

The Hell of Being Who One Ordinarily Is: Is it Possible to Construct Stable Phenomenological Traits of Mood Disorders?

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> Abstract • Assuming that the only epistemically relevant experiential report is the one made in the present moment, it may be unclear how individuals ground their responses to stable-trait assessments. Recently, novel approaches (such as the phenomenological control) suggest that it is possible to construct stable phenomenological traits. Questions are raised as to whether there are first-person reports suggesting the nature of stable phenomenological traits in the context of mood disorders.

Introduction

« 1 » The target article by Sebastián Medeiros and colleagues aims at establishing a neurophenomenological understanding of mindfulness-based interventions for coping with mood disorders. The authors examine the experiential dynamics of searching for emotion-regulation strategies before and after the participants engaged with a mindfulness-based intervention. The study employs a neurophenomenological research design, meaning that it attempts to constrain first- and third-person data. First-person data consist of reports gathered with *micro-phenomenological interviews* (§17). Third-person data consist of measurements of heart rate variability (§25) and stable-trait questionnaires (§§19–24). One case study is presented in detail. In this commentary, I discuss whether it is sensible to rely on closed-form questionnaires for measuring stable-traits in the context of first-person research, and whether it is possible to construct stable traits based on systematically gathered first-person data.

An empirical phenomenological critique of questionnaires

« 2 » First-person research has largely focused on experience as it is present *in the moment*. Micro-phenomenology, used in the target article, relies on a methodological move wherein the experience under investigation is made present in the here and now (the so-called *evocation state*; §17, Petitmengin 2006). There seems to be a pervasive conceptualization of human consciousness as bound within a single moment of experience with the past immediately collapsing into oblivion. Michael Lifshitz and Samuel Veissière refer to this view of temporality as the *hegemony of the present moment*.¹ This is the position that the only epistemically relevant experiences are the ones that we are experiencing in the present.

« 3 » Let us accept the assumption that epistemically relevant experiential reports must be made during immediate contact with experience. Taken seriously, this position leads to the following dilemma: *how do we ground our responses on assessments of stable traits?* Medeiros and colleagues rely on standardized questionnaires of stable traits. As pointed out in §37, when investigating experience, the proposition that we may directly address stable properties of an individual's conscious life with run-of-the-mill questionnaires is questionable (Haun et al. 2017). This is because many such instruments may be *degenerate*. Degeneracy is a term used to describe psychological tasks (i.e., tasks in the everyday sense of the word, but deployed within a socio-cultural context of a piece of research to isolate and make measurable specific cognitive functions; Morrison et al. 2019) that can be solved using many different strategies (Seghier & Price 2018). In consequence, it is no longer possible to claim from task-performance alone what it is that the task measures.

« 4 » Analogously, standardized questionnaires may be degenerate in the sense that it is unclear what aspect of her experi-

ence an individual grounds her responses in. By way of example, let us examine the experiences one might ground her responses to Beck's Depression Inventory in (Beck 1972). The first item asks the individual to choose one of the following: *I do not feel sad; I feel sad; I am sad all the time and I can't snap out of it; I am so sad and unhappy that I can't stand it*. We can easily imagine at least three hypothetical ways one might ground a response to that item.

« 5 » First, an individual might be experiencing sadness in the moment of responding. Second, she could ground the response in a biographical account she holds about herself, according to which she is a sad person. In the moment of solving the questionnaire, her affect might be neutral or even positive. However, her autobiographical conviction might inform her response to a greater extent than her lived experience. Third, she might arrive to the testing location perfectly happy. She then reads the questionnaire and the question itself elicits the feelings of sadness.

« 6 » That is not to say that there are no assessments based on careful phenomenological consideration. There are, for example, the *examination of anomalous self-experience* (Parnas et al. 2012) and *examination of anomalous world experience* (Sass et al. 2017). However, these are both guidelines for semi-structured interviews, rather than closed-form questionnaires. When it comes to phenomenology, this distinction is crucial. In a study of grapheme-color synesthesia, the *same* participants, during the *same* interview, reported on their synesthetic experience both as automatic when responding to a closed-form question, and willed when responding to an open-ended question (Schwartzman et al. 2020). It may be that different styles of inquiry prompt individuals towards attending to different aspects of their experience (Kordeš & Demšar 2018). So, does the gathered first-person data suggest that standardized questionnaires' being degenerate is a sensible concern? **Q1**

The possibility of stable phenomenological traits

« 7 » "Hell" wrote Aldous Huxley (1955: 230) "is the incapacity to be other than the creature one finds oneself ordinarily behaving as." Many who have suffered

1 | Cf. presentation "Cultural neurophenomenology of hypnosis and meditation," by Michael Lifshitz and Samuel Veissière at the FPR-McGill social and cultural neuroscience workshop at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, June 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9di_ZFFepQ

from depression might find this quote familiar from their own experience of this illness: affordances shutting down, the world appearing distant and inaccessible, the body feeling impossibly heavy, as if the air itself is bearing down on it (Fuchs 2005), future receding into infinity (Owen et al. 2013). The question for us now becomes whether there is such an experience as *how it ordinarily feels to be someone*. That is, is it possible to provide a description of experience that is (a) extended in time; and (b) based on rigorous phenomenological research? I examine one potential phenomenological stable trait: *phenomenological control* (PC).

« 8 » PC is the observation that we have the ability to exert a considerable voluntary control over our own experience, sometimes even without conscious intention (Dienes, Palfi & Lush 2020). PC is a construct that, in a normative population, is conceived of as a participant trait; that is, its measures remain stable in time (Lush et al. 2018). The idea that we can control our experience in the absence of conscious intention has been applied to the *rubber-hand illusion* (RHI; Lush 2020). RHI is the phenomenon whereby a rubber hand is placed in front of a participant. One of her physical hands is occluded, and the other placed parallel to the rubber hand. The experimenter then proceeds to stroke the rubber hand with a brush. RHI is the felt experience of brushstrokes in the rubber hand. Pete Lush (*ibid.*) has shown that RHI may be elicited by the context of a psychological experiment. The idea is as follows: participants intuit what the goal of the study is and then unintentionally manipulate their own phenomenology to experience the brushstrokes on the rubber hand. Other phenomena, such as mirror-touch synesthesia, have been tied to PC (Lush et al. 2020).

« 9 » One way of interpreting PC is experiential: individuals with high PC can reach a larger number of possible experiences, encouraged by the immediate situation, than individuals who score low on it. This is supported by the observation that psychedelic experiences can be understood as acute states of heightened (auto)suggestibility (Lifshitz, Sheiner & Kirmayer 2018). If this interpretation holds, it would mean that PC can be understood as a phenomenological stable trait. It would measure a

kind of openness of one's consciousness towards novel experience.

« 10 » Is it possible that mood disorders amount to chronic alterations in (auto)suggestibility, wherein individuals become aware of their experiences without expecting to uncover affordances in them? Do they construct the sense of immobilizing bodily weight through self-suggestion without conscious intention? Can mood disorders be understood as habitually attending to one's experience as devoid of possibilities? Integrating PC into studies of mood disorders might help us address such questions. Additionally, constructing novel stable phenomenological traits would further make it possible to design more robust neurophenomenological studies of the kind pioneered by Medeiros and colleagues in the target article. Considering the concept of PC, I wonder: Do your first-person data point to a phenomenological stable trait relevant for the investigation of mood disorders? **Q2**

Conclusion

« 11 » In this commentary, I aimed at beginning a discussion on stable phenomenological traits. Such constructs may be necessary because, based on the assumptions that many approaches within contemporary first-person research hold about temporality, standardized questionnaires are inadequate. I propose that PC may be a measure of a phenomenological stable trait. My main questions directed at Medeiros and colleagues are (a) whether, based on the insights of the target article, my concerns regarding the degeneracy of standardized questionnaires are valid; and (b) are there any first-person reports in their data suggesting what such stable traits, relevant for mood disorders, might be.

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Competing Interests

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Guiding Principles for Methodological Integrity and Epistemological Consistency in Mixed Methods Studies

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> Abstract • Medeiros et al. implement a mixed methods approach to explore the mechanisms underlying individual transformation during mindfulness-based interventions. We provide critiques, questions and suggestions to increase the validity of the present study and fruitfulness of future mixed methods endeavors. We frame our commentary in existing guidelines for the design and implementation of mixed methods.

Introduction

« 1 » The “mixed methods” methodology is an approach that has been developed and refined in the social sciences for decades, but has only recently permeated medical and psychology research. In these fields, guiding principles have been formulated for the design of mixed methods studies (Wisdom & Creswell 2013). Even though specific techniques may differ considerably between medical and social sciences, any mixed methods study should be based on core principles ensuring that (a) each method is applied in accordance with its properties and constraints; (b) the role of each method is well specified with respect to the purpose of the mixed methods study; and (c) the results are integrated within an appropriate unifying theory or model. In

this commentary, we examine how the target article complies with these principles, and suggest possible improvements as well as alternative strategies that we and others have attempted to implement.

Principle 1 of mixed methods: Complying with the features of each method

« 2 » A major challenge in mixed methods studies is that individual methods can have widely different and sometimes seemingly incompatible features for data collection and interpretation.

« 3 » A paradigmatic example of such difficulty is the appropriate sample size, especially in so-called convergent designs where multiple data types are collected in parallel from the same participants and at the same time. Quantitative data are commonly subjected to inferential statistics, an analytic approach sensitive to risks of false positive and false negative results. Addressing the issue of statistical power inevitably necessitates appropriate sample sizes. While the exact number depends on the experimental design and the effect of interest, even the most favorable conditions will require at least 20 or so participants. The work of Sebastián Medeiros et al. is based on only six participants, a sample that might be suitable for the qualitative component of the study but not for quantitative analysis. Although the study might have been qualified by the authors as exploratory for this reason, we can only speculate so, as the exploratory nature of the study has not been clarified. Despite the cautionary qualification, inferential statistics have been conducted, and without the required precautions such as stating hypotheses before analyses and correcting for multiple comparisons. Therefore, would a descriptive presentation of the data not be more appropriate to the small sample and better serve the objective of integrating qualitative and quantitative data? « 4 » Inspiring examples of joint displays can be found in the literature of mixed methods research (Guetterman, Fetters & Creswell 2015).

« 4 » To overcome the gap between first- and third-person methodologies, qualitative techniques can be extended in creative ways. For example, Christopher Timmermann et al. (2019) have conducted