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Working with group-level data in phenomenological research: a modified visual matrix method

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Abstract

A common criticism of phenomenological methods has been that there is singular focus on individual experience at the cost of broader group level phenomena. In contrast, psychoanalytically informed psychosocial methods have continued to develop novel ways of exploring group level material. A notable recent methodology is the visual matrix method (Froggett, Manley & Roy, 2014), which is an innovative methodological development that draws on ideas from social dreaming (Lawrence, 2003, 2005). In this article, we describe the development and application of a group level existential-phenomenological method, inspired by the visual matrix method. In collaboration with a filmmaker we produced a film series designed to engage the public with research findings on 'enduring love'. The viewing experience was explored using a modified version of the visual matrix method. We discuss the value of this methodological development for research within the phenomenological tradition as well as potential tensions.

Keywords: phenomenology; existentialism; group-level data; visual matrix method; public engagement

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Introduction

A number of qualitative methods arguably have become over reliant on the semi-structured interview as a mode of data collection (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). This is particularly acute with interpretive/hermeneutic versions of the phenomenological method, where the semi-structured interview is almost hegemonic. To a great extent this is understandable – and indeed, sensible - given the focus in phenomenological methodology on first person experience (Smith, 2004). However, whilst we can argue that the socio-cultural and affective will emerge through analysis of an individual's life-world, there remains a general failure within the phenomenological tradition to engage with material, particularly difficult to reach affective content, beyond the individual. By contrast, people working with psychosocial methodology informed by psychoanalysis have made great strides in the development of methods designed to work with group-level affective material. A notable example of this is the visual matrix method that we take here as a model for how we might develop a phenomenological methodology to work with group-level affective material.

The visual matrix method is a recent and highly innovative approach to data collection and analysis that has been designed as a means of 'researching shared experience, stimulated by sensory material' (Froggett, Manley & Roy, 2014: 1; see also Froggett, Manley, Roy, Prior & Doherty, 2014). It was initially developed as a means of evaluating the experience, rather than economic or environmental impact, of public art (Froggett, Manley, Roy, Prior & Doherty, 2014). It was derived from the approach to social dreaming advanced by Lawrence (2003, 2005) and is theoretically situated within the object-relations psychoanalytic tradition, designed to facilitate access to otherwise hidden material (in the terms of Bollas, 1987, the 'unthought known' dimensions of experience). As such, the visual matrix method relies on a

process whereby a group of participants are encouraged to free-associate to sensory material such that imagery, visualisation and affect are given priority over cognition or discourse.

In this article, we take our lead from one of the early existential therapists Medard Boss (1957) who, having originally trained in psychoanalysis, sought to re-imagine the practice of psychoanalysis through phenomenology. His work resulted in a new mode of clinical practice that honours the practicalities of psychoanalytic practice but theorises the material emerging between client and therapist in a fundamentally different manner, with a focus on manifest rather than latent meaning (see Langdridge, 2013). Our aim in this article is to follow this same path in order to re-imagine the visual matrix method through phenomenology rather than object-relations and Deleuzian theory in the service of developing a method for collecting group-level data in phenomenology. The foundations of the visual matrix method in social dreaming (Lawrence, 2003, 2005), which is discussed further below, connect well with this aim. That is, the model of social dreaming proposed by Lawrence, with his move away from a Freudian analysis of individual psychic content, has much in common with the move of Boss and his development of existential dream analysis. In addition, some of the theoretical resources drawn on by Froggett et al (2015) – notably the work of Lorenzer (Lorenzer & Orban, 1978) and his use of hermeneutics – nicely dovetail with the aim of this article to take inspiration from this method to produce a method for the analysis of group-level affective material within the phenomenological tradition.

It is important to note that we do not wish to set this article up in an oppositional stance to the original psychoanalytic formulation of the visual matrix method, not at all. Froggett and colleagues' empirical work has generated valuable insights into a number of topics (see, for instance, Manley, Roy & Froggett, 2015) and if the researcher is comfortable with psychoanalytically informed methods then they should follow the original method without modification. However, our aim is to take inspiration from this method to devise an alternative means for the collection and analysis of

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group-level affective material within the phenomenological tradition. The aim herein is to build on the methodological foundations advanced by Froggett and colleagues at the University of Central Lancashire to produce a new method for research within the phenomenological tradition. Following Boss and his rethinking of psychoanalytic practice, we seek to retain many of the practical aspects of the visual matrix method as a way to collect affect rich group-level data but then rethink the meaning of the material generated through existential phenomenology.

We first discuss the challenge of a group level analysis for phenomenology, which has traditionally been concerned with individual first person experience. We then provide more practical detail on the visual matrix method before we introduce the project we conducted. This project involved us working with an artist to produce a film series based on a research project on enduring relationships. The film series was created to explore the power of art (in the form of film) as a means of engaging the public with research findings. A modified visual matrix was conducted as part of the evaluation strategy for the project. We then move on to discuss the foundations of the visual matrix method in social dreaming and how the matrix method can be rethought through phenomenological theory, particularly through work concerned with existential dream analysis. This rethinking of the foundations of the visual matrix provides the theoretical justification for developing a modified existential phenomenological version. Finally, we present our own analysis of the data produced in the evaluation of the film series, as an exemplar of how to conduct an existential group-level phenomenological analysis of visual matrix data. In the process of presenting these findings we discuss the value and challenge of adopting a phenomenological perspective with the visual matrix method as a means for collecting group level and affect saturated data.

The challenge of group-level analysis in phenomenology

Phenomenology is rightly most commonly identified with the work of Husserl. Indeed, it would be bizarre for someone to position their work as phenomenological without due regard to the foundational principles of the

tradition laid out by Husserl (1954/1970). However, phenomenology does not begin and end with the work of Husserl (see Spiegelberg, 1994), in spite of continuing boundary wars to this effect. Not only has phenomenological philosophy been subject to continuous debate and development since Husserl but a number of other early figures in phenomenological philosophy – Edith Stein and Max Scheler, in particular - also offer radical alternative insights for the tradition. Much more recently, a notable contemporary development and application of phenomenological philosophy has been concerned with social cognition and questions of sociality (Szanto & Moran, 2016). That is, whilst phenomenology has always been concerned with first- and second-person (singular) experience, contemporary philosophical scholarship has been exploring the problems and possibilities of first- and second-person plural (group-level) experience.

Both Edith Stein and Max Scheler have been rather neglected within the English language tradition of phenomenology but their work, particularly when developed through contemporary phenomenological scholarship (e.g. Szanto, 2015), provides the philosophical foundation for a group-level approach to data collection and analysis in phenomenological research methodology[1]. The present work may therefore be categorised as 'phenomenological' or 'informed by phenomenology', depending on the reader's adherence to Husserlian first philosophy and desire to enforce strict (and historically static) definitional limits around this philosophical and methodological tradition. It is not the purpose of this article to engage in such disputes or even discuss the philosophical underpinnings of group-level phenomenology in any detail (for that see AUTHOR, forthcoming). The focus of this article is to present an empirically grounded phenomenological development of a group-level methodology focused primarily on experience rather than interactional dynamics. Even so, it is still valuable to briefly outline some fundamental ideas from Stein and Scheler about phenomenology and sociality to provide some background theoretical context for what follows.

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[1] Levinas (1969, 1981, 1985) is another figure who offers considerable scope for the development of a social phenomenology (see Dimitrova, 2016).

Stein (1917/1989; 1922/1970) provides particular insight into the relationship between an individual and other person or group through her phenomenological investigations into empathy and emotional sharing (Szanto, 2015). She describes in detail the 'communal life-feeling' (*gemeinschaftliches lebensgef ühl*) and role of moods (*Stimmungen*) in their intentional constitution. In spite of this shared emotion Stein argues that even when there is complete immersion in a group 'we' (plural subject) experience the individual remains in tact. There is no fusion or extinction of individual subjectivity. Nevertheless, Stein distinguishes individual and communal emotions in part on the basis that they have different 'subjects of experiencing' (*Subjekt des Erlebens*). Groups consist not only of a plurality of individual subjects but also – according to Stein – a 'we' subject of the shared emotion. This is not some notion of collective consciousness or singular shared super-ego but rather a plural subject or 'constituted unity' that may be experienced by the individual subjects that partake in the shared experience, the 'communal experiential stream of experiences'.

Scheler (1913/2009; see also Szanto, 2016) is even more radical and takes the phenomenological position a step farther with his notion of 'group personhood' (*gesamtperson*). Scheler argues that personhood is inherently (and irreducibly) social, with the 'I' an essential part of the 'We' and vice versa. In keeping with some existential thinkers (e.g. Buber), Scheler also claims that the 'We' predates the 'I'. Building on this position, he further argues that all individuals not only experience themselves as individuals but also as a member of a 'communal person' (*gesamtperson*) and ultimately as a set of 'group persons'. The term 'communal person' is used by Scheler because of his view that groups (especially communities) have values and it is only persons who bear values. Group persons as a concept therefore is not only epistemological or ontological but also ethical (cf. Levinas 1969, 1981, 1985). Persons, whether individual or communal, are ontologically 'centres of experiencing' (*Aktzentrum des Er-lebens*), and the integration of mental and practical acts. In keeping with Stein, 'communal persons' are not a fusion of persons or in any real way something to be contrasted with individual persons. In Szanto's (2016: 299) terms they are instead: "… complex matrices

of different levels and depths of the social integration of intentional and phenomenal experiences, volitions, and actions." They are constituted through 'mutual co-experiencing' (*Miteinandererleben*) with an intentional 'consciousness-of' that is distinct from and independent of the 'consciousness-of' of individuals.

In this context, the very nature of experience must be re-thought in a group-level analysis as the traditional phenomenological focus on individual accounts of lived experience become subsumed within a broader sense of collective mood or group personhood. This is not to say that we lose a focus on experience, not at all. But rather individual accounts of experience may be less identifiable as 'individual lived experience descriptions' (van Manen, 2014), as a result of the detachment of the individual from the experience being recounted and distinct affective nature of communal experiencing. The focus in this instance is not the individual and their concrete lived experience but rather group level phenomena, especially the affective (the mood), expressed through individuals but referencing a sense of collective or group personhood experience. In these terms, it is the group that 'speaks' or - more accurately - is the object of analysis, albeit always as expressed through a plurality of individual consciousness (cf. Schutz, 1932/1967). And it is the modified version of the visual matrix method described herein that we contend provides a means with which to gain some sense of the 'communal experiential stream of experiences', or the essence of group personhood itself as it relates to the intended object of the collective group experience.

The visual matrix method

In practical terms, the visual matrix is conducted with groups of anything from 6-35 participants, with one facilitator per 15 members of the group. Participants may be selected on any criteria appropriate to the study but is usually on the basis of their shared experience of a sensory experience. The method requires that participants and the facilitator sit on chairs in a 'snowflake pattern' such that they can avoid direct eye contact and speak into a shared space rather than to one another. The facilitator invites participants

to express their experience in terms of 'images, associations, thoughts and feelings', without people taking turns to speak or engaging in other traditionally polite conversational practice. The group facilitator would emphasise that no judgement will be made about any contributions. The facilitator also models appropriate behaviour throughout such that participants are encouraged to maintain a mode of engagement where they talk about their experience and the imagery, associations and feelings, rather than engaging in analysis or conversation. Sessions will run for a pre-determined time before a short break where the chairs are rearranged into a semi-circle, wherein participants are encouraged to reflect on what emerged in the previous 'snowflake' session and identify clusters of imagery, thoughts and feelings. These themes are then mapped on a flipchart by the facilitator.

The theoretical foundations for the method are primarily derived from object-relations theory, particularly the work of Bion (1970). Work from Winnicott (1971/2005) about potential space and play, and particularly Lorenzer's (Lorenzer & Orban, 1978) notion of 'scenic understanding' further add to the theoretical foundations. These ideas are allied – in the spirit of 'theoretical hybridization' - to the Deleuzian concept of rhizomatic thinking (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988), in an attempt to make sense of the nature of the associative thinking emergent in the matrix. That is, the quality of material generated in a matrix is of a different order to that seen in a discursively oriented group discussion (focus group) or – as we remark upon in this article – might be seen in individual interviews. The material in a matrix does not emerge in a linear or chronological fashion but instead flows through associations in moments of intensity and dispersion. Froggett et al (2015) argue therefore that the rhizome described by Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 21) as "… an acentred, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automation" might serve as an appropriate framework within which to situate this phenomenon. As such, data analysis is traditionally informed by object-relations theory within a broad Deleuzian psychosocial framework with the aim being to detect tacit social processes and emotions along with more overt material. This operates through a mechanism described as a 'hermeneutic vortex' in which successive analytic

panels incorporate wider contextual concerns into their analysis in an effort to articulate the 'unthought known' (Bollas, 1987).

The film project and evaluation methodology

The impact agenda is now well established in the UK and increasingly so elsewhere around the World. Notwithstanding criticisms of some of the political imperatives driving this agenda, there is widespread acceptance of the need for researchers to engage in practices designed to maximise the impact of their work beyond academia: to engage with policy makers, practitioners and members of the public. The use of art in its myriad forms is starting to figure large as a valuable means for engaging a variety of audiences – particularly, the general public - with the potential for more powerful impact than the written word alone (Leavy, 2015). In collaboration with an artist, we produced a film series based on the findings from the PROJECT TITLE research project on relationships (ESRC: RES XXX-XX-XXXX). *PROJECT TITLE* was designed to investigate how couples sustain their long-term relationships, focussing on the meanings and practices of relationship quality and stability.

The film project was designed to explore the potential of art as a means of engaging with a variety of publics on this topic. We gave the artist a book that included academic analysis of key findings (AUTHOR, 2015), and also briefed him in person, highlighting a number of key outcomes from the study. He then sought to immerse himself in the findings in order to produce his proposal for the film series. Through on-going dialogue, with much back and forth on content and form, the filmmaker produced a series of films entitled 'Molecular Human'. The artist we worked with was ARTIST NAME (www.ARTISTNAME.com), an experienced artist who works primarily in producing public artworks, often using film and large-scale projections. He called the film series he produced for our project 'Molecular Human' (with the series available to view on the project website: www.PROJECTNAME.org).

The series included 14 films, with each film in the series inspired by the research findings with them each representing different – though often overlapping - aspects of the findings. The film series was premiered at a launch event in The Vaults at The Royal Society of Arts House, just off The Strand in central London. The location provided easy access and a venue that was ideal for showing a film, with people able to move freely about the space whilst viewing the films. We decided to accompany the films at the launch with live music, with David McAlmont and Guy Davies devising a music set in liaison with ARTIST NAME. It was felt that music would facilitate an immersive aesthetic experience with the audience engaged in sustained focus on the visual material rather than in conversation. Following a very brief introduction about the aim of the project people were left to view the films and enjoy the music.

Our evaluation strategy involved the use of a modified visual matrix exercise consisting of 16 people (including the facilitator) conducted immediately after the presentation of the film series at a launch event in central London, along with 15 individual interviews conducted within 3 weeks of the event. Participants were a self-selecting convenience sample who responded to an invitation email sent out prior to the launch event and through recruitment at the event itself. People were asked if they were willing to take part in a group exercise following the viewing of the films. We decided to use interviews alongside the visual matrix in order to balance group-level associative data with individual experiential accounts, especially given the interview remains the normative mode of data collection within phenomenological analysis, the findings of which are reported elsewhere (AUTHORS, forthcoming). The visual matrix was designed to generate group-level data and as such we did not collect data on individual participant demographics. We note, however, that the group reflected the make up of the event audience, with it being well balanced for gender, age and ethnicity and reflective of the ethnically diverse population of London. The matrix was conducted in line with the standard visual matrix procedures described above.

Rethinking the visual matrix method

Re-imagining the dream space

As mentioned previously, the theoretical and practical foundations of the visual matrix method have been built upon the ideas and techniques of social dreaming (Lawrence, 2003, 2005). Lawrence (2003) contrasts his method of social dreaming with the Freudian approach. He draws primarily on the work of Bion (1970) to provide the theoretical foundation that allows him to see dreams less bound to the psyche of any one individual, and instead the product of broader social and cultural processes. In a social dreaming matrix the participants will free associate such that any individual dream "sparks off associations among the participants that lead to the matrix becoming a multi-verse of meaning.' (Lawrence, 2003: 610). In addition, Lawrence conceives of dreams such that the discovery of individual latent meaning is no longer central. Instead, he questions whether dreaming might better be understood as a "normal human activity" in which individuals are "capable of making their own interpretations".

The notion of the matrix itself, where people come together to free associate, drawing upon the web of social and cultural resources that surround and situate us, derives from the group analytic work of Foulkes (Foulkes & Anthony, 1957; Foulkes, 1964, 1973). As such, the matrix is that "substratum of feelings, thoughts and emotions that is integral to every social configuration and allows primordial images to appear from the social unconscious." (Lawrence, 2003: 617). Affect is central here, as is the possibility for "play, in the sense that Winnicott (1971/2005) used the term, with the potential meanings of the dreams" (Lawrence, 2003: 618). There are no predetermined meanings imposed on a dream nor any specific theoretical apparatus employed in the analysis. Instead, participants 'play' – engage creatively – with the dream material as they freely associate with the emergent ideas and meanings.

The work of Boss (1957) in reimagining the Freudian approach to dream analysis shares some striking similarities to that of Lawrence, even though

they had a different agenda and came from rather different theoretical perspectives. That is, Boss (1957) sought to reimagine Freudian psychoanalytic dream work through a phenomenological lens, drawing principally on the thought of Heidegger (1927/1963), such that the focus is firmly on the manifest meaning – inflected by the social and cultural world - rather than individual latent content. His aim was not to develop a social model of dreaming but rather to develop a phenomenological approach to individual dream analysis that moves away from analysis of depth within an individual psyche towards an understanding of the person within their lifeworld. Scientific work on dreams offers some support for the argument of Boss in favour of focusing on manifest content, with evidence for the striking similarity between material in a person's waking life and their dreams (Hall & Nordby, 1972). The key argument is how dreams must be explored as an aspect of our being-in-the-world that can only be understood in relation to the everyday concerns of waking life.

Boss (1957) developed two principles for dream analysis that draw directly on Heideggerian concepts: bearing and possibility. The first concerns the bearing of the dreamer to other persons and the wider world in a dream, which - like Lawrence - emphasises the way in which a dreamer is embedded in a culturally and historically situated relational context. The second principle involves exploration of possibilities in the dream that are ahead of the dreamer's waking experience, so that we might identify how the dream may offer insight that opens up a person's world. Unfortunately, Boss (1957) failed in large part to implement - and therefore demonstrate - an effective phenomenological method of analysis in practice, often drawing on extant psychoanalytic concepts and idiosyncratic notions (Gendlin, 1977; Vedfelt, 2002).

In the light of the need to implement a proper systematic phenomenological mode of analysis, the approach to existential dream analysis of Boss has been further developed by the first author (AUTHOR, 2006, 2013, in press). He sought to achieve this by turning to work on phenomenological research methodology to explicate a more systematic way to conduct a

phenomenological dream analysis. This involves a strict phenomenological stance along with incorporating consideration of the dimensions (or 'fractions') of the lifeworld – self, sociality, embodiment, temporality etc. - into the analytic process. AUTHOR (in press) argues that dreams "…dreams offer us a creative play space for working through our ontic concerns." in which client and therapist work together to critically interrogate the material through a number of existential dimensions. The aim is that the use of the existential dimensions will help illuminate the meaning of dream material that might otherwise be out of immediate awareness.

It is worth clarifying what is meant here by the 'meaning' of material 'out of immediate awareness' within the context of a phenomenological perspective. The visual matrix method that provides the technique being used here to generate data, and the social dreaming method upon which it is based, both adhere to a psychodynamic notion of the unconscious that is an anathema to phenomenology. Phenomenology is concerned with consciousness first and foremost. However, contrary to a common misconception, the phenomenological focus on consciousness does not mean that all of consciousness is necessarily available or fully meaningful to a person (strictly, to *Dasein*, in Heidegger's terms). Heidegger (2001) argues strongly against any notion of an unconscious as a container into which material is inserted that might then re-emerge at some other time but his philosophical position allows for self-deception. The psychoanalyst M. Guy Thompson (2003; 2007; 2016) is particularly helpful here in his exploration of the relationship between Heidegger's thought and Freudian psychoanalysis. Thompson (2007: 147) explains that Heidegger is correct that '…there is no "unconscious", only *being*, which is another way of saying that what is hidden from us is not the "content" of an unconscious portion of the mind, but rather the *meaning* of such and such a circumstance that, perhaps chronically, eludes us.' The Heideggerian position further refutes any mechanical notion of cause and effect and associated developmental theory (the 'why' of psychoanalysis), with (unconscious) motives for human action being fundamentally unknowable. As an aside, Thompson (2007) notes that Heidegger and Boss both admired the technical principles that Freud developed and underpin all

subsequent psychotherapeutic practice even if they disagreed with his theory. Heidegger is not the only phenomenological philosopher to discuss the unconscious of course but there is not the space here for further exposition. It is, however, worth mentioning how the unconscious may also be rethought, at least in part, through Sartre's (2003) notion of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith), effectively a form of self-deception. Sartre's rejection of the Freudian unconscious, like that of Heidegger, is often misconstrued as a rejection of anything that is not immediately available to consciousness when in fact it is actually a rejection of the reification of the unconscious as an objective entity, something that many contemporary psychoanalysts would agree with. In these existential terms, material that is not immediately or readily available to consciousness operates as a mode of self-deception, a deception that emerges through our *being*, the perpetual confrontation with nothingness and a desire to escape anxiety, guilt and shame (Holzhey-Kunz, 2014). Dreams, and psychosocial methods like the visual matrix technique, may therefore be useful means within a phenomenological perspective for accessing this material that is not otherwise readily available to any individual subject.

The inspiration for incorporating the dimensions of existence within dream analysis comes primarily from work developing phenomenological methodology, most particularly Ashworth (2003, 2015), though van Manen (1990, 2014) also suggests a similar addition to his hermeneutic phenomenological method. Ashworth argues for the explicit use of dimensions (or 'fractions' in his terms) of the lifeworld in order to deepen a phenomenological analysis. Heidegger (1927/1963) and the later Husserl (1954/1970) both stressed the need for experience to be understood 'within a world', which was described as the 'lifeworld' by Husserl. The lifeworld describes any individual's own subjective experience of day-to-day life but whilst it is idiosyncratic it will share certain common features with the lifeworld of other human beings. These common features can be found described in the literature of the existential phenomenological philosophers Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, De Beauvoir, and others, and may be described as 'dimensions' or 'fractions' of the lifeworld.

Existential dream analysis may similarly employ the dimensions of the lifeworld to better enable therapist and client to work together to make sense of the meaning of a dream within a broad phenomenological framework (AUTHOR, 2006, 2013, in press). Whilst the dimensions (or fractions) underpin all experience, they are not necessarily all salient within any one analysis. They will carry different weights with different topics and the phenomenological rule of equalisation is particularly valuable here in ensuring that we do not presume which dimension will be most apparent in our analysis with any particular topic.

> Each fraction imposes, as it were, its own "aura," or theme, on the lifeworld without being detached from the other fractions. The whole lifeworld is mine, just as the whole lifeworld gains its meaning from my sociality; the whole lifeworld is relative to my embodiment; the whole lifeworld is temporal and spatial; the whole lifeworld has its priorities and saliences which mark out the individual's cares and concerns, their projects; the whole lifeworld bears the marks of the categories and grammatical dispositions of the culture and language, and the whole lifeworld, as it is lived through, is experienced affectively in terms of the moods which the entities (entities-for-me) disclose. Each fraction is essential, and each melds in with the others. Yet we can think each one separately, and view the lifeworld in its light. (Ashworth, 2016: 24)

Ashworth (2016) provides detail about each concept but for those less familiar with them they are, in brief, as follows:

- Selfhood refers to our subjective understanding of who we are, our sense of identity or selfhood.
- Sociality concerns the way that human beings are fundamentally relational beings, with relationships at the heart of our experience of the world.

- Embodiment relates to our embodied state as human beings and how this features in our experience, including consideration of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and disability.
- Temporality refers to the way that existence is temporally structured such that we are always 'living in time', and how the sense of time might be phenomenologically apparent within any experience.
- Spatiality refers to a person's understanding of their position in the world through geography.
- Project is that aspect of a situation that relates to a person's ability to carry out activities which they have committed to and which they believe are central in their life, in other words our fundamental concerns.
- Discourse concerns the way that language structures experience and how our experience may be understood through particular social and cultural discourses.
- Moodedness is about 'mood as atmosphere'. That is, for every event in the lifeworld there will be an associated mood. We must be careful not to assume that this is the possession of any individual but instead to acknowledge mood as the broader affect accompanying the various situations that we encounter in daily life.

The use of the dimensions must therefore be driven by the data, whether that data is the substance of a dream or the product of a visual matrix exercise. This additional analytic element is incorporated into the latter stage of a more traditional phenomenological analysis, whether that is through breaking down the text into meaning-units as we see with the work of Giorgi (2009) or into themes as we see with van Manen (1990), and others adopting a more hermeneutic approach to the analysis. Below we present an outline of the existential phenomenological analytic strategy we have developed, along with a summary of the analysis. Through this, we aim to demonstrate the value of a phenomenological stance engaging the existential dimensions to an analysis of visual matrix material.

An existential phenomenological analysis of the visual matrix

There are numerous phenomenological methods but we suggest that a hermeneutic approach is likely to be most productive for an analysis of material of the sort produced within a matrix exercise (e.g. van Manen, 1990, 2014). The flexibility, freedom and creativity – inspired in large part by the philosophy of Gadamer - most commonly associated with these approaches best matches the nature of the data being collected through a visual matrix exercise. Hermeneutic phenomenological methods inspired by Gadamer's work (1975) generally provide a guide to analysis rather than a rigid set of rules to follow and are thus heuristic (Langdridge, 2007). The focus is on how language reveals different aspects of the lifeworld, within particular cultural and historical limits, through a fusion of horizons between participant and researcher. This entails an investigation where one engages the epoché and moves continuously between part and whole in a hermeneutic circle in order to derive the thematic structure of the phenomenon. Van Manen (1990) describes six basic steps that we followed here: (1) Turn to the phenomenon and commit to it; (2) Investigate experience as lived (rather than conceptually); (3) Reflect on the essential themes which characterise the phenomenon; (4) Describe the phenomenon through writing; (5) Maintain a strong and oriented disciplinary relation to the phenomenon. (6) Balance the research context by examining parts and whole.

The aim is not to translate the theoretical commitments of the visual matrix method into phenomenology but rather to appropriate the method and then rethink that method in terms of phenomenology. This does require some dialogue so that theoretical tensions may be resolved but not a direct translation of the extant (object relations and Deleuzian) theory into phenomenology. As such, the key theoretical matters are those which most directly relate to the meaning of the data collected as it exists in a particular form and analysis being conducted. With these limits we must therefore make sense of data from group free association and explain how this material might be analysed from a phenomenological perspective. And whilst there may be some productive theoretical links to be made between phenomenology,

psychodynamic theory and Deleuzian and broader process philosophy (see, for instance, Manley, 2010; Thompson, 2016), that is not the primary focus of this work. Our aim here, as set out at the beginning of the article, is to explore how we might take inspiration from psychosocial work, such as that on the visual matrix method, to move phenomenological research beyond the individual.

The analysis therefore eschews any exploration of phenomena beyond the 'what' and 'how', in which an analyst adopts a hermeneutic of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970) when investigating 'why' such material might occur. The focus is firmly centred on a phenomenological analysis of the manifest meaning captured in the transcript and flipchart record of the visual matrix event. In addition, such an analysis may draw on the dimensions of the lifeworld to further enrich the analysis, as we do here. Our own phenomenological analysis of the visual matrix, and particularly the individual interviews, is reported in detail elsewhere (AUTHORS, forthcoming) but we summarise the analysis of the visual matrix here, as that is the primary concern of this article, before moving on to discuss the use of existential dimensions designed to further deepen the phenomenological analysis. The theoretical and practical process of phenomenological analysis adopted herein - our phenomenological alternative to the 'rhizomatic' method of Frogget et al., (2014, 2015) - for an analysis of group-level material was as follows:

(1) Each person in the visual matrix is the locus of their own experiential process in line with Husserl (1954/1970) and clarified in Schutz (1932/1967). They view the material and thus act as a centre of phenomenological experience. That experience is ontologically singular but ontically collective in the terms of the natural attitude. Whilst every participant is a singular experiencing being, the data collection process outlined in (2) below frames the type of material produced, especially in the context of the subject not necessarily having complete knowledge of their own subjectivity.

(2) Participation in the visual matrix encourages an imaginative group process in which imagery and affect are prioritised, along with a sense of group

reverie. This qualitatively alters the type of phenomenological material produced such that we gain access to material that is less readily available to or anchored within individual personal history. We know from experience, theoretical argument and empirical literature that we gain somewhat different data from individual interviews, couple interviews and focus groups (e.g. Potter & Hepburn, 2005). We also know that we get different data from focus groups and visual matrix groups (Froggett et al, 2015).

(3) The visual matrix data collection process is aligned with the notions of empathy of Stein (1917/1989; 1922/1970) and of the group person of Scheler (1913/2009; see also Szanto, 2016), along with material that might be less readily available to individual subjects (e.g. material subject to self-deception in Sartrean terms or in Heidegger's terms our own relationship to our being). That is, we are seeking to encourage the production of material that is not so readily available to articulation by an individual through the use of the visual matrix method as well as material that is more inherently intersubjective.

(4) Data are collected by the facilitator and through recording of the visual matrix exercise. This data can then be subject to a phenomenological analysis in which the 'ownness' of the experience of the material is returned to a single individual in the usual phenomenological manner. The data represent something of the natural attitude of this particular group of people giving voice to their collective experience of the initial prompt material. In order to make sense of this material we must engage the epoché and reduction as we would with data from an individual's experience, setting aside our own individual natural attitude in the process (Husserl, 1954/1970). The difference here is that we do not have the usual initial sense making process of the individual centre stage but instead some version of group personhood and empathic shared experience. We gain access to the essence of an empathic shared experience and/or a sense of group personhood, a neglected aspect of experience within traditional phenomenological research in psychology.

The phenomenological analysis of the visual matrix exercise revealed a fascinating picture of affect in which images and sensations flowed across a

number of domains. The analysis focused on the transcript of the matrix exercise itself and also the summary discussion at the end of the matrix that took place where dominant themes are written on a flipchart (see Figure 1), and was conducted by the first author.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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The core group concerns expressed through the visual matrix exercise, reported in AUTHORS (forthcoming), were as follows:

> There was talk of temporality, objects and relationships enduring over time, including the potential for positive change even in the context of social and emotional precarity. The theme of embodied touch figured large in the social imagination of the matrix. This was connected to images of bodies engaged in dance, the ritualistic making of cups of tea or in some other everyday act of domesticity. This evoked feelings of comfort and familiarity, trust, intimacy, and desire alongside separateness and suspicion about the potential sinister and/or unspoken content. Talk circled around the notions of difference and sameness, conflict versus harmony, the real versus the fictional, and narrative drama versus the poetic snapshot. People adopted either side of these polarised positions whilst others resisted or opposed them. Questions of technology and the material world mediating interpersonal connections were raised and inflected by generational difference, alongside concerns about filmic cliché and representation of the banal. People felt privileged to witness the intimate lives of others and identified with stories of intimacy, bonding, and struggle, whilst others craved more 'edgy' and obvious signs of argument, conflict and anger.

The existential dimensions of the visual matrix

A number of existential dimensions emerged as particularly significant in the analysis of the visual matrix material, including: sociality, embodiment, moodedness, and spatiality. Each of them helped focus attention on underlying aspects of the group experience of viewing the film series and the audience engagement. As mentioned above, whilst they may be discussed separately in theoretical terms they are not necessarily separable in empirical terms and, as such, are discussed in relation to each other below.

As one might expect, empathic sociality figured prominently in the visual matrix (Stein, 1917/1989). The focus of the film series was on enduring relationships and discussion of various aspects of relationships was central in the matrix. When issues of embodiment were invoked they were inevitably – and perhaps not unexpectedly – also intertwined with sociality. That is, bodies were rarely discussed through the lens of any one individual body but much more as 'bodies-in-relation' with social relations similarly described in deeply embodied terms. A central and highly pertinent motif mentioned repeatedly throughout the matrix was that of hands touching.

> Very strong image for me that ran through most of the films, that kept coming back to me, was the hands touching each other, hands reaching out across space and making contact with each other, and that seemed to connect an awful lot of the different ideas and concepts of the films together for me, that repeated motif of touch and contact in relationships, that resonated very strongly.

Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962; 1964/1968) uses the notion of touching hands himself in his philosophy of embodiment. Merleau-Ponty's entire philosophy implicates the body through his notion of the *body-subject* and the way that all subjectivity (or selfhood) must be understood through our embodied being-in-the-world. That is, he based many of his arguments against the pervasive dualisms of the day (mind-body; self-world; inside-outside) on a phenomenology of embodiment. For Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) our bodies are not objects that can be separated from consciousness, the world only makes sense through our embodied perception of the world. However, it is in

his last and tantalisingly unfinished work *Visible and Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968) where touching hands figure centrally. In this work, Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968: 136) seeks to fundamentally question body-world dualism through his notion of *flesh*:

> … the world is at the heart of our flesh … once a body-world relationship is recognised, there is a ramification of the world and a correspondence between its inside and my outside and my inside and its outside.

He uses the example of touching hands to demonstrate the *double belongingness* described above. If we touch our left hand with our right hand when one hand is touching then the other is touched and vice versa. The experience of touch is not reducible to one hand or the other with a double belongness represented through his notion of chiasm (from 'chiasma', the crossing over of two structures). That is, there is an inextricable relationship between body and world, with each folded into the other, with subjectivity located in this chiasm of touching and being touched (see Figure 2).

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Insert Figure 2 here

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Participants in the visual matrix explored the chiasm of flesh that is inherent to subjectivity and sociality through a variety of tropes, notably through the notion of touching. This was, at times, mediated by the material (spatial) world of objects whether a glass shower screen or technology.

> And for me the hands and that was almost a yearning to be touched, to be very connected with someone. And so when I saw the screen between them, it came as, I could see quite a can never quite meet, and yet put them down, kind of pretty well the same. I know there is, there seemed to be, I think that kind of for me sense

of the alienation that you kind of feel a lot of the time, social media and yet there's a huge gulf between us in some ways.

Intimacy was expressed in the matrix in two registers: intimacy between the people within the film series and intimacy between members of the audience. With both, mood - or attunement in Heidegger's (1927/1962) terms - was critical to the meaning being expressed. Heidegger (1927/1962) argues that all experience is through the mood of Dasein (the 'there of being', his notion of subjectivity) and in the matrix this operated at two levels. There was exploration of mood within the filmic material and also mood within the audience, with them connecting at times and not others. People were swept up in the mood, carried along in the flow, or detached from their experiential present as a result of it, suddenly conscious of their position in space in relation to the 'Others' in the films.

> I thought there was a sort of wistfulness of them, just a mood that went through them, like all those relationships, there's a sort of … not sadness … but sort of … gentleness, air of loss or something, it seemed.

> It was funny watching the intimacy, talking about something very intimate, it felt like sort of … not quite voyeuristic but like watching and being in a room with people where you have no sense of couple-dom at all, and yet you're watching couples (apart from the threesome) so you're watching these couples and yet collectively in a whole load of people there's no sense of couple-dom at all around me, and that's, that felt a bit … I was conscious of that somehow.

> Speaking of people in the room, I did see some smiles of people … same-sex rel… people in same-sex relationships being intimate, and watching same-sex and feeling, feeling the joy of it

The sense and importance of 'Otherness' as a key constituent of sociality emerged at times within the matrix, albeit in somewhat different form to the individual interviews. In the individual interviews many participants were preoccupied with the machinery of film production and technical decisions about representation and diversity. Whilst there was some similar talk in the matrix this was minimised by the associative format and instead there was an opportunity to express the sense of *jouissance* (joy) (see Figure 3) that may emerge through a face-to-face encounter with Otherness (Levinas, 1969).

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Insert Figure 3 here

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That is, the asymmetry inherent in the 'call of the other' (Levinas, 1969, 1981, 1985) offers up the possibility of an ethical engagement in which one's own selfhood is radically transformed (Krycka, 2015). An encounter with Otherness is at the heart of sociality for Levinas (1969, 1982, 1985), with Otherness itself critical for awareness of one's own ethical responsibility, one's own subjectivity. The first precondition for learning, for engaging more ethically in the world – in these terms – is the presence of the Other as teacher.

> I was relieved to see some different cultures. I felt that there were
> some rare moments of actually … where the lady was removing
> her scarf I felt it was such an intimate moment, the lady removing
> her scarf which is something I don't ordinarily see, and another
> aspect was that I had anticipation that something more, that there
> was going to be some … it was gonna escalate, and it didn't, and I
> just felt left with a … a kind of surprise with myself, that I'm so used
> to seeing things escalate into more, and that it's actually so great to
> see intimacy in, just for a few moments of intimacy and for it to be
> safe through those films, and how rare and precious that was.

Conclusions

This article has made a theoretical case for how we might take inspiration from the visual matrix method to work with group-level material within an (existential) phenomenological perspective. The foundation of the visual matrix method in social dreaming, offers useful parallels to the (existential) phenomenological approach to dream analysis in the move away from an analysis of individual psychic content towards an analysis of manifest content (the 'what' and 'how' of experience). The visual matrix method has proven valuable in generating more affect-laden and group-level data than produced through individual interviews or focus groups and so provides a particularly useful method for the production of data beyond the individual. This article has shown how it is possible to rethink a (psychodynamic) psychosocial method through the theory and methodology of phenomenological psychology.

Our analysis brought many aspects of the phenomenological experience into sharp focus across the dimensions of sociality, embodiment, moodedness and spatiality. By incorporating the existential dimensions, as proposed in some phenomenological methods (Ashworth, 2015; van Manen, 1990, 2014) and utilised in dream analysis by AUTHOR (2006, 2013, in press), we have shown how it is possible to work with group-level data from a phenomenological perspective. Our findings have shown how the dimensions intertwine as participants associate to the film material in the matrix. Their affective engagement was inflected with notions of an empathic embodied relationality, expressed most vividly through the trope of touching hands, and subjectivity being brought into focus through Otherness. That is, the matrix expressed a group-level concern with sociality in which the call of the (asymmetric) 'Other' acts as a teacher by confronting us with an awareness of our own subjectivity. This relationality was also perceived to be mediated through the material world, whether through a plate of glass or an iPad screen, with participants struggling with and then determining that this material mediation need not diminish the potency of our embodied intimate relating.

It is worth noting that there were some interesting similarities and differences in the material generated by the visual matrix exercise when compared with the individual interviews. A central theme of the individual interviews concerned the sense of identification, in a variety of forms (character, narrative, and apparatus) with the material (AUTHORS, forthcoming). Identification is of course an aspect of subjectivity and this was almost completely absent in the visual matrix. Identification and other matters of subjectivity are in many ways individual ontic concerns and so not necessarily the material to expect from a visual matrix designed to facilitate group level association. Other key concerns that emerged in the individual interviews were whether the films were 'real' or fictional representations and issues of diversity (AUTHORS, forthcoming). This exercised a number of the interviewees and whilst the topics were touched upon in the visual matrix they were not dwelt on for any length of time. As we hoped, the visual matrix itself resisted any individual working through of more cognitive matters about the process of filmmaking. In contrast, the key dimensions within the visual matrix were those concerned with embodiment, sociality and mood, with all three inevitably linked with the other. The visual material presented in the film series are of course inherently relational phenomena and so were more likely to emerge within the relational context of the visual matrix but it is still interesting and also reassuring to note how the visual matrix encouraged the production of more group-level and affect-oriented data than we saw in the individual interviews.

Finally, we should note how this novel approach provides us with a way to move away from a focus on the individual within phenomenological methodology. This is not uncontroversial, as many phenomenologists would – with good reason – argue that this approach is not phenomenological at all. It is quite true that the methodology described herein does not fit within a classic Husserlian understanding of phenomenology. It pushes the boundaries of phenomenology very far and some might think too far. As mentioned above, our aim here is not to fight over these definitional boundaries but rather to think through how we might be able to move beyond a focus only on individual consciousness to explore group-level phenomena, particularly affective (mood

oriented) material, within a broad phenomenological perspective. If this must be described as 'informed by phenomenology' rather than a (social) group-level phenomenological method then so be it. The important thing is that we find ways to gather data that honour experience, whether of one individual or a collective and it's mood. Beyond the theoretical focus on individual experience, phenomenological methods have also been over reliant on semi-structured interviews as the primary means for data collection (Langdridge, 2007). Indeed, semi-structured interviews have become almost hegemonic as a means of data collection amongst many of the most popular interpretive phenomenological methods. The modified visual matrix described herein by contrast produces group level data that we have demonstrated can be subject to an existential phenomenological analysis, such that we may better grasp group-level experience as it relates to an object of study. As such, the existential-phenomenological development of the visual matrix method described herein opens up new possibilities for more group oriented phenomenological research within the human sciences.

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