

**Exploring inner landscapes through psychophenomenology: the contribution of
neuro-linguistic programming to innovations in researching first person
experience**

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper explores a contemporary European development in research into first person accounts of experience, called psychophenomenology (Vermersch 2004), that offers enhancements to phenomenological interviewing. It is a form of guided introspection that seeks to develop finely-grained first-person accounts by using distinctions in language, internal sensory representations and imagery that have been incorporated from neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) (Bandler & Grinder 1975a). It is also a participative, relational and developmental form of interviewing, in the sense that the interviewee can gain significant insight into their experience; the process is not concerned purely with data gathering.

Design/methodology/approach

We review the theoretical assumptions on which psychophenomenology is based, then describe the principal method used in psychophenomenology, the 'explicitation interview'. The interview protocol is illustrated with transcript data, through which we identify specific aspects of NLP that have been incorporated into psychophenomenology.

Findings

Psychophenomenology offers refinements to the precision of phenomenological methods found in organizational research, such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith 2008).

Research limitations/implications

We review the epistemological claims and implications of psychophenomenology.

Practical implications

These developments may provide a basis for reconsidering the research value of introspection, which has often been dismissed as non-rigorous.

Originality/value (mandatory).

The paper introduces psychophenomenology to the field of organizational research. It also describes how psychophenomenology has innovated by drawing from neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) (Bandler & Grinder 1975a), an approach to personal development that is found in organizational practices such as executive coaching, in order to enhance the precision and rigour of both interviews and transcript analysis.

Keywords: Psychophenomenology; neuro-linguistic programming; interviewing; introspection; emergence; epoche.

Classification: Research paper

Phenomenology in organizational research

According to a review of interviewing methods in organizational research, 'the interview remains the most common method of data gathering in qualitative research', and 'the goal of any qualitative research interview is... to see the research topic from the perspective of the interviewee' (King 2004:11). King acknowledges three main epistemological stances in qualitative methodologies; realist, phenomenological and social constructionist. This paper is concerned with phenomenological interviewing.

Phenomenology is an established approach in qualitative research (Giorgi 1985, Moustakas 1994) that 'is directed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the nature and meaning of everyday experience' (Gibson & Hanes 2003:182). Gibson and Hanes emphasise the contribution that phenomenology has to make to research and practice in human resource development (HRD); Conklin (2007) makes a similar case for management inquiry, and Kupers (2008) advocates a phenomenological approach to the analysis of organizational learning. Contemporary examples of phenomenology in organizational research include Gallagher *et al.* (2007) and Heil (2008); further studies are cited by Gibson and Haines (2003). There is interest in varieties of phenomenology including interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith 2008), which has arisen mainly in health studies and is now being applied in organizational contexts (e.g. Cropley & Millward 2009); and relational phenomenology (Finlay 2002).

Despite a long tradition of phenomenological research, Gibson and Hanes acknowledge (2003:193) that it has no prescribed method. Giorgi (1985:25) ascribes the lack of a clear methodology for such research to the notion that phenomenology itself is an emergent knowledge system: 'Neither psychological phenomenology nor psychology as a human science is as yet a well-founded, fully mature discipline; both are only in the process of coming into being'.

Phenomenology usually relies on first person accounts for its data, yet such information, especially when arrived at through introspection, tends to be mistrusted. According to Depraz *et al* (2003:7), most scientific psychology has spent a century disqualifying and ignoring first person accounts. Stevens (2000:112) believes that the development of appropriate procedures and instruments for the investigation of first person experience is still in its infancy. Lutz and Thompson (2003:31) point out that, 'the integration of such first person data into the experimental protocols of cognitive neuroscience still faces a number of epistemological and methodological challenges'. Depraz (1999:108-9), observing that since Husserl's time there has been much theorising in the field, believes that the time is right to return to developing more practical approaches to phenomenological investigations. According to Velmans, 'a psychology that investigates brain states and behaviour, but not how humans experience the world, cannot be complete' (2000:340). Vermersch (1999), who builds on Husserl's phenomenology, believes that there is a scientific vacuum surrounding the use of first person data, and that ignoring the potential of information arrived at through introspection leads to an impoverished view of consciousness. He argues that introspection is necessary for the development of psychology, and has been too long ignored.

In response to this need, a strong case has been made for the role of first person accounts as valuable data in the field of consciousness studies. There, psychophenomenology has emerged as an approach to researching first-person accounts through what Vermersch (2004) has called *guided introspection*. What characterises psychophenomenology is its focus on the subtleties of language in people's reports of their experience, and associated features of people's 'inner landscapes', such as sensory representations and imagery. Knowledge of these subtleties enhances the capacity for 'bracketing' (Jeanne 2003), since the researcher can distinguish more finely between their own constructs and those of the interviewee. It also highlights the risk that existing phenomenological methods may be gaining imprecise accounts, or inappropriately interpreting accounts through the researcher's constructs and presuppositions despite their conscious intent to do otherwise.

Despite an extensive literature on research interviewing, there is little evidence of sophistication in the awareness and use of language. For example, Kvale's text on interviewing offers only a rudimentary categorisation of questions (Kvale 1996:133-5). Qualitative interviews inevitably utilise language, yet the role and significance of language in gathering phenomenological accounts seems to be a metaphorical elephant in the room that no one talks about.

We emphasise that psychophenomenology is wholly consistent with the commitment in phenomenology to discovering *interviewees'* meanings and respecting their views of the world. The argument made by psychophenomenology is that it is knowledge of

the *forms and structures* of language, not its *contents*, that enables the researcher to develop a more precise, extensive and rigorous understanding of the interviewee's subjective world.

Psychophenomenology

Psychophenomenology was developed as a response to a perceived need for a more methodical approach to introspection and eliciting personal accounts. Vermersch conceives of psychophenomenology as both a research tool and an approach to discovery. Many of its findings are published in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* (e.g. Petitmengin-Peugeot 1999), and in a French journal, *Expliciter*ⁱ, dedicated to communicating developments in the field.

Its developer, Pierre Vermersch (Vermersch 1999), worked closely with Francisco Varela in Paris, and was influenced by his theory of 'embodied mind' (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch 1993). Varela *et al* (1993) criticised contemporary cognitivism, arguing that the time was ripe for cognitive science to go beyond the dominance of the computational metaphor and enlarge its horizons to investigate the broader phenomenon of actual lived human experience, and the role of reflection and introspection as empirical tools for gathering information about conscious processesⁱⁱ. Hence the idea of *embodiment* is central to psychophenomenology, where it is conceived of as encompassing both the lived embodied experiential structure, and the context or milieu in which cognitive mechanisms operate.

Depraz, Varela and Vermersch (2003) stress a number of conceptual and theoretical starting points for researchers in consciousness studies. These form the basis of a

praxis that involves a number of epistemological distinctions, which we summarise as follows:

- experience from accounts of experience;
- procedural knowledge from declarative knowledge;
- verbal from pre-verbal information;
- content from process;
- description from explanation;
- internal from external attention.

What distinguishes psychophenomenology from its Husserlian roots is that it focuses directly on practical ways of investigating experience through the act of reflection. It admits to being a methodology that is still emerging, discovering the pitfalls of investigating subjective experience, and endeavouring to define its field (Varela & Shear 1999, Depraz, Varela, & Vermersch 2003).

A central aim of psychophenomenology is to elicit information about conscious experience at increased levels of 'granularity' (Vermersch 1994) in factual descriptions. It aims to access more details of the complex dynamics of awareness (and assumes that this is possible), and to bring these into consciousness. Granularity refers to making distinctions at ever finer levels, and for the researcher to be able to recognise at what level of specificity, or what kinds of processes are being researched. With the explicitation interview, Vermersch seeks to 'map' conscious experience at increasingly higher magnification. In his words:

'Describing an act's structure requires that one describes its temporal unfolding at different levels of density: the linkage between subordinate goals, the succession of stages and at the heart of each stage, elementary actions seen as both acts to be accomplished and as information-gathering acts, then micro-operations etc.'

(Vermersch 1999:31)

Psychophenomenology is predominantly inductive. It aims to uncover phenomena, then draw conclusions rather than to apply pre-existing theory deductively. Depraz *et al* (2003:17) describe psychophenomenologists as pragmatists, who care about 'how well something adapts to its situation rather than how well one formulates *a priori* principles ... in praxis, conduct finds its truth in itself and does not need a prepared blueprint'. Researchers are urged to be 'perpetual beginners', and phenomena are considered to reveal themselves, rather than being actively sought. The emphasis is on finding out for oneself, rather than being led by existing theory.

The explicitation interview

The explicitation interview ('L'Entretien d'Explicitation', Vermersch 1994) is of central importance to psychophenomenology. Much of Vermersch's writings (which are in French, translated for the purposes of this article by Mathison) attempt to describe, with precision and rigour, the skills and procedures needed to guide a person's introspective journey; a detailed description of the explicitation interview is given by Petitmengin (2006).

The aim of this protocol is to elicit increasingly precise detailed information about people's inner landscapes, such as when they are memorising, introspecting, or becoming aware of how they learn. Petitmengin, for instance, has tracked the unfolding of the intuitive experience in an attempt to discover a common pattern to the phenomenon (Petitmengin-Peugeot 1999)ⁱⁱⁱ. Mathison (2003) used a similar approach to elicit people's responses to small changes (experienced by the listener at the sensory level) in the syntax of a statement. More recently, Petimengin has used the explicitation interview to enable sufferers of epileptic seizures to become aware of very small changes in their awareness which herald an attack, but of which they had so far been unconscious (Petitmengin, Baulac, & Navarro 2006).

In order to achieve this precise and detailed exploration of inner landscapes, psychophenomenology has drawn from the tools and frameworks available in the practice known as NLP, which we now introduce^{iv}. We then go on to identify and illustrate (with extracts from transcripts) the ways in which NLP has been incorporated into psychophenomenology.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming

NLP may seem an unusual source of a potential contribution to phenomenological methods, since it is a controversial practice (Tosey & Mathison 2009); there is no little irony in the fact that it has come to inform an academic research methodology. This migration of frameworks from organizational practice into research methodology represents an interesting transfer of knowledge. It is important to emphasise that its validity in psychophenomenology does not rely upon any claim to efficacy as a

psychotherapeutic procedure, which is contested (Heap 1988). It is also relevant to note that NLP appears to be less controversial in non-English speaking cultures, including France, where psychophenomenology developed, Belgium (Esser 2004) and Germany (Walker 1996).

Developed in the 1970s by Richard Bandler and John Grinder as a pragmatic approach to communication, initially for psychotherapists (Bandler & Grinder 1975a), NLP proposes ways in which syntactical structures may directly influence meaning making, based on a combination of insights from transformational grammar (Grinder & Elgin 1973) and empirical observation. Its founders espoused a pragmatism, claiming to be interested only in 'what works', and sought to remove linguistics from the confines of a narrow academic field. From there it has become more a commercial product than an academic endeavour. It is used in organizational contexts as a method of executive coaching (Linder-Pelz & Hall 2007, Hayes 2006); and its techniques and frameworks have a wide variety of applications in business (Knight 2002) and management development (Molden 2001).

In fact NLP was described originally as a methodology, which was called 'modelling' (Grinder, DeLozier, & Bandler 1977:4). Modelling is intended to make human capabilities available for others to learn: 'The objective of the NLP modelling process is not to end up with the one 'right' or 'true' description of a particular person's thinking process, but rather to make an *instrumental map* that allows us to apply the strategies that we have modeled in some useful way' (Dilts 1998:30).

This methodology was developed through Bandler and Grinder's study of three well-known therapists in the early 1970s. Bandler was asked by Robert Spitzer, a psychiatrist and publisher, to transcribe the recently deceased Fritz Perls' recordings of his workshops and sessions with patients (Spitzer 1992). He also studied the patterns of communication used by the family therapist, Virginia Satir, attending many of her workshops as a recording technician, and later working with her personally. Bandler became intrigued by the prospect of identifying basic, replicable communication patterns of people who could produce change. John Grinder, then an associate professor of linguistics at Kresge College, University of Santa Cruz, joined him in this work, using his expertise in transformational grammar to develop their findings. Gregory Bateson, who was also teaching at Kresge College (Grant & Riesman 1978), acted as their mentor (Bostic St.Clair & Grinder 2001). Many assumptions on which NLP is based are claimed by authors in that field (e.g. Dilts & DeLozier 2000) to be rooted conceptually in the cybernetics and epistemological explorations of Bateson's thinking (e.g. Bateson 2000).

Bateson urged both Bandler and Grinder to study the communication patterns of the Hypnotherapist Milton Erickson (Bostic St.Clair & Grinder 2001). The founders also drew heavily from developments at the Palo Alto Mental Research Institute (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson 1967), which gave it a constructivist outlook. This work, added to the insights derived from Satir and Perls, led Bandler and Grinder to specify ways in which the forms and structures of language can influence people's meaning-making and experience, as described in a stream of early publications (Bandler & Grinder 1975a, 1975b; Bandler, Grinder, & Satir 1976; Grinder & Bandler 1976; Grinder, DeLozier, & Bandler 1977)^v.

The principles by which NLP operates have many parallels with cognitive linguistics (Evans & Green 2006), the basic premise of which is that grammar has a cognitive dimension. In other words, both NLP and cognitive linguistics reject the common-sense view that language contains or indicates meaning, regarding it instead as providing directives or instructions for sense-making. Thus Bandler and Grinder concluded that syntactical structures activated certain semantic processes, and, crucially, that language has an epistemological dimension; as well as transmitting information about *content* it activates certain epistemological *processes* used to make sense of any message. Both NLP and cognitive linguistics take as a starting point the belief that syntactical language patterns reveal and mirror the processes involved in conceptualising and sense making (Evans & Green 2006). Fauconnier (1997:40) sums up this approach: 'The natural-language sentence is a set of (underspecified) instructions for cognitive constructions at many different levels.'

The principle that language acts as a cognitive directive is highly important for research interviewing, since an understanding of the epistemology of syntactical structures can assist researchers in obtaining first person data with a high degree of precision. This is the essence of the contribution of NLP to psychophenomenology. The development of the explicitation interview was influenced directly by many of the insights into language and cognition proposed by the originators of NLP, as shown by references to the NLP literature in the bibliographies of publications by Vermersch and Petitmengin. Vermersch is a Master Practitioner of NLP (Vermersch 1994: 106 footnote), and makes extensive use of NLP in the training of guides^{vi}.

How psychophenomenology has drawn from NLP

Here we illustrate describe and illustrate three central ways in which the explicitation interview incorporates NLP:

- Enabling evocation (through association, transderivational search and perceptual positions)
- The meta-model: language patterns.
- Eliciting sensory detail: internal sensory representations and their sub-modalities.

Enabling evocation

The first stage of the explicitation process is to guide the interviewee to associate fully into the memory or re-enactment (Depraz, Varela, & Vermersch 2003) of the event being investigated.

This can be likened to, and also contrasted with, the phenomenological practice reported by Gibson and Haines (2003:191). Gibson and Haines describe the 'primary question' used in a study of mentoring: 'Start with your first experience with mentoring – and describe that experience – for example, how did the relationship get started?'. Among the potential follow-up questions listed is; 'How did you know, what did you see happening?'

Psychophenomenology is similarly interested in descriptions of a specific experience. However, rather than ask these questions that refer to the experience in the past tense

(e.g. 'what did you see happening?'), the explicitation interview will seek to enable people to re-access or re-live events, and then to describe these as if they are happening in the present. Questions will therefore be in the present tense, about what the interviewee is experiencing now: thus, 'what do you see happening?'

The following is an extract from an explicitation interview (conducted by the first author), the purpose of which was to enable the participant, Edward, to discover more about his experience of having 'insight'. Rather than exploring the participant's opinions or beliefs about having insights, the explicitation interview works by reaccessing a specific example of this experience. The interviewer's purpose was therefore to enable the participant to recall such an experience.

J. ...so can you think of a time, or allow a time to emerge in your memory, when you had an insight ... into whatever it was ?

Here the question deliberately invites the participant to engage in a search to identify a specific occasion.

Initially the participant responded with the comment:

Edward. [...] I guess my perceptions are coloured in a way by academic understanding of what I mean by insight. I tend to think of it in theoretical and conceptual terms. [...] When invited to give an example of my own insights it's a little more difficult. Let me think, let me think, let me think.

This was followed by a long silence. When Edward finally said: “*I’m driving a car,*” the interviewer knew that the participant was accessing the internal imagery of a specific memory. This could then be investigated further by eliciting a more detailed description of the stages leading to the insight.

The form of the interviewer’s language encourages the person to direct their attention inwards, and is vague enough to allow the subject choice about what specific memory is evoked. This exemplifies the NLP notion of ‘transderivational searching’, a term used by Bandler and Grinder (1975b:220) to describe the effect that hypnotherapist Milton Erickson’s questions had on his patients, where they engaged in an internal search for meaning, scanning their own experiences and constructs in order to make sense of another person’s communication. Knowing this, researchers can structure a question to elicit a certain *direction* for the respondent’s internal search, and then investigate what emerges at that level of experience.

Inviting the participant to see, hear and feel whatever is happening also encourages them to re-enact the event in their inner world, as much as possible, as if it were happening now. Vermersch refers to this state as being *in evocation*. In NLP terminology, the person has *re-associated* with the experience. It is even suggested that the physiological concomitants of the event may thus be re-experienced, which is potentially highly useful for research purposes, as ‘the reference point for understanding perception is no longer a pre-given, independent world but rather the sensory-motor structure of the perceiver’ (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch 1993:173).

A further important distinction that is proposed in psychophenomenology, and which is mentioned in NLP, is that there are three possible standpoints or *perceptual positions* which complement one another. These are referred to in the literature as first, second and third person positions (Depraz, Varela, & Vermersch 2003:80 et seq). Each may bring equally valid information to an inquiry, but cannot stand alone. The researcher needs to be aware from which standpoint information originates, and when it is appropriate to use information from each of these. Information gleaned from one perceptual position alone is considered as incomplete; information that confuses first and second perceptual positions is proposed as inadmissible.

First person accounts are those which are only accessible to the person undergoing the experience under investigation. Thus in Petitmengin's work, her participants' reports on what they discovered when they re-evoked their experience of intuition are classified as first person accounts.

The second person account arises from what is described as 'an exchange between situated individuals' (Depraz, Varela, & Vermersch 2003:81). The researcher guiding her subject's introspective journey, whilst listening, observing and de-briefing, continuously maintains an awareness of her own responses to the emerging material, and differentiates between the two. For instance, the signs that an interviewee's attention is turned inwards and may be engaged in a transderivational search is information obtained from the point of view of the second person. The second person is perceived as needing to develop an empathic resonance with the first person, a metaphorical meeting on common ground. However, the information obtained from this viewpoint is of a different order^{vii}, to that of the first person, and contributes to

the validation of the emergent material. Researcher and participant become an interacting dyad with different and interdependent roles to play.

The third person stance is an objective perspective, like that of the traditional scientist who appears to 'forge facts as independent world entities' (Depraz, Varela, & Vermersch 2003:80), avoiding the supposed taint of subjectivity in his search for universally applicable truths. However, that traditional perspective is viewed in psychophenomenology as too wedded to the reification of the theoretical and the myth of objectivity, as it can appear free from any concrete, embodied reference experience. In psychophenomenology the third person stance is only valid if it results from a collaborative, grounded exploration from first and second person positions.

The meta-model

The second way in which psychophenomenology has drawn from NLP is through a typology of syntactical structures, called the 'meta-model' (Bandler & Grinder 1975a), that indicate patterns in a person's verbal reports on their 'map of the world', and reveal aspects of how it had been constructed (see table 2, which shows the full set of original meta-model categories). This typology was based on patterns identified in transformational linguistics (Grinder & Elgin 1973), and was claimed to reflect the ways in which Satir, Perls and Erickson used language in practice.

The meta-model provides ways of investigating people's constructs through carefully targeted questions that correspond to each pattern or syntactical structure. In its application, Bandler and Grinder emphasised Bateson's view that language belongs to

a different domain to that of sensory experience, and that one of the greatest fallacies in western thought is to confuse map with territory (Bateson 2000:455). In this, Bateson was influenced by Korzybski's dictum that 'the map is not the territory', which has become a central principle of NLP. Hence a researcher who is aware of the different levels of abstraction inherent in the language used to report on an experience can distinguish information about the actual, sensory representation of an event, from the beliefs (interpretations and explanations) that the person may have generated. These are epistemologically distinct; a person's description of, say, their internal imagery of an event, is of a different logical type from the abstract categories used to explain it.

The meta-model can be applied directly to research in two main ways. It has been used as a framework for analysing interview transcripts to track subtle conceptual changes (Tosey, Mathison & Michelli 2005). It can also be used to design precise questions that engage not with the content of an interviewee's account, but with its syntactical structures.

To illustrate this use of the meta-model interview, here is a short extract from a transcript. For example, one syntactical pattern in the NLP meta-model (Bandler & Grinder 1975a), is called 'modal operators'. These are words that define the mode in which an action is to be carried out, such as 'will', 'can', 'may', 'might', 'won't' and so on. In this inquiry, the researcher (Mathison 2003) sought to elicit the subjectively experienced distinctions between the modal operators *could* and *will*. Initially, participants were asked to think about something that they were intending to do, but not to specify the activity. They were invited to think about the activity in such a way

that they were aware of what they saw, heard and felt as they re-presented the event to themselves, and then to report on any changes in the internal representations when using the two different modal operators. The extract is from an interview with one of these participants, Simon.

J. (...) and if I say 'You could do it'?

Simon: That's much gentler. The kinaesthetic is more relaxed, it's em.... The external auditory effect is one of support, so it's my choice... the internal, the picture is soft, still clear, but soft.

Note that the statement 'the external auditory effect is one of support' is general. We know that Simon is hearing something external to himself (i.e. as distinct from internally), and we know that he somehow equates this sound with a construct, 'support'. By comparison, 'the picture (of the intended activity) is soft, still clear', is more specific about the qualities of Simon's awareness.

Eliciting sensory detail

When the participant is fully in evocation, the guide invites them to notice what is happening in their interior worlds at the sensory level. What do they now see in their interior vision? What sort of qualities do their visual representations have? One of the most important tasks the guide has is to ensure that the participant does not return to their habitual levels of description, beliefs or viewpoints, but is genuinely engaged in exploring the unfamiliar dimensions of their inner landscape.

There is a fundamental distinction made within NLP between the *content* of a reported event, and the *processes* generating the syntactic patterns by which the event is verbalised. NLP claims to work predominantly with process (Bandler & Grinder 1979). In psychophenomenology, similarly, Petitmengin stresses that 'the content, like the context, can be useful to understand what kind of experience it is, but contains no information on the subjective living out associated with this experience' (Petitmengin-Peugeot 1999:50). A researcher able to make this distinction therefore has the choice of attending to either the content of a verbal report, or of turning to the processes that bring it about.

As mentioned, Petitmengin (Petitmengin-Peugeot 1999) used a mixture of psychophenomenology and her knowledge of NLP (as indicated in her text and bibliography) to explore the act of intuition. She interviewed twenty-four people who had claimed to have had significant intuitive experiences, describing her role as researcher as helping her subjects to re-live the images, sensations, sounds that are associated with that experience. The first part of her empirical inquiry was to track her participants' introspective reports of undergoing the intuitive act purely in terms of the sequences of what she terms sensorial modalities - what they saw, heard and felt as an intuition emerged into their conscious awareness. From this she derived a tentative, generalised model describing some common features of the intuitive experience. She concluded that the intuitive experience first makes itself known at the pre-verbal level as synaesthesias, a meld of sights, sounds and feelings, before it is verbalised. In this way, Petitmengin claims to have been able to arrive at a more

generalised description or model of the actual experience of the emergence of the intuitive act.

The following extract gives an example of the kind of questioning used in the explication interview:

Participant: I feel that it's time to visualise my interior landscape

Researcher: How do you know that it's time?

Participant: Because I have this sensation of calmness

Researcher: What is this sensation like? Where do you feel it?

(Petitmengin-Peugeot 1999:48)

Here the researcher recognises that there is another layer of experience subtending the participant's feeling (revealed by the use of the sensory predicate 'feel') that it is time to visualise her interior landscape. The researcher then seeks to elicit an aspect that appears to have been 'deleted' (*How do you know it's time?*).

When the participant responds that a 'sensation of calmness' is her indicator, the questions become even more specific (*'where do you feel it?'*). Here the researcher seeks information about the possible bodily location of the feeling. By asking the interviewee to become aware of this layer of consciousness, their attention is drawn to the background, or process, rather than the figure, or content, of the experience. The aim of the explication interview is to maintain the participant's attention at this level,

achieved through the guide's sensitive, empathic and precise verbal and non-verbal encouragement.

NLP proposes that inner experience consists of visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and olfactory/gustatory processes. It refers to these cognitive, sensory re-creations of experience as 'internal representations' (Grinder & Bandler 1976:6), a pre-verbal level of cognition where the senses were engaged in the subjective 're-presentation' of experience, lived or imagined. Bandler and Grinder claimed that working with the way in which experience was constructed through such representations had a wide range of applications, from a means of curing people of phobias in psychotherapy (Bandler & Grinder 1979) to ways of enabling managers to develop effective strategies to achieve personal goals.

While these claims about the efficacy of its applications are contested, the sensory nature of inner landscapes is increasingly borne out by developments in the cognitive and neuro- sciences (Barsalou 2008). Barsalou and colleagues claim that there is evidence that each reflective act engages the senses, though the person reflecting may be unaware of this. 'Conceptual systems are multi-modal simulations distributed among modality specific systems' (Barsalou 2003:513).

NLP suggests that these sensory modalities can be broken down more finely as 'sub-modalities' (Bandler & MacDonald 1988), and that people can become aware of such distinctions for themselves (see table 1). Re-lived or imagined events may reveal themselves in colours of different levels of brightness or clarity. They may be experienced as moving, have dimensionality, and an apparent location in space, as

well as a temporal duration. Such sub-modality distinctions can be accessed by a

sensitive interviewer. It is important to note that the significance of variations in these distinctions needs to be established for each individual. Thus an increase in the brightness of an image (say) for person A may be associated with feeling happier; for person B it may be associated with feeling more exposed or vulnerable.

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For example, returning to the interview with Simon, when the interviewer asked for more detail about his responses in the visual domain he said:

Simon: The colours, yeah, it's gone more pastel. I mean I wasn't aware of the colours before, but I would say now there must have been colours before because it's become a very soft gentle picture which to me means more pastelly colours.... Softer lighting on the picture, it was a bright intense picture, but it's very soft now, ehm, much more relaxing em, more pleasant, and more acceptable, the external auditory is a more acceptable part ... becomes part of the picture.

For Simon, therefore, there is a relationship between the colours becoming 'more pastelly' and feelings of 'relaxing and more pleasant'. This may not hold true for another person.

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We note that information about sub-modality distinctions can be distinguished from more generalised description. Hence Simon's description of the changes in a visual representation as 'pastelly', 'soft' and 'slow' is at a finer level of detail about his experience than '*much more relaxing em, more pleasant, and more acceptable*'. 'Relaxing', 'pleasant' and 'acceptable' are relatively vague terms which do not

describe an embodied experience in as much detail as the colours being 'pastelly'. They describe his reactions to the experience, rather than the experience itself and are of a different order, in that they refer to the domains of beliefs and abstractions, rather than that of raw sensory description.

The guide in the explication interview therefore needs to be knowledgeable about, for example, the ways in which verbal reports may vary in their levels of abstraction. Questions may be used to direct the participant's attention to the elicitation of more specific information, which Vermersch (1994) describes as a more refined level of 'granularity'. The guide may ask the interviewee to slow down a memory in order to notice even finer distinctions, or features of which they were not previously aware. Among further links to NLP, the researcher is also urged to attend to non-verbal signs that reveal, for example, whether a person's attention is internal or external (usually, people look away and break eye contact when attending or searching internally). Vermersch also encourages guides to observe their respondents' eye movements. In his view, observing and tracking eye movements provides valuable information which may indicate certain cognitive processes (Vermersch 1994:205).

In summary, these extracts have shown examples of exploring syntactical structures (modal operators), internal representations (e.g. the picture) and sub-modalities (e.g. softness) as possibly new areas for phenomenological inquiry. Our earliest application of these ideas was as a means of analysing transcriptions to investigate a manager's learning from an experience of organisational change (Tosey, Mathison, & Michelli 2005). In order to do this we mapped the changing features of a manager's 'inner landscape' as revealed by subtle syntactical changes in the transcripts over four time

intervals. NLP language models enabled us to identify changes in causal links, connections between conceptual entities, the extent to which the person experienced themselves as having choice and control in a situation, the qualities of perceptual space and time at different stages of the change, the sometimes unconscious scale of values that are referred to when judgements are made, and the changing metaphorical structures permeating this manager's ways of thinking.

Epoche

The above sections have outlined the process of the explicitation interview. What of its outcome?

One of us (Mathison) has investigated the methods of a gifted riding coach (M), who appeared to be using 'guided introspection' as a teaching method (Mathison & Tosey 2008). The study was aimed at discovering more about the experience of transformative learning (Mezirow 1991), a field that we contend can benefit significantly from a capacity for detailed and precise description of events in people's inner landscapes. In the study, Mathison became one of the coaches mounted students so as to be able to give a first person account of the experience of being coached, rather than just observing her lessons, which would have limited the research to a second person perspective.

The following extract is taken from this investigation,

At one critical point in the lesson, I learn that I have a distortion in my upper body, which the coach points out to me. I make an attempt to correct the distortion. The coach comments:

‘M: ... OK, just keep really keeping the distortion that keeps you face left. ... What words do you think are going to most hold you in this place when you go to trot?’

My mind went blank; there was darkness, and for a split second there were no sounds or images, as if someone had dropped a shutter in front of my eyes. I do not know how long this suspension lasted. Then an image emerged as if from nowhere. I saw a yacht in full sail with its spinnaker bowed outward by the wind. There came a sense that my upper body needed to feel curved round like that spinnaker.

‘Spinnaker I found myself telling her.’

(Mathison & Tosey 2008:82)

What was so significant about this image for the rider? Using introspection, both at the time, and later, she realised that the image that had emerged had changed the way she held her upper body in the saddle.

In retrospect this sequence was reminiscent of what Depraz *et al* (2003) have described as the stages in the phenomenological act of becoming aware. One of the aims of guided introspection is to enable inquirers to arrive at *Epoche*, which consists

of a cycle of three stages, the suspension of existing patterns of thinking, a redirection of attention towards interior processes so as to become more aware of the details and variety, and a 'letting go' (Depraz, Varela, & Vermersch 2003:47), accompanied by the strangeness of unknowing - a conscious choice to be passive, to slow down so that insights can emerge and make themselves known.

Epoche, a term derived from the Greek which originally had a number of meanings (Depraz, Varela, & Vermersch 2003:25), was used by Husserl to describe the process of actively suspending thinking and judging in order for new insights to emerge. In psychophenomenology, it is considered an essential part of inquiring into 'the minimal and self-sufficient cycle of the reflective act' (Depraz, Varela, & Vermersch 2003:24). *Epoche* is completed through 'an interruption of the flow of our unexamined thoughts and actions' (Depraz, Varela, & Vermersch 2003:254). It is a part of a never ending cycle of developing interior awareness and arriving at new insights.

The final stages of the explicitation interview involve de-briefing, with checks to ensure that the guide has properly understood what has been communicated about the participant's inner journey. There may be further sharing, reviewing and discussion of the findings with a group of collaborators. New insights and viewpoints may then emerge from such further sharing of information.

In the explicitation interview the aim is to *elicit* descriptions at ever finer levels of detail, not to *alter* the interviewee's experience. The interviewer therefore needs to be alert to the emergence of new qualities or features. This underlines the importance of

appropriate training or experience; as King acknowledges, a central aim of phenomenological interviewing is 'for the researcher to consciously set aside his or her presuppositions about the phenomenon under investigation' (2004:12-13). In psychophenomenology, the researcher needs to develop an awareness of how the syntactical structures of questions influence the responses that are elicited, so that they utilise language effectively whilst ensuring that they do not influence the responses inappropriately.

Psychophenomenology and IPA: a brief comparison

Compared with IPA (Smith 2008), psychophenomenology seeks to investigate conscious experience at ever finer levels of detail, and to put even the most fleeting mental events under a microscope, as it were, to find out more about how we make sense. A full exploration of the difference between psychophenomenology and IPA is beyond the scope of this article. Here we illustrate that difference using an extract from an interview people's experiences of being a kidney dialysis patient (Smith 2008:68), in which Smith explains how he interviews, then analyses the resulting transcript according to IPA guidelines. The extract is

I dunno, that's the pain bit, I know you're going to say it's all me, but I can't help it, even though I don't like it. It's the mean me, my mean head all sour and horrible. I can't cope with that bit. I cope with the pain better.

The question then posed by the researcher using IPA was:

How do you cope with it?

We would argue that as a result, this researcher was missing the opportunity to elicit a whole layer of the sufferer's experience. To the psychophenomenologist, what is presented by this participant is a verbally expressed map of 'the pain bit', many further details of which could be accessed through the language used to describe it. Among the points of interest here, the word 'sour' is, in NLP terminology, a sensory predicate. This could alert the researcher to consider what could be happening at the sensory level of this person's internal representation. They would want to know more about the detail of 'sour'; is it being used metaphorically, or as a description of a bodily sensation? In order to explore this, they might begin by asking, 'how do you know it is "sour"?' Further detail of the dynamic role of 'sour' in this experience of 'suffering' could be explored through questions such as, 'what makes it "sour" for you'?

A second point of interest arises from the notion of 'the mean me'. An NLP-trained interviewer might consider this from the point of view of process rather than content. For example, it is possible that there is an internal dialogue maintaining 'the mean me'. If so, and if the words of the internal dialogue can be elicited, they might reveal conceptual linkages such as cause-effect structures and complex equivalences.

There are many additional possibilities for exploration of the person's phenomenological world based on this one utterance. The two examples given indicate that the utterance *per se* is (from the perspective of psychophenomenology) at quite a broad, undetailed level. Yet in this example Smith moves directly to an

interpretation of this passage as: *Attribution of unwanted self to the pain, and defence of original self* (Smith 2008:69). For the psychophenomenologist, not only is there much more detail to be uncovered before any such conclusions are possible, but also, significantly, the researcher has introduced his own inferences. Thus the notion of 'unwanted' is the researcher's construct; the interviewee's words ('don't like' and 'can't cope') certainly do not necessarily mean that 'the mean me' is unwanted. By comparison with psychophenomenology, therefore, according to this example IPA appears over-interpretive and lacking in the capacity to make distinctions that are as fine-grained.

Critical review

In terms of traditions in phenomenology, psychophenomenology is clearly influenced by Husserl and as such is empirical rather than hermeneutic; the latter, according to Hein and Austin (2001), gives greater recognition to the social and cultural context of experience. Psychophenomenology would therefore need to address critiques of the transcendental approach to identifying essences of experience. Our experience and understanding of psychophenomenology, however, is that it is concerned principally with eliciting detailed descriptions of experience and not with making transcendental claims about essences. There is, as in Petitmengin's work, an interest in identifying common patterns across different individuals' experiences. In its emphasis on embodiment, psychophenomenology also builds on the developments in phenomenology pursued by Merleau-Ponty (1962), although its direct influence in this respect is Varela (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch 1993).

Interestingly, Hein and Austin argue that there is little difference in output when comparing empirical and hermeneutic approaches. As indicated above by our comparison with IPA, we would expect psychophenomenology to show evidence of more finely detailed accounts of experience than could be developed through hermeneutic approaches.

As a phenomenological approach to interviewing, it would be accurate to say that the explicitation interview is a 'realist' approach that assumes 'that the accounts participants produce in interviews bear a direct relationship to their "real" experience' (King 2004:12), in contrast, say, to the radical constructionist's interest in the discursive strategies employed by the interviewee. The thrust of psychophenomenology is towards extending the detail of such accounts, at the same time as enhancing the interviewer's capacity for 'bracketing'. It therefore contributes to strategies for reflexivity on the part of the interviewer (King 2004:20).

As noted earlier, psychophenomenology rejects linguistic determinism. It is wholly consistent with the commitment in phenomenology to discovering *interviewees'* meanings and respecting their views of the world. The argument made by psychophenomenology is that it is knowledge of the *forms and structures* of language, not its *contents*, that enables the researcher to develop a more precise, extensive and rigorous understanding of the interviewee's subjective world.

The issue of whether the explicitation interview is accessing 'true' memories has been raised, usually (in our experience) by people working within the formal discipline of psychology. It is important to emphasise that psychophenomenology, like NLP,

regards *all* memories as constructions. Epistemologically, therefore, a distinction between 'real' and other memories is problematic. What is most important to emphasise is that psychophenomenology is not concerned with recall of *external* events, other than through identifying a past experience as a focus for exploration. The emphasis is instead on attending to internal processing. We would make no essential claim about the accuracy of such recall; the question is more of whether this approach yields accounts that are interesting and valuable because they are more detailed and less prone to inappropriate interpretation. We would suggest, however, that Petitmengin's study of epileptics (Petitmengin, Baulac, & Navarro 2006), in which data from explicitation interviews were triangulated with fMRI scans, provides strong support for the validity of recall of internal processing through the explicitation interview.

Finally there are issues of training, capacity to practise, and ownership. We infer from Vermersch's view that many researchers conducting phenomenological interviews today are insufficiently trained, both in the structures and features of inner landscapes, and in the subtleties of language as used in interviews. According to Vermersch, they need the ability to use syntactical devices such as Ericksonian language patterns (Bandler & Grinder 1975b, Grinder, DeLozier, & Bandler 1977); to enable an interviewee to access the relevant levels of consciousness, and to become aware of features in their landscapes of which they had not hitherto been aware. One of Vermersch's pre-conditions for the guide is to have had substantial experience of the processes of introspection themselves, and to be familiar with its various stages. 'We insist that a truly phenomenological experience has to be trained and cultivated' (Depraz, Varela, & Vermersch 2003:179). Without this, Vermersch insists that the

guide is not qualified to carry out the procedures. This raises issues such as the extent to which psychophenomenology is specialised and even elitist; of who owns knowledge and skills once they are in the public domain; and of who has the right to declare someone qualified.

Conclusion

Psychophenomenology represents a way of investigating experience methodically and to a greater level of detail than is apparent in other phenomenological methods used in organizational research. To our knowledge, the explicitation interview is distinctive in its emphasis on an understanding of syntactical structures and the qualities of internal representations. Significantly, it holds that an understanding of the complexities of language, in its epistemological dimension and in its practical effects, is as vital to this type of research as is statistics to quantitative methods.

The ability to make such distinctions, and to target questions to elicit information about the lived, embodied, phenomenological aspects of subjective experience, is the hallmark of both NLP and psychophenomenology. Psychophenomenology would not have developed in its present form had it not been for the techniques and insights drawn from NLP that enable and enhance the extent to which people can offer rigorous descriptions of experience. We have described three central ways in which the explicitation interview incorporates NLP:

- Enabling evocation through association, transderivational search and perceptual positions;

- The meta-model language patterns.
- Eliciting sensory detail through internal sensory representations and their sub-modalities;

These techniques enable interviewers to formulate more precise and searching questions, which can be designed to target aspects of people's cognitive and affective maps of experience, illustrating relationships between syntactical structures and people's internal responses. They can also be applied to the analysis of transcripts, enabling researchers to identify changes in a respondent's conceptual structures over time.

We have argued that in psychophenomenology the researcher needs insights into the epistemological dimensions of different syntactical structures and levels of abstraction, and skills in the subtleties of questioning, directing, commanding, suggesting and giving permission to explore further. These are subtleties which may be lacking in more conventional approaches to phenomenological inquiry such as IPA. Psychophenomenology therefore represents an interesting attempt to bring greater rigour to the use of guided introspection to organizational research.

Table 1: Representational systems and associated sub-modality distinctions

Representational system	Visual	Auditory	Kinaesthetic	Olfactory & Gustatory
Submodalities (examples)	Location Size Distance Brightness Focus Colour (or monochrome) Frame Motion Etc.	Location Volume Pitch Tempo Rhythm Intensity Motion Etc.	Location Temperature Pressure Intensity Scope Etc.	Sweetness Sourness Saltiness Bitterness Etc.

Table 2: the NLP meta-model categories (page references from Bandler & Grinder 1975a)

DELETION

- General case - where surface structure does not represent full deep structure; e.g. 'My father was angry'. [challenge; 'how, specifically, was your father angry?']

Special Cases:

- COMPARISON (deletion of one term of comparative construction); e.g. 'She is more interesting' [challenge; 'more interesting than...?'] Clearly and Obviously; adverbs used to make 'it is' or 'I am' statement (p. 66)
- MODAL OPERATORS - must, should, etc. [challenge; 'who says we must?'; 'what would happen if you didn't?'] (p. 69)

DISTORTION

- NOMINALISATION (process becomes an event); e.g. 'Our anxiety is stopping us' [challenge; clarify process that is equivalent to nominalisation 'anxiety'] (p. 74)
- PRESUPPOSITIONS; e.g. 'I realise that my wife doesn't love me' (presupposes 'my wife doesn't love me') [challenge; identify presupposition by negating sentence e.g. 'I don't realise..'; if a presupposition, the phrase must remain true for the sentence to make sense; draw attention] (p. 52; 92; also Appendix B p.210)
- SEMANTIC ILL-FORMEDNESS:
- CAUSE-EFFECT; e.g. 'My husband makes me mad' [challenge; 'how, specifically, does your husband make you mad?'] (p. 95)
- MIND-READING; e.g. 'Everybody in the group thinks that I'm taking up too much time' [challenge; test] (p. 104)
- LOST PERFORMATIVE (judgements stated as generalisations about the world); e.g. 'It's wrong to hurt anyone's feelings' [challenge; 'who says it's wrong?'; 'how do you know?'] (p. 106)

GENERALISATION

- REFERENTIAL INDICES (e.g. 'Nobody pays any attention to what I say') [challenge; 'nobody?'] (p. 80).
- COMPLEX EQUIVALENCE (e.g. 'My husband never appreciates me...my husband never smiles at me'); [can try referential index shift (i.e. check for mirroring), 'Does your not smiling at your husband always mean that you don't appreciate him?'] (p. 88).
- INCOMPLETELY SPECIFIED VERBS (e.g. 'My mother hurt me') (p. 90).

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ⁱ http://www.expliciter.fr/rubrique.php?id_rubrique=11, accessed 22nd April 2009

ⁱⁱ Neuro-phenomenology, another emergent field, uses procedures similar to the elicitation interview to investigate possible correlations between reported conscious experience and data obtained simultaneously from fMRI scanners.

ⁱⁱⁱ Petitmengin-Peugeot and Petitmengin are the same author.

^{iv} Psychophenomenology is not the only method available for this type of exploration. Another contemporary practice that intentionally explores the imagery of inner landscapes in great detail is symbolic modelling (Lawley & Tompkins 2000). Its detailed protocol of 'clean language', typically used in coaching or psychotherapy, also appears highly applicable to phenomenological research.

^v These publications preceded the creation of the term 'Neuro-Linguistic Programming'.

^{vi} Dr Mathison has attended two of these trainings herself.

^{vii} Or perhaps 'logical type'.