Social interaction style in autism

An inquiry into phenomenological methodology

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Social interaction style in autism: an inquiry into phenomenological methodology[1]

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Abstract

Autistic difficulties with social interaction have primarily been understood as expressions of underlying impairment of the ability to 'mindread.' Although this understanding of autism and social interaction has raised controversy in the phenomenological community for decades, the phenomenological criticism remains largely on a philosophical level. This article helps fill this gap by discussing how phenomenology can contribute to empirical methodologies for studying social interaction in autism. By drawing on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and qualitative data from an ongoing study on social interaction in autism, I discuss how qualitative interviews and participant observation can yield phenomenologically salient data on social interaction. Both, I argue, enjoy their phenomenological promise through facilitating attention to the social-spatial-material fields in and through which social interactions and experiences arise. By developing phenomenologically sound approaches to studying social interaction, this article helps resolve the deficiency of knowledge concerning experiential dimensions of social interaction in autism.

Keywords

Introduction

In the current diagnostic guidelines (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organization, 2018) as well as in the historical literature (Asperger, 1991; Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985; Bleuler, 1950; Kanner, 1943), autism is described as a disturbance of the ability to understand and engage with the social world. Since the 1980's, the paradigm of theory of mind has retained a dominant position in autism research and described social difficulties in autism as results of a failed maturation of the cognitive system arguably responsible for our ability to infer the mental states of others. Although theory of mind has been widely accepted in the fields of autism research and cognitive psychology for roughly three decades, it continues to spark controversy in the phenomenological community (Dant, 2014; Fuchs, 2015; Fuchs & De Jaegher, 2009; Gallagher, 2012, 2013; Zahavi, 2005; Zahavi & Parnas, 2003), in the field of 4E cognition generally (Newen, De Bruin, & Gallagher, 2018), and specifically in enactive cognition (De Jaegher, 2013; Fantasia, De Jaegher, & Fasulo, 2014).

The phenomenological and enactivist criticisms of theory of mind dispute the assumption that social understanding and interaction are higher-order cognitive achievements and urge autism research to consider sociality in terms of embodied experience and situated interaction. The critical engagement with theory of mind offers an appealing alternative conception of sociality based on embodied intersubjectivity rather than higher-order cognitive processes. However, this criticism has largely remained on a conceptual and theoretical level.[1] Although this is understandable since the métier of philosophers is to perform

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[1] Although theory of mind and other cognitivist approaches to autism and to consciousness in general have been criticized from the standpoint of empirical science (e.g. phenomenological psychological critiques such as Frederick Wertz' criticism of cognitive theories of perception (Wertz, 1987), Giorgi's criticism of experimental psychology (Giorgi, 1971) and Davidson and Cosgrove's discussion of psychologism (Davidson, 1988; Davidson & Cosgrove, 2002, 1991), I focus here on the specific critique of theory of mind emanating from the philosophical-phenomenological community.

philosophical analyses, it is nonetheless regrettable. Theory of mind has built its empire on the power of empirical studies, and thus, it is unlikely that the mainstream understanding of autism will change without alternative empirical research strategies. The purpose of this article is to help fill this gap by discussing how phenomenology can contribute to a qualitative methodology for studying social interaction in autism[2] and thus to advance and add to the already rich diversity of empirical phenomenological methodologies.[3] Given that the core of autism is widely considered to be of a social nature, this discussion will naturally be of interest to autism research, but also to the various types of empirical research that identify as phenomenological.

The article will proceed as follows: First, I will present the theory of mind hypothesis of autism and the debate it has ignited in the fields of phenomenology and enactive cognition. Second, I will review two approaches to designing qualitative methodologies with inspiration from phenomenology, the commonly used phenomenological interview and the more peripheral phenomenological approach to participant observation. Where the interview-format has received considerable attention as best-practice in phenomenological research, participant observation has rarely been explicitly framed as a phenomenological method of data collection despite being generally acknowledged as part of the methodological reservoir of phenomenological research (Englander, 2020; Giorgi, 2009).[4] By drawing on the

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[2] In the past decade, a number of empirical studies on autism using a phenomenologically inspired methodology have emerged (Desai et al., 2012; Huws & Jones, 2015; Newman, Cashin, & Waters, 2010; Williams, 2004; Zukauskas, Silton, & Assumpção, 2009). However, none of these studies tackle the phenomenon of social interaction in autism directly.

[3] See Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method (Giorgi, 2009), variants of hermeneutic lifeworld analysis advocated by Max Van Manen (1990) and Peter Ashworth (2003), Smith's interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2009), and Honer and Hitzler's life-world analytic ethnography (Honer & Hitzler, 2015).

[4] Although this article does not explore the role of the phenomenological epoché in empirical research, a relevant discussion of how to construe participant observation as a phenomenological method is recently put forth by Jason Throop, who suggests the employment of an "ethnographic epoché" in phenomenological anthropological research (Throop, 2018).

phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and in particular his notion of *milieu* and ontology of the flesh, I will discuss and rethink these approaches to empirical phenomenological methodology in order to strengthen their grasp on the phenomenon of social interaction.

Major phenomenological contributions to the study of social phenomena count Alfred Schutz' phenomenological sociology (Schutz, 1967) and his development of a life-world analytic approach to the constitution of social meaning as well as Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodological investigations of the meaningful structuring of social environments (Garfinkel, 1967). In addition, phenomenologists within the field of psychology have also highlighted social processes in understanding psychological phenomena, such as Larry Davidson's account of the social and everyday processes involved in the constitution of schizophrenic experience (Davidson, 1992, 1994, 2003). Despite the great significance of these contributions to social phenomenology, my concern in this article is to discuss how recently emerging phenomenological and enactivist approaches to social interaction in autism may shape different methodological orientations in phenomenological psychology.

I will argue that an adequate study of social interaction invites a reevaluation of the methodological 'business as usual' in phenomenological research. More precisely, I will argue that phenomenological research is not only about first person experience, but in an important sense also about the social-spatial-temporal fields in and through which experiences arise. Thus, this article serves as a methodological explication of the extra-individual dimension of first person experience emphasized by phenomenology and discussion of how to trace such experiential 'alterity' in phenomenological psychological research. In the words of Davidson,

Phenomenology begins with experience, which might appear on the surface to

be individual in nature as well. But to view experience as entirely individual in

nature is to repeat the Cartesian/ Kantian error of failing to look at the genesis,

the constitution, of the meanings being accessed through, and derived from,

experience (Davidson, 2017, p. 16).

Although this extra-individual dimension of experience is recognized in phenomenological

research through the vital role played by the notion of intentionality (Giorgi, 1997, 2009;

Giorgi, Giorgi, & Morley, 2017; Langdridge, 2007), I argue the benefit of a methodological

reorientation in order to emphasize its importance adequately. In other words, I will argue for

rethinking phenomenological methodology in terms of its *Gegenstandsangemessenheit,* a

concept borrowed from Klaus Holzkamp (1983) to emphasize the ability of theory and

method to *grasp* its object. A central theme already in Amedeo Giorgi's early work (1970),

which was further explicated by Kurt Danziger, is how theory, data, and methodology "are

enmeshed in relations of mutual interdependence" (Danziger, 1985, p. 1). Given that methods

are not neutral tools, but in important ways shape and construct the object of inquiry, the

phenomenological researcher should always work toward a fit between the methodological

orientation and the phenomenon of interest. Giorgi aptly suggests the question, as cited in

Magnus Englander (2020, p. 65-66), "What is the best access to the phenomenon I am

interested in researching, given the question I am seeking to answer?" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 63).

With regards to studying social interaction in autism from the perspective of phenomenology,

it is in this case a question of *methodologically* facilitating attention to how particular styles of

interaction emerge in dynamic entanglement with other bodies, things and spaces.

During the article, I will develop these points by presenting and discussing

qualitative data excerpts from an ongoing empirical research project on social interaction in

autism. The data presented in this article are collected through qualitative interviews and participant observation conducted throughout a period of one and a half years in two social groups for adolescents and young adults with autism. This ongoing research is motivated by what could be termed a paradox in autism research. Although the core of autism is continuously recognized as an impaired ability to relate to and interact with others, autism research has rarely addressed the question of how participating in social interactions is experienced by autistic people. Moreover, the question of *how* individuals with autism actually do interact with other people is often neglected in favor of the persistent interest in how autistic individuals misperform in social situations. Thus, there is a significant lack of knowledge in autism research about the experiential and qualitative dimensions of the phenomenon of social interaction, which is taken to be fundamental to the nature of autism. As I will propose in this article, developing ways of empirically studying social interaction in autism in a way that converges with phenomenological and enactivist perspectives on sociality presents a fruitful way to resolve this inconsistency in mainstream autism research.

Autism and theory of mind

The core symptoms of autism are commonly recognized as a combination of difficulties with social communication (e.g. social-emotional reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviors, social relationships) and restricted, repetitive behaviors (e.g. stereotyped movements or use of objects, inflexible or ritualized patterns of behavior, restricted interests, hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organization, 2018). Although there has yet to be developed a unified account of the various traits associated with autism, three theories currently occupy a prominent role in accounting for its characteristics. Research has pointed to (1) executive function deficits resulting in a

weakened ability to flexibly manage one's own cognitive processes (Ozonoff, Pennington, & Rogers, 1991; Pennington & Ozonoff, 1996), (2) a detail-focused cognitive processing style impeding the ability to process global coherence (Happe & Frith, 2006), and (3) impairment in the ability to cognitively represent other people's mental states, also called 'theory of mind' (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). In the following, I will focus on the latter of the three prominent theories. First, because theory of mind has held a dominant position in autism research since the 1980's, and second, because its account of social understanding has ignited a flourishing debate in the fields of phenomenology and enactive cognition.

The terms 'theory of mind', 'mentalising', and 'mindreading' have since the 1980's played a key role in discussions about the nature and development of social understanding within the fields of philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science. Theory of mind proceeds from the idea that higher-order cognition allows us to interpret other people's behavior in terms of mental state concepts, thus enabling an understanding of their psychological states, such as beliefs, intentions, and emotions (Carruthers & Smith, 1996). Although the field of theory of mind is characterized by a number of subdivisions and basic disagreements,[5] the winning paradigm in autism research has been the modular approach to theory-theory, according to which the ability to 'mindread' stems directly from the architecture of our brains (Scholl & Leslie 1999, p. 131).

According to this framework, social difficulties in autism follow from an impairment of a specific cognitive module that allows people to infer the hypothetical mental states of other people (Baron-Cohen, 1995, 2001). In this way, the variety of social struggles experienced by people with autism are arguably caused by an impaired ability to "read" other

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[5] Even though it is now standard to integrate different views within the field of theory of mind, two main stances are clearly discernible: theory-theory (Gopnik & Meltzoff, 1997; Leslie, Friedman, & German, 2004) and simulation theory (Goldman, 2006; Gordon, 1986)

people's minds. This theory has achieved its uncontested status in autism research by developing an experimental paradigm that tests for impairment in the distinct cognitive mechanism arguably responsible for social deficits in autism. By measuring children's emerging ability to exert cognition about other people's cognition, this paradigm has grown into an immense empirical research area centered primarily on varieties of the so-called 'false belief task'[6] (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985; Wimmer & Perner, 1983).

The idea of the false-belief task is to design an experimental situation that isolates and measures the exact cognitive mechanism of interest and yields clear observational data devoid of any situational or subjective elements, thus allowing the researcher to focus solely on the object of study. The original study by Simon Baron-Cohen, Alan Leslie and Uta Frith (1985), which since then has been reproduced innumerable times, revealed striking results: 80% of autistic children failed the false-belief task, and are consequently, in the words of Baron-Cohen (1995), *mindblind*. Ivan Leudar and Alan Costall describe theory of mind as "one of the most recent, and certainly most influential, outbreaks of 'scientism' in psychology" (Leudar & Costall, 2009, p. 11). In autism research specifically, theory of mind represents the idea that social understanding can be investigated exhaustively by the methods of the natural sciences. Thus, theory of mind proposes that the social dimension of autism can be readily observed and quantified; that social phenomena are objects in the world available for scientific measurement.

In the following, I will briefly flesh out the objections to these assumptions raised by scholars within both the philosophical-phenomenological and enactivist research

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[6] The classical false belief task, devised by Baron-Cohen, Leslie, and Frith (1985) as a modified version of Wimmer and Perner's (1983) puppet play paradigm, presents the test subject with a hypothetical scenario involving two dolls, Sally and Anne. Sally is shown to hide her marble in a basket, and then leaving the scene. Anne has witnessed this, and after Sally has left, she moves the marble from the basket to a box. Sally then returns, and the child is asked the question: 'Where will Sally look for her marble?' (Bowler, 2007, 27)

community. These objections can productively be read within the broader context of phenomenological psychological critiques of psychology's natural scientific inclinations (Davidson, 1988; Davidson & Cosgrove, 2002, 1991; Giorgi, 1971; Wertz, 1987). In the words of Davidson and Lisa Cosgrove, psychology has "remained fettered to their naturalistic heritage, assuming that the objective world provides the ground for (psychological) subjectivity" (Davidson & Cosgrove, 1991, p. 103). To move forward, "we must distance ourselves from the assumption that psychological subjects and their lived experiences may be studied and understood as objects of Nature" (Davidson & Cosgrove, 1991, p. 103).

Enactivist and phenomenological responses to theory of mind

Already in the heydays of cognitive psychology when the theory of mind paradigm was on the rise, criticism emerged from the field of psychology. Drawing on Ulric Neisser (1976) and Merleau-Ponty (1968, 2012), Frederick Wertz (1987) criticizes the information-processing model originally launched by Allen Newell, John Shaw, and Herbert Simon (1958), but still inherent in present day theory of mind research, for its representationalist assumptions and for neglecting the meaningful embodied involvement in perceptual and cognitive processes. Despite such critical engagement, theory of mind has continued to dominate the fields of social and cognitive psychology for roughly three decades. Recently, the theory of mind paradigm has sparked renewed controversy in the phenomenological community (Dant, 2014; Fuchs, 2015; Fuchs & De Jaegher, 2009; Gallagher, 2012, 2013; Zahavi, 2005; Zahavi & Parnas, 2003), from the perspective of 4E cognition generally (Newen et al., 2018), and specifically in the field of enactive cognition (De Jaegher, 2013; Fantasia et al., 2014).

Phenomenological and enactivist criticisms of theory of mind argue that social cognition, construed as a higher-order cognitive process, is in no way our primary mode of

social understanding. In everyday social encounters, the emotions and intentions of other people are not hidden and unobservable entities as theory of mind would have it, but apparent and accessible in the other's bodily expressions as well as in our joint interaction. Thus, we do not need processes of inference and metarepresentation to understand the minds of others. Rather, we understand each other immediately and fluently based on situated and embodied interaction. Thus, phenomenologists and enactivists dispute the basic assumption in theory of mind that social understanding is achieved from cognitive, inferential, and representational processes.

Furthermore, scholars within both the fields of phenomenology and enactive cognition have commented, not only on the theory of mind account of social cognition in general, but also on the theory of mind hypothesis of autism. Here, phenomenologists typically make reference to how the Other appears in interpersonal experience and empathy and argue that autism research should take into account how autistic people experience themselves and interpersonal relations from an embodied first person perspective (Dant, 2014; Zahavi, 2005; Zahavi & Parnas, 2003). This point is further elaborated in Miraj Desai's research in which he develops an account of autism as a socially contextualized phenomenon and takes the first person experience of the person-in-context as empirical basis (Desai, Divan, Wertz, & Patel, 2012; Wertz et al., 2017).

Although phenomenological and enactivist responses to theory of mind are largely convergent, enactivists refer to how social cognition is constituted by dynamic social interaction, thus shifting the focus from experience to reciprocal embodied engagement. When applied to the case of autism, enactivism urges us to take into account the actual embodied and interactional engagement of autistic individuals rather than starting from the premise of social deficits (De Jaegher, 2013; Fantasia et al., 2014). Thus, from a phenomenological and enactivist perspective, the standard accounts of social interaction in

autism represent varieties of internalist approaches that reduce intersubjective processes to what goes on "inside the heads" of individuals and that "[…] do not seem up to the task of taking the real interaction into account" (Fuchs & De Jaegher, 2009, p. 466).

From phenomenological philosophy to phenomenological methodology

Contemporary phenomenological criticism of theory of mind offers an appealing alternative conception of sociality based on intersubjectivity and embodied interaction rather than higher-order cognitive processes. And as I have pointed out, given the intense controversy that theory of mind has raised in the philosophical and psychological community, it is imperative to advance discussions of how to design phenomenological studies in terms of their grasp on empirical social interaction as conceived by phenomenology. Namely, as an embodied, dynamic, situated and intersubjective phenomenon. As Bruce Levi aptly addresses this issue in his 1978 dissertation on improvisational dance,

> What these events share is the manner in which peoples' gesturing bodies move together. Often they appear to flow together in an orderly, cohesive, and dynamic manner, whether one is an observer or participant. There is at present no clear way of conceptualizing this orderly, cohesive, dynamic, and often spontaneous stream of gestural activity (Levi, 1978, p. 2).

Although philosophers rarely venture into the particulars of empirical research, discussions of how to apply phenomenology as a methodological approach have abounded for decades within the fields of psychology and qualitative research (Finlay, 2009, 2013). As stated by Giorgi and emphasized by Wertz, the aim of empirical phenomenological research is to

"faithfully conceptualize the processes and structures of mental life, how situations are meaningfully lived through as they are experienced, with "nothing added and nothing subtracted" (Giorgi, 2009)" (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 124-125). Yet, applied phenomenological research encompasses a variety of different research strategies that offer diverging answers to questions such as the role played by Edmund Husserl's phenomenological method or whether researcher subjectivity should be foregrounded or sought 'bracketed.'

Recently, phenomenological philosophers have commented on a number these discussions within qualitative psychology. Concerning Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological psychology, which is strongly influenced by Husserlian phenomenology (Giorgi, 2009), Dan Zahavi argues that Husserl did not intend his phenomenological psychology to work as a research manual for qualitative psychologists (Zahavi, 2019a). Rather, Husserl's reflections on phenomenological psychology were primarily intended "to facilitate the entry into proper philosophical thinking" (Zahavi, 2018, p. 119). On Zahavi's account, the ambition of adopting phenomenology as a methodological framework for applied psychology seems somewhat futile.[7] Similarly, Shaun Gallagher and Jesper Brøsted Sørensen has argued that phenomenologists are not interested in the individual or psychological experiences that people have, but in the invariant organizing structures of such experiences (Gallagher & Sørensen, 2006, p. 121). They suggest frontloading phenomenological notions and insights in empirical research designs, thereby allowing phenomenological analyses to inform the design of

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[7] In response to Zahavi's point that phenomenology as a transcendental philosophy should be clearly distinguished from phenomenological psychology as an empirical science, one could look to some of the arguments presented by Wertz (2016) and Davidson (2021), who both argue for the merits of a transcendentally informed rather than transcendentally naive empirical psychology. In addition, James Morley has pointed out (in direct response to Zahavi's criticism of phenomenological psychology) that "many philosophers promote the use of phenomenological methodology […] as an interdisciplinary practice and would reject this notion that philosophical phenomenology holds 'disciplinary sovereignty' regarding phenomenological methodology" (Morley, 2019, p. 165).

empirical studies. In this way of using phenomenology, "there may or may not be any phenomenological method" (Gallagher & Sørensen, 2006, 125).

My point here is not to naively rehearse Zahavi, Gallagher and Sørensen's critiques of empirical phenomenological research, neither it is to discuss what can properly be termed phenomenological nor what role the epoché and the reduction should play in phenomenological research. On the contrary, I argue that philosophical phenomenology contributes invaluably to the theory, method and practice of psychological research as Husserl himself argued by positing phenomenology as the proper basis for empirical psychology (Husserl, 1925/1977). Yet, recent discussions have shown a certain skepticism from members of the philosophical community about the idea of construing empirical research strategies as phenomenological as such. Although I agree that it might not be useful to let a philosophical method serve as the ideal model for an empirical method or to evaluate qualitative research according to how its methodology conforms to the criteria laid out by philosophers, I think another point needs to be made. If empirical data is to be used in a mutually enlightening dialogue with phenomenology, the question remains of how to ensure that the collected data is suitable and adequate for a phenomenological analysis. Regarding the present case of social interaction in autism, my discussion will thus concern how to use qualitative research in a way that converges with phenomenological perspectives on sociality.

Social interaction style in autism

In the ongoing research project from which I will draw samples of empirical data throughout the rest of this article, I have studied how adolescents and young adults with autism interact with each other and experience participating in social situations and interactions. The aim of this study is to explore how particular social interaction styles in autism emerge in the

dynamic encounter between autistic experience and the material, sensible, and normative environments in which social interactions take place. Thus, a crucial agenda of this research project is to develop an understanding of social interaction in autism that respects its experiential, situational and embodied aspects and that productively bypasses the tendency in autism research to see social behaviors in autism as results of a failed competence ascribable to the individual.

The empirical part of this study was conducted through fieldwork in socializing and networking groups, which, with their ambition of facilitating friendship with peers and providing social competence training, are becoming an increasingly popular way to address social difficulties connected with autism in youth. Throughout a period of one and a half years, I observed and participated in two social network groups each consisting of 10-15 adolescents and young adults with autism: one mixed-gender group for adolescents between the ages of 15 and 21, and one group for women between the ages of 18 and 27. As part of the fieldwork, I carried out qualitative interviews with 11 of the group participants about their sensory and embodied experiences of participating in social interactions. By participating in, observing, and talking with the group participants about their experience of social interaction, the study explores social interaction in autism as both an embodied practice, a way of *doing*, and as characterized by the experience of mutual connectedness and reciprocity.

In the following, I will discuss the two data collection methods (qualitative interviewing and participant observation) adopted in this study as methodological entry points to the phenomenon of social interaction style in autism. I will discuss what role these methods have typically played in phenomenological research and argue how each invite and enable consideration of the intertwinement between social interaction and the material, social, and sensory environment. During these discussions, I will present exemplary extracts from interview transcriptions and field notes produced as part of my research. I will begin by

discussing the role of the qualitative interview in phenomenological research. I will then

argue that the common usage of the interview involves an important pitfall for the

phenomenological psychologist; namely of assuming the subject as author of its own

experience.

Phenomenological psychology and the qualitative interview

The purpose of the qualitative interview in phenomenological research is usually framed as a

way to generate knowledge about a phenomenon through exploring how it is experienced

from the first person perspective. According to Englander (2012), studying lived experience

in a structured and rigorous way requires thorough and detailed descriptions of concrete, lived

experience, which can be obtained through the interview. The phenomenological interview

proceeds as a conversation, where the researcher invites the interviewee to describe in detail

his or her experience. In the words of Englander,

> The basic issue here is that we as phenomenological researchers are interested in
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> the subjectivity of other persons and thus it seems logical that we would want to
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> get a description of such subjectivity (Englander, 2012, p. 15).

A crucial part of obtaining such descriptions is to ask the interviewee to describe a situation in

which he or she has experienced the phenomenon investigated by the researcher (Bevan,

2014; Englander, 2012, 2016, 2020; Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi et al., 2017). This strategy is

commonly employed to invite the interviewee to describe the phenomenon as freely and

extensively as possible while maintaining the highest possible degree of concreteness and

level of detail. Englander (2012, 2020) has recently emphasized how this strategy is also vital

to ensure that the actual context in which the phenomenon appears is maintained in phenomenological analysis. I will return to this point later in relation to my discussion of participant observation as a phenomenological method of data collection.

As Claire Petitmengin (2006) argues, the purpose is to elicit and highlight pre-reflective and embodied aspects of experience through the process of guiding the interviewee's attention away from explanations, evaluations or judgments of the experience and toward describing how the experience proceeded. According to Simon Høffding and Kristian Martiny, a central ambition of doing qualitative interviews in phenomenological research is to "[…] disclose invariant phenomenological structures" (Høffding & Martiny, 2016, p. 543) in the interviewee's experience. Davidson emphasizes how the use of the qualitative interview in phenomenological research relates to Husserl's call for a return "[t]o the things themselves" (Husserl, 1983, p. 35) by directing the researcher's attention toward "how the phenomena of interest present themselves to us in "originary" (first-person) experience" (Davidson, 2003, p. 29). Thus, a common feature across different approaches to the phenomenological interview is the ambition of explicating the normally tacit and taken-for-granted aspects of our experience of the world. By urging the interviewee to describe in as much detail as possible the "how" or the "what it is like-ness" of experience, the central aim is to gain access to its normally tacit and pre-reflective dimension (Englander, 2012; Høffding & Martiny, 2016; Petitmengin, 2006).[8]

One strand of phenomenological research in which the interview occupies a central role is the approach to phenomenological psychology coined by Giorgi in the 1970's.

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[8] Recently, the phenomenological interview has been construed by Zahavi and Martiny as a "hands-off approach, which basically reduces the interviewer to a tape recorder" (Zahavi & Martiny, 2019, p. 5). In direct response, Englander (2020, p. 63) has argued that this critique fails to take into account the complex interpersonal activity between interviewer and interviewee enabling the in-depth level of description of experience characteristic of phenomenological interviewing.

Phenomenological psychology developed as a response to the mainstream of academic psychology, which at the time was heavily influenced by a natural scientific approach to the study of human phenomena (Smith, 2010). Giorgi argued that psychology should be based on a humanistic science that "supports a nonreductionistic approach, sees value in seeking the meaning of qualitative phenomena, and acknowledges the nonnaturalistic status of consciousness" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 212). Broadly construed, phenomenological psychologists are interested in examining concrete, lived experience in a structured and rigorous way (Finlay, 2013). According to the approach advocated by Giorgi, the phenomenological method as applied to psychological phenomena allows the researcher to arrive at the general structure, or essence, of how psychological phenomena are experienced (Giorgi et al., 2017).

According to Giorgi (2009, p. 80), the psychological phenomenological reduction is the pivotal methodological step the psychologist performs in order to arrive at the general structure of psychological phenomena.[9] With the psychological phenomenological reduction, objects are reduced to phenomena as presented in experience, allowing the researcher to access the intentional relation between experiencing subject and experienced phenomenon (Davidson & Cosgrove, 1991; Englander, 2016; Giorgi, 2009). The notion of intentionality thus plays a fundamental role in phenomenological psychology, which starts from a notion of experience as object-directed, relational and world-involved, as a relation of co-dependence between subjectivity and objectivity. This is evident from the rich tradition of phenomenological psychological studies, where psychological phenomena such as moving as one (Levi, 1978), learning (Giorgi, 1985), criminal victimization (Wertz, 1985), driving a car

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[9] Crucial to the practice of phenomenological psychology as conceived by Giorgi and colleagues is the adherence to a Husserlian conception of the epoché and the reduction (Englander, 2016; Giorgi, 1997, 2009; Morley, 2010). Drawing on Husserl (1925/1977), Giorgi and colleagues argue that phenomenological psychologists should perform the psychological phenomenological reduction, which aims to reveal phenomena as they present themselves to empirical consciousness rather than consciousness as such (Giorgi et al., 2017, p. 180).

(Van Lennep, 1987), daydreaming (Morley, 1998), recovery (Davidson, 2003), early emotional memories (Englander, 2007), mental illness (Van den Berg, 1972) and countless others are portrayed as constituted reciprocally by the socio-cultural, historical and worldly context (Davidson, 2017) and the subjective acts through which the phenomenon is grasped. In the words of Giorgi,

> There are not two independent entities, objects and subjects, existing in themselves which later get to relate to each other, but the very meaning of subject implies a relationship to an object, and to be an object intrinsically implies being related to subjectivity (Giorgi, 1997, p. 237).

Despite this widespread understanding of psychological phenomena, the experiencing subject is often described as the meaning-originator in the intentional relation. Although clearly acknowledging the intrinsic interdependence of subjectivity and objectivity (Giorgi, 1997, p. 237), Giorgi also argues that "meanings are originated in acts of consciousness" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 80) and that "consciousness constitutes its perceived objects" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 185). In their related discussion of psychologism, Davidson and Cosgrove touches on the same tendency to assume "that intentional constitution is a psychological function" (Davidson & Cosgrove, 2002, p. 144).

Although it is clear that phenomenological psychology is not about first person experience, but rather about phenomena as constituted through self-world-other relations, there is a looming danger of falling back on subjectivistic language and thus to inadvertently privilege the subjective pole in the constituting-constituted relationship. Such a reading is reinforced by standard literature on the phenomenological interview (as discussed above) describing the goal of phenomenological analysis as the disclosure of the invariant structures

of first person experience. Englander recently has construed the aim of phenomenological

interviews as one of generating descriptions of psychological phenomena as they appear in the

lived experience of the research participants (Englander, 2020). Yet, it is emphasized on

several occasions that the interview is only one possible form of data collection, and that the

data collection approach "has to fit the phenomenon under investigation" (Englander, 2020, p.

59). A question worth discussing is how the interview format fits the phenomena targeted by

phenomenological psychology.

Phenomena as they are conceived in phenomenological psychology refer both

the subjective acts in which they appear and to their socio-cultural, historical and material

contexts, and as Zahavi argues, Husserl's concept of constitution implies that both subject and

world "are irreducible structural moments in the process of constitution, the process of

bringing to appearance" (Zahavi, 2003, p. 73-74). Thus, "the constitutive performance is

characterized by a certain reciprocity insofar as the constituting subject is itself constituted in

the very process of constitution" (Zahavi, 2003, p. 73-74). The purpose of bringing the

concept of constitution into this discussion is not to make psychologists responsible for the

nuances of Husserl's transcendental philosophy. Yet, the consistent use of experience as

methodological frame of reference in phenomenological psychology too easily results in an

unintended inattention to how subjectivity is itself accomplished and shaped in and through

encounters with alterity. Rune Mølbak has previously criticized phenomenological

psychology for treating the subject as the irreducible basis for experience, and argued that the

phenomenological researcher should treat experience as "its own type of experiential event

rather than a given of experience itself" (Mølbak, 2012, p. 194). Mølbak argues that the

concept of intentionality, rather than merely describing a characteristic of subjective

consciousness, points to the inseparability of subject *and* object. Thus, the intentional relation

does not only bring about an object for an experiencing subject, but also vice versa in that

subjectivity is irreducibly intertwined with objectivity. As we have seen previously, this central phenomenological tenet is shared broadly in the field of phenomenological psychology. Yet, this discipline is often described as the psychological study of subjective experience as if the first person perspective was an end in itself. Although the target of phenomenological psychology is psychological phenomena, the medium through which to access these phenomena is that of subjective experience, usually as described in impressive depth and richness through the interview format. My point here is that *method matters* as it is what enables the phenomenon to come into view and shapes its way of appearing. In this case, the use of the phenomenological interview requires strict attention on the part of the phenomenological researcher to avoid the experiencing subject as final reference point in favor of explicating how experience emerges in dialogue with what is, in a sense, external to it. As Giorgi and Giorgi themselves point out in the context of discussing the role of the transcendental in the practice of phenomenological psychology,[10]

> […] references to meanings beyond the psychological subject providing the description are clearly ascertainable […] These expressed meanings had familial, social, and cultural sources and no claim was made that they originated in her (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008, p. 172).

An important task for a phenomenological psychology is thus to trace and describe such extra-individual dimensions of experience. In the words of Emmanuel Alloa,

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[10] This discussion was primarily initiated by Davidson and Cosgrove (2002) in their discussion of psychologism and phenomenological psychology. For a review, see Englander (2016).

> If experience is not something for which we can claim authorship (let alone ownership), all the other instances that shape experience and its meaning have to be taken into account (Alloa, 2017, p. 11).

In the following, I will argue that one way to help accomplish this absolutely pivotal aspect of phenomenological psychological research is to consider the qualitative interview not only as a medium through which to study the meaning-generating aspect of experience, but also as a way to explore how experience is itself accomplished by the alterity of world.

Tracing social experience 'outward'

The interview as a research situation centered on gathering fine-grained descriptions of subjective experience can easily lure the phenomenological researcher into assuming subjectivity as the comfortable ground of experience. To be clear, I am not arguing against the use of interviews in phenomenological research, but I do want to unsettle the idea of subjectivity as the definitive framework within which to view experience. Regarding social interaction in autism, it is particularly important to avoid a 'return' to the experiencing subject because it invites a unilateral perspective, as is often seen in autism research, where breakdowns of reciprocal social interaction is traced back to the autistic party in the social encounter. In the following, I will present an extract from an interview conducted with a 17 year old young woman with Asperger's Syndrome in order to illustrate how it is possible to treat the experience of social encounters as "its own type of experiential event" (Mølbak, 2012, p. 194). In the following, Hanna describes a Christmas Eve with her family as an example of being in a stressful social situation.

Christmas Eve

"There are people talking, people yelling, my cousin and sister are running around like crazy, there are people opening Christmas presents and music in the background, and it is just as if all of these things are happening all at once. All the sounds, it is as if they become amplified. Everyone is talking, and then it is as if I just go blank. My ears are ringing, and I have trouble with where I should focus. I get very anxious, and I feel like I can't be in my own body. I don't know what to do with myself. It's hard to explain."

Can you describe this feeling of being anxious further?

"It is like I'm beginning to shake uncontrollably and can't sit still. I just want to get out of my body, although I can't. No matter what I do, I can't get calm."

And then what do you do?

"I try to push it away, but it's difficult because you hear sounds no matter how much you don't want to hear them. You can't just shut down your hearing. I get very quiet and shut within myself so I can focus better, and I try to close… or to go into myself and just try to do whatever it takes to be in this situation, and yeah, to create a bubble around myself."

In this brief excerpt, Hanna describes how the social activity around her – movements, voices, music – becomes amplified, intrusive, and overwhelming to a point where she disconnects from her social surroundings and herself. Yet, Hanna's description does not only reveal a socially stressful experience or a case of auditory hypersensitivity resulting in an autistic

meltdown: [11] It does not only point to an autistic young woman whose experience bestows the

world with a sense of intrusiveness. What her description reveals is her *becoming autistic* by

virtue of an overwhelming world. When she withdraws and encloses herself within the

boundaries of her bubble, she fulfills the prophecy of autism as the enclosure in a private

world, which was first described by Eugen Bleuler (1911/1950) in the beginning of the 20th

century.[12] This point is neither meant to make Hanna accountable for her autism nor to argue

that her autism is a social construct, but to emphasize that her autistic (lack of) social

engagement takes the form of a dialogue between what goes on around her and what goes on

within her.[13] With Mølbak, we could say that her experience "exists only in the inter-action:

in the way subject and object mutually appropriate each and cohere in and through a specific

event or gathering" (Mølbak, 2012, p. 211). What Mølbak suggests is to consider a new point

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[11] As opposed to a temper tantrum, a meltdown is commonly understood as an instinctual adaptation to overwhelming stressors resulting in behaviors such as crying, screaming, bolting, aggression, or complete disengagement from the environment (Lipsky, 2011).

[12] The notion of autism was first introduced in psychiatric literature by Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler (1857-1939), who used the term to describe the schizophrenic's detachment from outside reality:

> The [...] schizophrenics who have no more contact with the outside world live in a world of their own. They have encased themselves with their desires and wishes [...]; they have cut themselves off as much as possible from any contact with the external world. This detachment from reality with the relative and absolute predominance of the inner life, we term autism (Bleuler 1911/1950, p. 63).

Later, in his pioneering article from 1943, Leo Kanner would extend Bleuler's description to characterize autism in childhood as a case of "extreme aloneness from the very beginning of life" (Kanner, 1943, p. 248) with no response "to anything that comes to them from the outside world" (Kanner, 1943, p. 248). According to Kanner, autistic children display a "basic desire for aloneness and sameness" (Kanner, 1943, p. 249), only "extending cautious feelers into a world in which they have been total strangers from the beginning" (Kanner, 1943, p. 249).

[13] This analysis of autism closely resembles how Davidson (2003) approaches schizophrenic experience in his phenomenological research on recovery in schizophrenia. One of Davidson's research participants describes the experience of withdrawing from the world, which Davidson insightfully interprets as a form of active self-protection in the face of a chaotic and intrusive world rather than what psychiatrically could be understood as apathy or lack of motivation. Thus, schizophrenic symptoms and experiences do not really go on 'inside' the person, but are active forms of 'becoming ill' in dialogue with a threatening outside world (Davidson, 2003, p. 153).

of view of a phenomenological psychology. Rather than taking Hanna's experience as the ultimate starting- and end point, we should consider her experience "from the point of view of the 'middle' rather than the subject or the object" (Mølbak, 2012, p. 212).

Emmanuel Alloa emphasizes how the concepts coined by Merleau-Ponty in his later work was ultimately meant to describe "what happens around and between things" (2017, p. 59). This would seem a productive starting point for Mølbak's idea of thinking "from the middle" in phenomenological psychology rather than from an experiencing and sense-constituting subject. In *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), Merleau-Ponty seeks out the constitutive principle as immanent in the sensible itself rather than in transcendental subjectivity. The notion of the flesh expresses how, even though the world appears *to* me, I am also *of* the world. The idea of reversibility establishes how "every relation with being is *simultaneously* a taking and a being taken" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 266). Ultimately, the act of seeing, touching, hearing, or feeling is accomplished by reversibility, by also being seen, touched, heard, and felt by the world. What we term 'subjectivity' is accomplished in and through the sensibility and the materiality of things. When Merleau-Ponty argues that world and body, object and subject, emerge out of a common fabric, sometimes referred to as the "flesh" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 147), we can see how his phenomenology invites a certain skepticism about positing such a thing as 'autistic social experience.' Thus, Hanna's experience should be regarded as a form of dialogue with the world and the situation in which she finds herself rather than be ascribed to her as an experiencing subject. With Merleau-Ponty, we could argue that subjectivity (autistic or otherwise) should be understood in and through engagement with the world.

As is pointed out by Merleau-Ponty and carried over in the phenomenological and enactivist discussions of theory of mind, social interaction is a form of intercorporeal blending, where "just as the parts of my body together form a system, the other's body and

my own are a single whole, two sides of a single phenomenon" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 375).[14] However, what we see in the description provided by Hanna is not the fluent intercorporeality, which Merleau-Ponty describes as the epitome of the reversibility of the flesh, and in which it is "[…] as if the other person's intention inhabited my body, or as if my intentions inhabited his body" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 191). During the interview, Hanna does not describe social interaction more than in a few passing sentences. Rather, her description alerts us to how social engagement is facilitated by a certain relation between foreground and background in sensory experience, and how the absence/presence of the sensory surroundings allows for reciprocal social interaction. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes how experience is always accomplished in concrete and carnal interactions with other bodies and with things in the world, and thus presents a way to avoid tracing social interaction 'inward' to an experiencing subject and instead tracing it 'outward' to its intrinsic blending with other bodies, material spaces and things.

It could be argued that this way of approaching experience as something, which in the words of Martin Heidegger "is not of our own making" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 57) is already an inherent aspect of the methodological agenda of phenomenological psychology. Englander has recently described the strategy, originally suggested by Giorgi (2009, p. 116), of inviting the interviewee to describe a situation in which the phenomenon of interest has occurred as a way to bring the everyday context of the phenomenon into view (Englander, 2020). Paraphrasing Giorgi, he emphasizes the importance of addressing "the everyday world where people are living through various phenomena in actual situations" (Giorgi, 1985, p. 8 cited in Englander, 2020, p. 64). According to Englander (Englander, 2012, 2019, 2020), the

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[14] For previous uses of Merleau-Ponty's notion of intercorporeality in empirical phenomenological psychological research, see Levi's (1978) analysis of gestural relating in improvisational dance and Coenen's (1986) study on deaf children's embodied interactions.

described situation thus provides a context within which to understand the interviewee's experience. Englander's clarification of the methodological rationale in phenomenological interviewing is apt and on point given the recent critical reception this data collection method has received from the philosophical-phenomenological community (Zahavi & Martiny, 2019). Yet, it is pertinent to discuss whether Englander's notion of context dependence of psychological meaning is strong enough to fully elucidate the phenomenological notion of experience as belonging equally to the subject and the world? In the words of Davidson, it is a matter for the phenomenological psychologist of addressing "what Husserl described as the 'co-consciousness' of social and cultural objects, such as stadiums, libraries, or even universities, such as Yale" (Davidson, 2017, p. 16-17) and of "appreciating that what comes to be viewed as the psychological is always already a socially, culturally, and historically constituted phenomenon" (Davidson, 2017, p. 16-17).

In the following, I will approach this endeavor in terms of rethinking the typical strategy for data collection in phenomenological research, namely by inviting psychology to engage with ethnographic methods and the phenomenological researcher to engage actively with the spaces in which social encounters take place. The question that I will pursue is: what can be gained from observing and participating in, rather than (or in addition to) talking about the phenomenon of social interaction as described by Merleau-Ponty as situated intercorporeal blending?

Ethnographic methods and phenomenological research

Englander (2020) argues, following Giorgi's (2009, p. 85-86) original notion of the phenomenologist as participant observer, that participant observation is a necessary interpersonal stance in phenomenological research as a joint exploration of a phenomenon of interest. Although Englander is describing the researcher's empathic participation as an

interpersonal attitude[15] *within* the interview situation, his account of what can be gained from a participatory and observational stance is valuable in a broader context. Describing participant observation as the stance from which the researcher can "begin a 'rough seeing' of the phenomenon" (Englander, 2020, p. 66), Englander elaborates:

> To be a participant observer within the interpersonal context of an interview situation would mean that one could thrust deeper into the world in which the meaning of the phenomenon appears. […] To strive for depth is to move closer (to use a metaphor) to the meaning of the other's expression in relation to a world and as it comes through within the we-relation, to understand something in a more original way, in the sense of "going back to the matters themselves" (Englander, 2020, p. 66).

Englander's account of the potential of participant observation is an important addition to the usual phenomenological methodological rationales as it describes phenomenological research as a form of involvement in the experiential worlds of others. In addition, Englander's discussion motivates the important question of what the phenomenological researcher can achieve by adopting the stance of participant observer not only *in* the phenomenological interview, but *outside* of it?

Participant observation in the context of fieldwork is rarely described as a method for collecting phenomenologically salient data. If anything, the role of fieldwork in phenomenological research is reduced to an initial exploratory context "in which one

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[15] For a similar view, see Peter Ashworth's (1995) Schutzian analysis of participation and Davidson's "cross-cultural attitude toward experiences of psychosis" (Davidson, 2003, p. 119).

discovers a phenomenon that could later be explored in an interview situation" (Englander, 2020, p. 65). In this way, phenomenological researchers, such as Davidson (2003) and Desai (2012), build on participant observation and fieldwork without explicitly recognizing it as a means for collecting phenomenological data.

Some exceptions are worth pausing on here. Herman Coenen's (1986) phenomenological study of movement, perception and expression in deaf children's interactions makes highly productive use of ethnographic participant observation in a field where obvious communicational differences pose a challenge for conducting qualitative interviews that rely on verbal exchange. Through his participation in the everyday life of the school and subsequent phenomenological analysis of observational notes, Coenen elucidates the various intercorporeal processes at play between the children as they emerge in various cultural, social, and material contexts (Coenen, 1986). Levi (1978) similarly addresses the phenomenological potential of researcher observation in his dissertation on the coherence of gestures in improvisational dance. In the words of Levi,

> The researcher must insert him/herself "inside" the perceptual/behavioral interaction to overcome a) the behaviorist's bias of external observation, and b) the phenomenologist's bias of articulating the event only within participating individuals *[sic]* experiences (Levi, 1978, p. 54).

Arguing that various regions of experience can in fact "be studied by the phenomenological psychologist through the observation of behavior" (Levi, 1978, p. 270), Levi argues that "the researcher's primary mode of access to the event is through his perceptual presence to the event" (Levi, 1978, p. 54).

Thus, even though empirical phenomenological psychologists usually favor the qualitative interview, some important contributions for developing a phenomenological approach to ethnographic data collection have already been underway. Unfortunately, they have not manifested themselves very clearly in the practice of phenomenological psychology. In the following, I will review some approaches to combining phenomenology and ethnographic participant observation that have emerged from outside the field of phenomenological psychology and subsequently discuss their relevance for studying the sensory and material aspects of social experience and practice in autism.

Commonly conceived, ethnographic research explores social reality from the perspectives of the participants in a social group. Typically, the researcher will become part of the everyday practices of the participants over lengthy periods of time and strive to immerse him- or herself in a group's natural environment (Bryman, 2012). One way ethnography has been exploited for phenomenological purposes is through the 'life-world-analytical' approach proposed by Anne Honer and Ronald Hitzler (2015), who argue that exploring the life-worlds of other people requires a methodology that allows for "seeing the world with the eyes of the other person" (Honer & Hitzler, 2015, p. 548). Central to this methodology is the requirement that the researcher engages him- or herself completely and unconditionally in the social context, practices, and worldviews of the participants. By privileging participation over observation, Honer and Hitzler argue that the researcher "actually co-experiences [the research participants'] own meanings (or sense); and that, in this way, he undertakes a (temporary) shift in perspective" (Honer & Hitzler, 2015, p. 549).

The idea that the researcher through his or her co-participation can access the experience of the participants resembles what Ilja Maso (2007) describes as approaching phenomenological ethnography through an act of destrangement (as opposed to estrangement). In the act of destrangement, the ethnographic researcher strives to experience

the experiences of others to the point where "[…] the distinction – the distance – between the experiences of herself and those of others [are bracketed]" (Maso, 2007, p. 139). Conversely, in the act of *estrangement*, the researcher refrains from describing the experiential fullness with which phenomena present themselves, thus deliberately making the scene appear strange with the purpose of explicating the taken-for-granted aspects of social and cultural contexts (Maso, 2007, p. 139). For Maso then, phenomenological ethnography aims to describe both the experiential fullness of phenomena through the researcher's participant experience and the taken-for-granted aspects of social and cultural contexts.

A crucial element of both Maso's and Honer and Hitzler's accounts of phenomenological ethnography is the important role played by the researcher's own embodied experience during ethnographic research. However, the idea that the ethnographic researcher can gain direct access to the experience of the research participants, as argued particularly by Honer and Hitzler, might be disputed as intersubjectivity does not reveal the other's experience 'in the first person' (Zahavi, 2012, p. 227). This caveat is also highlighted by Susanne Ravn (2017, p. 208), who emphasizes that even though phenomenological research is about gathering rich descriptions of experience, phenomenological data can be gathered in ethnographic studies by shifting between first-, second- and third- person perspectives. In other words, the researcher shifts between his or her own (embodied, sensory, affective) experience during fieldwork, engaging in interpersonal interactions, and observing the practices, movements, and interactions between the research participants.

Engaging with the social milieu as a *field of forces*

In light of these various ways of understanding the potential of participant observation, it is compelling to ask how ethnography might reveal phenomenologically salient data. To what

exactly does the researcher's participatory experience grant access? And how are we to reconcile the predominant focus on first person experience in phenomenological research with the second-, and third person perspectives that are necessarily involved in ethnographic data collection? I propose that Merleau-Ponty's notion of milieu can get us closer to answering these questions. In the following, I will present an excerpt from my observations during fieldwork in social groups for adolescents and young adults with autism and discuss how participant observation allows the researcher to experience and describe the social and sensory milieus in and through which social interaction arises. This particular excerpt is a condensed version of a field note describing an autistic women's group on a day trip to a museum of rock music in Roskilde, Denmark.

Spinning on the LP record

When the elevator doors open, we enter a large room full of colors with walls covered in mirrors in different sizes and shapes. The walls are leaning like in a typical funhouse in an amusement park, and it makes the colorful lights shoot back and forth across the room in different directions. As we proceed somewhat cautiously to explore the many display cases in the exhibition, we are suddenly startled by several loud screams that cut through the air. My heart jumps and I look up to see the widened eyes of Ina, Eva and Johanne. The screams continue undeterred, apparently emanating from an interactive part of the exhibition in the adjacent room. We try to ignore the screams and walk a bit anxiously further into the exhibition, which now takes us through darker and narrower corridors. The room feels labyrinth-like, and music, lights, mirrors, and screams surround us. We do not say much to each other, and it seems that everyone is a bit overwhelmed by all the impressions around us. After a while, I notice that Eva is

sitting down on a platform, crouched together and covering her ears with her hands. She has her head bent down and her legs drawn up, so I can only see her hair and her hands, which grasp her head tensely. I bend down and ask her if she is okay, but she does not react or seem to hear me. One of the employees in the group notices too, and kneels down beside her. They both get up and disappear down one of the many corridors in the museum. After we have spent around an hours' time looking around, we descend a flight of stairs to what turns out to be the last part of the exhibition. We find ourselves in a room with a huge, slowly rotating LP record in the center of the floor. The LP record is elevated and almost five meters wide and on top of it, people are lying flat down on their stomachs. I notice Eva, Lene, and Ina there, moving around slowly but steadily. They are facing inward towards each other, heads supported by their hands. There are also some kids and teenagers there that we do not know, and Eva is talking quietly and casually with one of them, but I cannot hear about what. Emma and I join the others and lie down with our heads facing inward, toward the center of the circle. Lying there, I notice that there are sounds emanating from the LP. The sounds are difficult to decipher, it is not really music, but not random sounds either. The sound is extremely slow, almost hypnotic, and it is difficult to distinguish if the sounds are instruments, voices, or merely noise. It is almost as if the sounds are waves flowing, merging and separating. As the LP is rotating slowly, but firmly, I feel my body rotating with it. It is a weird, but calming sensation, lying still yet moving. The girls are talking cheerfully but calmly, and it takes me a while to realize that they are discussing what song is playing. We lie still and listen together for a while, and it is like not only the music, but everything has slowed down. Eva smiles. "This is a great sensory

reset", she says. We feel the slow rotations of the LP record and chat a bit more about the music playing.

The field note above describes how Eva reacts to a noisy and visually intense environment at the museum and what subsequently arises as a social situation between the women in the autism group on the rotating LP record. By deliberately attending to the sensory surroundings in the rock museum installations, I have described how social encounters not only take place in, but also happen in virtue of a sensory space. Social encounters do not happen in a vacuum, but in and through an abundance of things. In the situation described above, it is almost as if the screams, lights, colors, and mirrors dismantle or shatter the group, whereas the LP record seemed to carry or enfold a sense of togetherness. Thus, the LP record becomes more than a museum installation. It becomes a "sensory reset" that returns the bodies that are rotating on it to a shared space. Almost like a stim toy,[16] it helps to manage overwhelming and stressful sensory surroundings by refocusing attention to one's own body in motion. Just as the LP record becomes more than wood, plastic, paint, and sound and incorporates itself in a social space, the women on top of it are now talking to strangers and amongst themselves, casually resting their chins in their hands. There is a lightness to their conversation, it feels unburdened, borne by the gentle movements of the LP record. The women enable the LP to become part of a social space, and the LP enables them to become social in a particular way.

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[16] Stim toys are toys to assist the practice of *stimming,* short for the varieties of self-stimulating behaviors often seen in autism (e.g. hand flapping, finger flicking, rocking, spinning, or pacing) that are often depicted in autism research as something to be eliminated and treated (Boyd, McDonough, & Bodfish, 2012). In recent years, the rapid growth of stim toys like chewable jewelry, spinner rings, fidget toys, etc., bear witness to an increasing re-appropriation of these behaviors by individuals identifying as autistic.

Thus, what the observational note descriptively targets is not Eva's experience as such, but the things, atmospheres, spaces, bodies and movements in and through which her experience emerges. Such description enables a further clarification and enrichment of Mølbak's ambition of 'thinking through the middle'. The LP and the women's moving bodies together form a particular environment and unfold a social potential particular to their spatiotemporal situation. I want to suggest that Merleau-Ponty's notion of milieu enables us to look at social interaction not only as essentially embodied, but also material and situational. Merleau-Ponty has famously stated that "having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 84). To have a body means to be engaged in a milieu, but the relation between body and milieu is not one of containment or encirclement, as Alloa (2017, 26) rightly emphasizes, thus contrasting Merleau-Ponty's notion of the world with Heidegger's notion of *Umwelt.* The milieu is rather, as Merleau-Ponty describes below, a *field of forces* with which the body is in continuous exchange:

> From what we have just seen, we must grant the descriptive originality of the behavioral setting and of behavior itself in relation to "geographical" infrastructures. Such a perspective defines a certain psychological field, in a double sense. It is first of all a notion like that introduced by physicists (such as the Newtonian theory of gravity). This is the gravitational field that is responsible for the local phenomena of gravity. We use this comparison to develop a notion of the psychological field as a milieu of relations of forces, tensions, and reactions, thus permitting us to comprehend human conduct. No individual relation between stimulus and response exists; instead this relation

necessarily occurs within a milieu: a field of forces (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 346).

Here, Merleau-Ponty draws on Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin's notion of *psychological field* as a relation between a body and a geographical, spatial structure. This relation is what can be characterized as a milieu; a field of pulling, resisting, drawing, and thrusting between body and world. Thus, the milieu is not merely a material space that contains bodies but a field of potentiality within which body and world emerge. For Merleau-Ponty, this implies that the body also finds itself as part of the fabric of the world that envelops it rather than merely being the means for it to appear. When Merleau-Ponty argues (1968, 140) that "there is a relation of the visible with itself that traverses me and constitutes me as a seer", it means that the sensing body is also constituted by the dense, opaque, and sensible world. Thus, rather than basing his ontology solely on the structure of the body as the means to open up a milieu of potentiality, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the constitutive nature of the flesh of things. Alloa (2017, 86) argues that Merleau-Ponty in his late writings develops an ontology that is increasingly material. However, already in *The World of Perception* (2004), Merleau-Ponty points to a peculiar space between individual action and material setting, between subjectivity and things:

> My interlocutor gets angry and I notice that he is expressing his anger by speaking aggressively, by gesticulating and shouting. But where is this anger? […] None of this takes place in some otherworldly realm, in some shrine located beyond the body of the angry man. It really is here, in this room and in this part of the room, that the anger breaks forth. It is in the space between him and me that it unfolds (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 83-84).

Here, Merleau-Ponty describes an instance of social interaction and asks where the related social emotions and expressions take place. As we have seen, the answer within mainstream autism research is to locate the crux of social interaction in the cognitive system of the autistic person. Instead, Merleau-Ponty asks us to consider the space *between* bodies and how a social milieu opens up between interacting bodies and material things. In the example I have presented above, the ethnographer is invited to attend, not only to what individual people say and do, but also to the fullness of sounds, smells, colors, and lights, the movements between things and bodies, and the atmosphere, tensions, openings, and contractions. With Merleau-Ponty, we find an attention to the fields in and through which bodies interact. From this perspective, the rotating LP or the screams from the interactive installation are not merely around or beside the social interactions in the autism group; they are inseparably entangled with the social situation in question.

Discussion

We can now elaborate on Honer and Hitzler's (2015), Maso's (2007) and Ravn's (2017) emphasis on the key role played by the ethnographer's first person experience during ethnographic fieldwork. Even though we could say with Mølbak (2012) and Merleau-Ponty (1968) that social experiences emerge in the encounter with something or someone other, it is still necessary to pass through subjective experience in order to reveal the quality of this happening. In ethnographic fieldwork as a method of collecting phenomenologically salient data, the experience through which we must pass is the participant researcher's. In order to describe the complex interactions between bodies in particular social and sensory milieus, these forms of intercorporeal and material blending must be sensed, felt, and experienced. As

is commonly recognized in ethnographic research, the participant observer is him- or herself "the research instrument par excellence" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 17). Thus, the researcher's body is itself the crucial sensory, affective, and experiential organ with which to open up descriptions of social interaction.

It is important to note that this embodied presence on the part of the participant researcher must be understood as embodied engagement. Phenomenological description in the discipline of ethnographic research cannot be performed from a distance. In other words, the researcher's first person perspective cannot stand alone, but draws its validity from continuous second-person embodied and situated engagement between researcher and participants. This invites us to reconsider the qualitative interview once again. As is emphasized by Høffding and Martiny (2016, 541), further argued by Giorgi (2009) and recently discussed by Englander (2020), the first person descriptions of experience collected in the phenomenological interview are facilitated by second-person engagement between interviewer and interviewee.[17] In this way, first person descriptions are in part results of an interactive co-generation of meaning pertaining to the interview situation itself; a form of interaction that "strongly affects both the discursive and the tacit knowledge generation process" (Høffding & Martiny, 2016, p. 542).

Ultimately, these considerations imply that phenomenological research is not only about first person experience, but in an important sense also about second person engagement. Recently, the role of the second person perspective has gained considerable attention within the phenomenological research community and as is becoming increasingly evident, it is impossible to disentangle subjectivity from intersubjectivity (Szanto & Moran,

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[17] Such interpersonal dynamics between interviewer and interviewee are broadly recognized in qualitative research methodology in the form of the "inevitable power plays inherent in qualitative research" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2017, p. 273), thus indicating the important ethical dimension of all qualitative inquiry.

2016; Zahavi, 2001, 2019b). In other words, experience is always already intersubjective and worldly, and thus, "the three regions 'self', 'others', and 'world' belong together; they reciprocally illuminate one another, and can only be understood in their interconnection" (Zahavi, 2001, p. 166). This has important consequences for autism research. If we want to consolidate autism research with phenomenological perspectives on sociality, the most important step is perhaps to realize that social interaction in autism should be studied on the same premises as any form of sociality: namely by attending to its sensory and bodily dimension and entanglement with things and spaces.

In conclusion, I have argued that it is relevant and necessary to discuss how phenomenological philosophy can contribute to empirical methodology in autism research and urged a reconsideration of how the qualitative interview and participant observation might yield phenomenologically salient data. I have argued for restraining the idea that the qualitative interview yields an unproblematic account of experience and proposed increased attention to how experience is accomplished in encounters with alterity by tracing experience 'outwards' rather than 'inwards'. Furthermore, I have argued that ethnographic methods provide a promising addition to the methodological reservoir of phenomenological research by facilitating attention to the social-spatial-temporal fields in and through which bodies interact. In short, I have presented a way to think about phenomenological methodology that captures aspects of sociality that are necessary in order to rethink social interaction in autism in terms of its dynamic relation to the body, sensory experience and material entanglements. In this way, we can perhaps avoid the kinds of unilateral explanations often seen in autism research, where breakdowns or disruptions of reciprocal social engagement are traced back to the autistic party in the interaction. By attending to the sensory and material environment as part of social interactions, we can begin to understand social behaviors in autism as forms of

dialogue with the world rather than as results of a failed social competence ascribable to the individual.

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