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* [3] and adapting the *phenomenological attitude*. To put it differently – we believe that the act of *epoché* is both an 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 crack in the fluidity and continuity of the flow of our conscious experience. This means that when we change the nature of our awareness, we experience a moment of emptiness. To explain we will compare our awareness with the grip of our hand. When we hold on to one object, let’s say a glass, we are gripping something and sensing specific qualities. When we want to switch to a different object, we must first release the glass and be (and thus feel) empty at least for a moment so that we can grip (experience) something else.

5.2 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.

5.3 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’.

6 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 experience 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 gaps that lurk amid experiencing, being aware and describing, many pieces of the original experience are most likely lost in translation. Yet by persistently and methodically carrying over the remaining pieces created by this process we are building better and more reliable bridges.

7 References

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