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Empirical phenomenology: principles and method

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Abstract. It is argued that phenomenological and empirical approaches to research are not antithetical. As long as its central principles are maintained, phenomenological enquiry could benefit from a more rigorous empirical framework. There are two objectives behind this paper. The first aim is to define the minimum methodological requirements of an "empirical phenomenology" for social sciences. This involves finding a common ground between phenomenological research on the one hand, and more empirical, "mainstream" social science on the other. The second aim is to define a suitable methodological tool that will fulfil the prerequisites of an empirical phenomenology. The Multiple Sorting Task (MST) is seen as appropriate in this respect and a description of the principles and procedure of the MST is provided. Examples from the authors' own research are used to illustrate how the MST operates within an empirical-phenomenological research design.

Introduction

In this paper, the multiple sorting task (MST) is presented as a useful methodological tool within an "empirical phenomenology". Although there seems to be as many phenomenologies as there are phenomenologists (Sixsmith, 1983), the approach in general has been gaining ground among social scientists. Shotter (1982) has argued for an interpretative descriptive psychology (cf. Davis, 1981) on the basis that:

> . . . we already know what it is to be a human being . . . we already know from the inside what it is like to act from a belief, etc., or what is involved in behaving in certain ways . . . .

The task is to put these givens into an appropriate interpretative structure which does not:

> . . . obscure, distort, or otherwise ignore the actual classes of mental phenomena given us in our experience (Davis, 1981).

However, phenomenology can be seen as being at odds with empirical social science in some respects. Phenomenology is a matter of "inner perception"

(Shotter, 1982; Brentano, 1973), and in a purist sense, the interpretation of experience ultimately demands self-reflection by the researcher (Husserl, 1960; Carr, 1975). This subjective,introspective orientation certainly does not endear itself within the perspective of an "objective" empirical social science. For example, it is not usually possible to replicate or test the outcomes of phenomenological research. Hence, it may be expedient to "harden" the phenomenological approach by incorporating an empirical perspective. The underlying assumption in this paper is that empirical social science and phenomenology are not irreconcilable. As Sardello (1978) puts it:

> the empirical turn in phenomenological psychology is perhaps the most challenging to this new direction in psychology and it is also the most controversial since the methodological atomism of empirical psychology seems far removed from the critical, holistic approach of phenomenology As long as an empirical orientation is understood as an attitude, a perspective, a way of looking, such an orientation is not antithetical to phenomenology

The idea of an empirical phenomenology is fine in principle. But how do you "do phenomenology" with other people? Unlike the more long-standing perspectives in social science, the methods and tools of empirical phenomenology are as yet very limited (cf. Giorgi, 1971; Seamon, 1979). If one is to stop preaching and start practising empirical phenomenology, it necessary to develop appropriate techniques

This paper involves two objectives. The first is to define the methodological requirements of an empirical phenomenology. To do this it is necessary to outline the minimum methodological prerequisites from the two perspectives of phenomenology and "mainstream" social science. Following this, a second objective is to define a suitable methodological tool that fulfils both sets of conditions. The MST is seen as appropriate in this respect. The principles underlying the MST are described in detail in this paper, along with the basic procedure and suitable methods of analysis.

Principles of phenomenological research

In the present context, it is not necessary to give a detailed account of phenomenology (useful sources in this respect are: Valle and King, 1978;

Seamon, 1982; Wann, 1964; Husserl, 1962; Natanson, 1967). However, certain philosophical and methodological principles need to be mentioned.

Firstly, within phenomenology, it is invalid to pursue the traditional subject-object dualism which separates the "external" physical world from the "internal" mental world. Rather, the man-environment relationship is INTENTIONAL, where both domains co-constitute one another. All human consciousness emanates from the source "me" to the focus "object", so that there can be no consciousness without consciousness OF something. Secondly, the object of phenomenology is to explore and understand the intentional consciousness that constitutes human experience. This analysis of experience reveals the pure structure of the world as expressed in shared, or intersubjective, MEANINGS. Meaning is what is there for the person when they confront the world:

> We allow what we see to teach us to comprehend the seen as opposed to forcing our comprehension of the seen to determine our seeing (Merleau–Ponty, 1962).

Thus, as a method, phenomenology takes and describes the human experience of lived phenomena, and through collaboration and intersubjective validation, seeks to reveal their fundamental structure in terms of meanings. This has certain methodological implications. Within phenomenology, "phenomena" are all the things experienced by people, whether they are formally acknowledged as "facts" or mentalistic abstractions. There is no presupposition that significant phenomena are given "facts" in the world. Simply, phenomenology seeks to "explicate the sense this world has for us all, prior to any philosophizing and obviously gets solely from our experience a sense which philosophy can uncover but never alter" (Husserl, 1960). But phenomenology is not simply descriptive of the "things" in the world: it is the meaning of things that constitutes our experience. Therefore phenomenology must go beyond the surface of "things" to reflect on our experience of them in the world.

Bearing all this in mind, Husserl (1950) suggests that the phenomenological method should be

i. presuppositionless
ii non-speculative
iii descriptive of phenomena as they are experienced
iv empirical and scientific as a method
v generalizable across situations.

Methodological implications of an empirical phenomenology

An empirical phenomenology must take into account Husserl's basic principles. Given these restrictions, several procedures commonly used to investigate meanings can be rejected as approaches to empirical phenomenology. The semantic differential (Osgood et al., 1957) presents participants with a prescribed set of adjectives which are assumed to be relevant and interpreted in a similar way by everyone. This may mask important individual differences and personal meanings, a criticism which can also be levelled at the repertory grid technique (Bannister and Fransella, 1971) when used with supplied constructs (cf. Canter et al., 1976). Even as a method of eliciting personal constructs, this approach has some problems: it assumes that constructs are bi-polar and hierarchically related (Kelly, 1955).

A less constricting method for generating descriptive experimental data is the open-ended interview. For example, Harré and Secord (1972) propose an accounts methodology based on open-ended interviews, recognising that people create, assess and use their own meanings. This does not imply that accounts should be uncritically accepted, but that "the phenomena which they purport to report both really exist and are relevant" (Harré and Secord, 1972). Open-ended methods have also been developed within empirical psychology from an explicitly phenomenological perspective (cf. Fischer, 1978; Giorgi, 1971). However, the general difficulty with this sort of approach is that it generates a vast amount of unstructured data, which presents a formidable challenge to the researcher. Moreover, much of this data is likely to be irrelevant or ambiguous, representing wasted time for both researcher and participant, while making it more difficult to extract the pertinent points. Clearly, what is needed is a systematic framework for collecting information, which maximises researcher efficiency, while still allowing people's freedom of expression.

There are other problems associated with the phenomenological approach. This type of research demands a great deal from participants in terms of their capacity for self-analysis and expression. The role of the phenomenological researcher is to facilitate this process. Therefore, there is always a need to build-up and maintain a rapport with participants. Without any framework for establishing a dialogue it is necessary to embark on a long-term intensive process of exploration of the pertinent issues (cf. Rowles, 1978). This can be a very time-consuming process for both researcher and participant.

This issue points to a major difficulty if one is trying to establish a common ground between phenomenology and empirical social science: the validity of subjective accounts. In an empirical phenomenology the researcher has, through empathetic understanding, the role of communicating the

experience of others. In this sense, phenomenology is still a self-analysis by the researcher. However, through reflection the results should be universally applicable, that is intersubjective rather than subjective- "the sense the world has for us all" (Husserl, 1960). On this point, phenomenological literature is persuasive in principle, but has proved less than satisfactory in practise. For example, humanistic geographers in their examination of the intentional relationship between person and place (cf. Relph, 1976) have been accused of an almost inevitable subjectivism (Entrekin, 1976; Sayer, 1979). Arguably, this is a fault of application rather than of the phenomenological approach itself. However, any method that relies solely upon researcher interpretation must be open to criticism.

There seems to be a tension here between subjective/intensive and objective/extensive research designs, and what is required is a framework that can bridge the two. For example, it is not usually possible to "do" phenomenology with a lot of people. If a common ground is to be established, then it may be valuable to incorporate larger samples within the research design. Larger samples make it easier to pinpoint shared meanings between people, and at the same time make it more difficult for the researcher to impose his or her own preconceptions.

This does not mean that the researcher should simply be non-participative within the inverview situation, as any interview is a dynamic and constructive form of communication. Rather, the researcher has a role in the negotiation, discussion and expression of people's experiences. However, this process could be aided by a method that structures experiential analysis and expression in a systematic way. Again, this may reduce the chance of researcher intrusion.

All the above issues along with the prerequisites for phenomenological research can be used to define the methodological requirements for an empirical phenomenology. This may be seen as compromising some of the principles of pure phenomenology. However, the main objective is pragmatic: to make the path to understanding people's meanings and experiences as direct as possible within the constraints of a typical social science research programme. Given this, there is a need for research methods that will:

i. Reduce the time/effort load on participants and researcher.
ii. Guide participants into systematic self-analysis.
iii. Ameliorate the problem of establishing rapport.
iv. Provide a medium for participants to express themselves.
v. Minimise the possibility for researcher intrusion.
vi. Increase research efficiency.
vii. Allow larger samples to be managed.
viii. Provide a response format that allows some form of systematic analysis.

One method that may fulfil the prerequisites of phenomenology and the demands of "rigorous" social science is the Multiple Sorting task (MST). The following sections describe the principles and procedures of the MST, and illustrates its use within empirical phenomenology.

The multiple sorting task: principles

The principle that underlies the MST is that people think about and deal with the world through categorisation. Uncovering these natural meaning categories is the aim of the MST. This claim that people categorise their world is not new. Platonic theory held that reason was a matter of judgments of sameness and difference. It is through categorisation of phenomena in terms of concepts, that people are able to respond to a class of objects, such as "chairs", rather than to each separate chair as a unique entity. Without this process of conceptualisation the world would seem chaotic, we would be overwhelmed by our experiences (Smith and Medin, 1981).

The notion of conceptual categories is not straightforward. In classical concept theory, a category is a way of grouping phenomena "in terms of those characteristics that distinguish this array from objects or events in the universe" (Bruner et al., 1956). However, this perspective fails to deal with problems such as unclear cases, and recent work in concept theory has favoured a probalistic approach. In prototype theory (Rosch, 1973, 1976; Mervis and Rosch, 1981) categories are proposed as overlapping networks of characteristics. Categorisation becomes a matter of less well-defined "family resemblances", where more prototypical members of a category have more overlapping characteristics in common with members of the same category, and less in common with members of other categories. For example, various kinds of fruit in a "fruit" concept have more characteristics in common with each other than they do with the things that belong in a "vegetable" category. An unclear case in this example is the tomato. Thus, family resemblance means that members of a category are similar, but not always equivalent (Rosch, 1975). This perspective stresses the subtleties and vagaries that characterise natural systems of categorisation, where phenomena are necessarily multivarious in their nature.

The MST is specifically designed to cope with multivarious phenomena, by allowing people to categorise and re-categorise their own everyday experiences in terms of natural system of meaning.

The MST procedure

The MST is a versatile method of investigating conceptual systems. The objective is to help people to analyse their everyday understanding of things: to get behind the natural attitude of taking things for granted. The MST provides a framework for this self-analysis. Basically, the procedure involves participants in sorting specific items into (dis)similar categories on the basis of a single, fundamental criterion. Once this criterion has been evaluated, further criteria provide the basis of further sorting procedures. Sorting continues until all criteria have been exhausted. For example, a person could divide a set of photographs of people into categories such as: happy, sad, serious, or angry, according to the criterion of emotions. Once the sorting in this criterion has been completed, the photograph elements could be sorted again according to a different criterion, such as beauty. Thus, there are three distinct aspects of the MST:

i. The specification of items to be sorted. Items can be anything from pictures and objects to written descriptions. These represent the phenomena of experience and help participants to focus on the resarch issue.
ii. The identification of sorting criteria. These represent the modes or dimensions of meaning within which things are experienced.
iii. The categorisation of the items (i) within the conceptual criteria (ii). Within a mode of experience, phenomena can be seen in terms of sameness or difference or in degrees of similarity.

The task itself developed out of Stephenson's (1953) Q techniques, Vygotsky's blocks (1934) and Sherif and Sherif's (1967) "own categories" procedure (cf. Canter et al., 1985). However, these procedures generally begin with the researchers own assumptions about what is relevant to the problem at hand. The researcher then prescribes the items and criteria to be used, and the categories in which items are to be placed. The MST, on the other hand, is flexible with regards to the precise format of the task:

i. It handles either researcher prescribed or participant-generated items.
ii. It handles prescribed criteria for sorting, and/or allows participants to produce their own.
iii. The number of sorts produced within an MST may be specified at the onset of the task. Alternatively, sorts need only be limited by the participant's conceptual system.
iv. The number of categories can be participant dependent or predefined.

The MST is versatile in that it can be used in an entirely researcher predefined, partially defined, or completely participant-driven way. It is this last approach which lends itself to phenomenological investigation. In this case, the nature of the criteria and categories reflects the personal meanings of participants. These meanings are elicited in a structured and systematic format for each person, allowing comparative analysis.

The MST procedure has a number of advantages over some of the other methodologies used within the framework of empirical phenomenology. For example, Sardello (19768) used protocol analysis (cf. Giorgi, 1971) to analyse the fantasy experience of students. This involved three stages: participants describe a particular situation in which they experienced a fantasy; the natural meaning units in the description are identified; these units are then examined in terms of the object of the fantasy. This procedure allowed the essential themes and meaning of the fantasy experience to emerge. However, this type of reductionist approach remains essentially an interpretation by the researcher of the participant's personal meanings in the written descriptions. Such an interpretation assumes a common understanding, which may or may not exist and there is a danger that the researcher will impose his own preconceptions on the data. There is also the problem of validation. How far does the interpretation adequately reflect the structure of actual experience? Should the participants not be involved in the interpretation of their own experiences? The MST provides the means for individuals to play a role in these areas, emphasising the expertise of the individual with regards to their own experiences (cf. Kelly, 1955).

Constructing the MST

Because the MST is such a flexible methodological tool, the specific construction of any MST is largely dependent on the nature of the research question. The first issue to consider is whether the task should consist of predefined elements, criteria and categories, or whether these should be freely generated by the participant. In this section, an open-ended MST procedure is illustrated with examples from a phenomenological exploration of the environmental experience of home (Sixsmith, 1984, 1986), and ongoing research by the present authors. The three phases of the task (items, criteria and categories) are discussed in turn.

i. *Choosing items*

Items or elements, are the basis of the MST. Two points need to be made here. Firstly, items can be the phenomena in question, such as physical

objects, or they can be representations of those things, for example, written descriptions, photographs, labels, etc. The medium used in the MST is important. Photographs concentrate on visual features, and so could hardly be expected to capture more ephemeral attributes such as the essence of home. Secondly, whatever their form, items must be chosen with care to ensure that they define as closely as possible the content universe which they are meant to represent. The advantage of using predefined elements becomes apparent here. To illustrate, Groat's (1982) study of architectural style and contextual fit used a representative set of photographs of different building styles as the elements in an MST. Without this basis, many architectural styles could have been overlooked by participants. However, predefined sorts would not be appropriate where the focus of attention is on personal experiences.

In the home study, participants generated their own items. These were descriptions of places they considered as home and places they did not consider as home in response to seven exploratory questions. The questions and a summary of one person's descriptions are given in Table 1.

The descriptions constituted the elements in a free sorting procedure. They also provided in themselves a wealth of information about the types of places people considered as home. The concept of home was found to be wide-ranging, including places such as the family home, the home town, the home country and the more abstract spiritual home.

However, where participant-generated items are concerned, a major difficulty can arise. Some people may not provide enough elements to make the MST possible, while others provide so many that it becomes difficult to perform the task. On the basis of the seven home questions, most participants described over seven places, but the nature of the topic did not encourage more than about ten items. Where insufficient items are generated, it may be appropriate to suggest general themes as the basis for further items. For example, ongoing research into unemployed people's conceptions of different places used general labels (e.g. post office, job centre) as an aid for people to focus on specific places. Equally, a large number of items (about $n > 25$) usually proves to be unmanageable, taking a long time to complete and involving increased researcher involvement. It may be possible to combine items in this situation.

ii. *Sorting criteria*

The next stage in the MST is the identification of the criteria for sorting the items. In the home study, participants were able to develop their own criteria, illuminating the different aspects of their concept of home. Many of

Table 1. Places thought of as home: seven questions and one person's (Sarah's) responses

Describe any place:

1. You think of as home at *present.*

   Hall of residence on university campus.

2. You have thought of as home in the *past* and *still do* think of as home now.

   Parent's house.
   Shared flat.
   Ex-boyfriend's parent's house.

3. You have thought of as home in the *past,* but *do not* consider as home now.

   Family house in Lincolnshire, where she was working as a live-in nanny.
   Friend's house in New York, where she stayed for some time.

4. You might think of as home in the *future.*

   No response. Participant could not imagine where she might be living after she left university.

5. You have *never* considered as home ever.

   Digs in Reading
   Bedsit in Slough

6. *At present,* which you *never* considered as home.

   Room she had when living in a hotel

7. Which would be/is your *ideal* home.
   A house shared with partner

Sarah wrote the following description of the flat she had shared, which was still home for her (question 2).

"Home in the sense that decorated and partially furnished with own colours, belongings. Shared two close friends – very likely. Always able to go back at any time and relax – privacy of own room. Communal room used in evenings by flatmates and friends. Own room full of my own books. Kitchen – usually dominated by myself.

Only problem cleanliness, difficult when sharing. Not always sense of responsbility and respect by all guests. Organised well, but not how I would want to run by own home".

these turned out to be shared conceptualisations, while others were highly personal in nature. Examples of the sorting criteria developed by two people are given in Table 2.

These criteria represent the modes within which an individual experiences "homeness". Some very interesting concepts emerged: home as an embodiment of happiness and belonging; a place of privacy; a personally defined and structured place where you can be yourself; a place to entertain; a place to feel secure in. What became apparent was that people experience "home" in a number of ways and that the precise content and structure of that experience is highly variable from person to person.

Table 2. Sorting criteria: 2 examples

Participant 1

1. Stability.
2. Being yourself.
3. Imprisonment versus non-imprisonment.
4. Choice of control of physical environment.
5. Emotional environment.
6. Number of possessions.

Participant 2

1. Distance from parents home.
2. Length of time people known.
3. Personal belongings.
4. Attachment to people.
5. Extent of social life.
6. Personal reflections.
7. Memories.
8. Places I feel confident in.
9. How well I get on with others.
10. Number of friends in a place.
11. Taking things for granted.
12. How much I care about the places.
13. Size of the place.
14. How much I can offer someone else.

This approach seeks to elicit sorting criteria without guiding participants. The problem with this is that some people find it difficult to define sorting criteria. The participants in the home study were postgraduate students, who were able to formulate and express abstract ideas fairly easily. However, this was not the case with groups of elderly people and unemployed people in ongoing studies by the present authors. Many of these people were less capable of making mental abstractions from their concrete experiences and a degree of researcher involvement was often inevitable. In these cases the MSTs were conducted more along the lines of discussion and negotiation to elicit meanings from which possible sorts could emerge.

One way of overcoming this problem may be to combine both free and prescribed sorts within the MST. The prescribed sorts ensure an amount of standardised information, while the free sorts allow any other issues significant to the person to be taken into account. Also, prescribed sorts could be useful where there is likely to be a good deal of interpersonal agreement. However, it is imperative that self-generated sorts are always included if the variety of individual conceptualisation is to be reflected. Combining free and predefined sorts has practical implications. For example, should predefined sorts be placed at the start or at the end of the MST.

Table 3. Categories used in one person's (Anna's) MST

Sort 1: Comfort

1. Most comfortable.
2. Least comfortable.

Sort 2: Privacy

1. Optimal privacy.
2. Desired privacy.
3. No privacy.

Sort 3: Happiness

1. Happy.
2. Some happy times.
3. Never happy.

Sort 4: Spaciousness

1. Spacious.
2. Adequate.
3. Not enough space.
4. Hardly any space.
5. Exempted.

Sort 5: Lighting

1. Sunlight.
2. Artificial.

Sort 6: Control over decor

1. Complete control.
2. My opinion not always taken seriously.
3. No control

Sort 7: Relaxation in relation to objects

1. Ideal.
2. Can relax.
3. Can't relax.

Sort 8: Environmental services

1. All fulfilled.
2. Some fulfilled.
3. Few or no servies fulfilled.

Sort 9: Interaction with friends

1. Many good friends.
2. No friends.

These are the sorts and categories produced by Anna and are given here in her own words.

Placed at the start, they help to clarify the procedure and provide cues for further sorts. On the other hand, they may lead participants to use a particular format in the free sorts. This can usually be resolved by interspersing the two types of sorts.

iii. *Categories*

The object of the MST is to sort elements into categories or groups on the basis of one single criterion at a time. It is assumed that the various categories show how the elements (as representations of real world phenomena) are experienced. Categories can designate quantitative or qualitative groupings. An example of the former are scales, such as the degree of importance that a person attaches to each item. Qualitative groupings indicate a categorical conceptualisation, such as personal, social and physical qualities of home. An example of participant-generated categories in the home study is given in Table 3.

From a phenomenological perspective, it is this part of the MST that is of most significance, as it ties together the concrete phenomena of experience (items) and the idealistic conceptualisations of that experience (criteria). Meanings do not exist in themselves, but are focused on things in the world, while the things in themselves have no significance outside the meaning systems of people (intentionality). An examination of this level of the MST makes it possible to see more clearly the interdependency of concepts and objects in terms of meaning categories.

Analysing the MST

A problem of interpretative research is the establishment of a dialogue between the researcher and participant. The MST can overcome this in a number of ways. Firstly, the procedure demands the precise definition of meanings and categories on the part of the participant. In fact, people often become engrossed in the task, almost as if it was a source of self-enlightenment. Secondly, the MST can provide the basis of discussion. In the home study, the MST was used to focus attention on the field of concern, and much of the time was spent on discussing and identifying criteria, categories and sorts, rather than the actual mechanics of sorting. Finally, the MST can be evaluated and interpreted by the researcher and the emerging themes can be discussed in further interviews. This aspect is very important. The initial MST should only be seen as a starting point on which to base further interviews, to expand on and clarify what had been said previously. Used in this way, the MST is a heuristic; not an end in itself, but a means

to an end, an aid to uncovering the structures of experience. Empirical phenomenology should involve a continuous process of analysis by the researcher and discussion with participants. This affords deeper understanding and is a way of establishing the validity of any interpretation.

Within this perspective one should not preclude the use of systematic analysis, as any technique that facilitates insight and understanding is useful. For example, statistical analysis may highlight issues that are not immediately apparent, especially when dealing with complex data as in an MST. One technique that is appropriate to MST data is multidimensional scalogram analysis (MSA) (Lingoes, 1973; Zvulun, 1978) one of the family of multidimensional scaling procedures (MDS) (Coxon, 1982; Davies and Coxon, 1982; Shye, 1978). MSA deals with categorical data in a pure form; it does not transform the original data in any way. Also, MSA deals with all items of data simultaneously. Thus, the integrity of the data is preserved, and its holistic nature is maintained. Simply, MSA represents items of data in multidimensional space on the basis of their similarity or disimilarity; the more similar, the closer together and vice versa. The results are given in graphical form, to allow visual interpretation.

To illustrate, one person (Sarah) in the home study produced nine descriptions of places, five of which were seen as homes and four as non-homes. Her MST consisted of eight sorts. Table 4 is a matrix that summarises her MST. Each sort and all the categories are framed in Sarah's own words, keeping intact her own meanings of home. These meanings were the subject of intense discussion, so that the researcher could understand, as far as possible, the concepts employed by Sarah.

In Table 4, the figures in each cell are the categories into which each description was placed for each sort. For example, in SORT 3 (physical attributes), Sarah used the two categories of "luxury facilities" and "basic facilities". What Sarah meant by "luxury" facilities fall under two themes. Firstly, things like an automatic washing machine, TV, video recorder and telephone represent luxury objects or gadgets. Secondly, large, comfortable settees, thick carpets, paintings on the wall, etc., also represent luxury. The important point about luxury for Sarah is not objects in themselves but what they afford for her lifestyle: comfort, convenience and ease, and even a sense of security. Her parent's home, ex-boyfriend's, lodgings in Lincolnshire and New York, and her ideal home are all similar in that they have luxury facilities. The rest are dissimilar to the first group in that they have basic facilities. Here, basic does not simply mean the absence of luxury facilities. Instead, a place that is basic may have the same sort of facilities, but may contain fewer, which may be of an inferior quality or standard: for example, a monochrome instead of a colour TV. The matrix in Table 4

Table 4. Summary matrix of Sarah's MST

Places	Sorting crieria							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Parent's house	1	1	1	1	1	2	4	3
2. Ex-boyfriend's	1	1	1	1	3	1	4	2
3. Shared flat	2	2	2	1	3	1	1	1
4. Hall of residence	2	2	2	1	3	2	1	2
5. Slough bedsit	2	2	2	1	1	3	2	4
6. Digs in Reading	1	2	2	2	2	3	2	4
7. Lincolnshire/family	1	2	1	2	2	2	3	3
8. Friend's in New York	1	2	1	2	2	3	2	4
9. Ideal home	3	1	1	1	2	1	1	1

Key to sorts and categories:

Sort	*Categories*
1. People in it.	1. Family 2. Shared with other people
2. Permanence.	1. Permanent. 2. Temporary.
3. Physical attributes.	1. Luxury. 2. Basic.
4. Adult orientation.	1. Adult 2. Child.
5. Atmosphere.	1. Quiet. 2. Active. 3. Hectic.
6. Belonging.	1. Me. 2. Comfortable in own room. 3. The way others want it.
7. Total environment.	1. Self-chosen area. 2. Chosen for convenience. 3. Parent's choice.
8. Behaviour.	1. Complete freedom of behaviour. 2. Relaxed but comforting to others. 3. Even more restricted. 4. Complete conformity.

formed the input into the MSA program and the resultant plot is given in Fig. 1.

The points on the plots represent Sarah's descriptions. Bearing in mind the similarity/proximity rule, certain observations can be made. The items are arranged in a circular fashion, rather than in discrete groups, indicating important qualitative differences between them. At the same time, there is a distinct division between those places that are "home" (right hand side of plot),

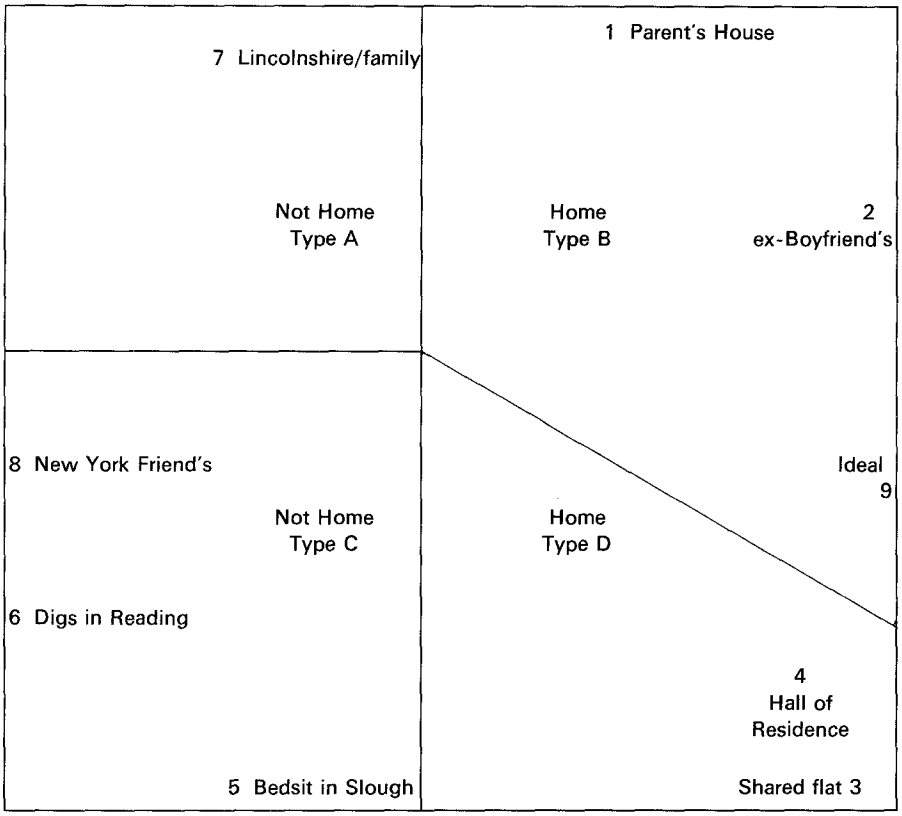

Fig. 1. MSA spatial representation of Sarah's conceptual system of home.

and those that are not thought of as home (left hand side). Within this basic division, Sarah also conceives of two different types of home and non-home. These can be seen in the typology given in Table 5.

The value of the MSA analysis is that it indicates how individual meanings may be interrelated within a more general conceptual structure. The main point here is that both homes and non-homes share certain qualities. As such, there is no single set of qualitites that in themselves define what home is. The interesting thing is the relationships between the attributes of places. This can be examined in terms of each type of place in Table 5.

Type A and C places are not thought of as homes. There are certain common chracteristics: shared with others; temporary; basic attributes; chosen for convenience. However, they differ in that type A places are child-oriented, with active atmospheres. Because of the child-orientation, Sarah only felt comfortable in her own room, where children were not allowed, and because of this, she felt that her behaviour was fairly restricted.

Table 5. A simplified representation of Sarah's conceptual system of home

	Not home		Home
Type A	Shared with others Temporary Basic physical attributes Child-oriented Active atmosphere Comfortable in own room Chosen for convenience Restricted behaviour	*Type B*	Shared with family Permanent Luxurious attributes Adult-oriented
Type C	Shared with others Temporary Basic physical attributes Conforming to others Chosen for convenience	*Type D*	Shared with others Temporary Basic attributes Self-chosen area Adult-oriented

In type C places, she felt she had to conform to the wishes of all the others who were sharing the place with her.

Type B and D places were homes for Sarah, but they were homes in very different senses. Type B homes were shared with her family, permanent and luxurious, while type D homes seemed to have much more in common with non-homes, in that they were shared with others, temporary, and basic. What seemed to be the major defining characteristic was that all homes were adult-oriented. Although Sarah liked children generally, she felt more comfortable and "at-home" in environments that were not centered around children and where she could pursue her interests and social activities.

Significantly, type D homes and type C non-homes are very similar in terms of their social make-up, temporary nature and physical attributes. However, the essential difference lies in the extent to which she has control over her situation and lifestyle. In type C non-homes she has to conform to others requirements and lives there mainly out of convenience, whereas with type D homes she was able to enjoy a "hectic", free and easy atmosphere, in an area she has especially chosen to live. These are aspects of home which she values highly. The example of Sarah's MST provides a nice illustration of how MSA can be an aid to understanding the possible structure of a person's meanings of home. However, one need not regard the MST as an end in itself. The MSA plots and the interpretation of them can be used as the basis for further in-depth analysis. Both the MSA plots and the schematic representation were discussed with Sarah. Her own interpretations and opinions then formed an integral part of the final evaluation. Such confrontation techniques are made easier because of the visual form of the MSA.

Although the focus of phenomenological research is the individual, the objective is to generalise from idiographic analysis, to provide insights into shared (intersubjective) meanings (Seamon, 1982). Briefly, in the home study this was done in a number of ways (cf. Sixsmith, 1986 for a more detailed account).

i. *Content analysis* (cf. Krippendorff, 1980). All the home descriptions were content analysed to form a typology of home, including family home, childhood home, ideal home, etc. Similarly, the sorting criteria were content analysed to provide a set of shared meanings of home. These included meanings such as happiness, belonging and self-expression.

ii. *Descriptive statistics.* Simple descriptive statistics are always useful in shedding light on a problem. For example, frequencies can show which meanings have a greater currency between people, and which are more idiosyncratic.

iii. *MDS.* Another MDS procedure, smallest space analysis (SSA), was used to explore the structures within a frequency matrix based on the meanings of home and the types of home. The SSA plot indicated three modes of home experience: the personal home, the social home and the physical home (Sixsmith, 1986).

Analysis in an empirical phenomenology has two objectives: to understand, as far as possible, the experiences of others and to define some general framework that can account for that experience. The MSA is an analogue of what the researcher usually does through less systematic means: that is to provide a general structure whereby particular meanings can be understood. But any generalisation must be related to the individual and one must be critical of the outcomes of analysis. Does it shed light on the issues at hand? Does it preserve the integrity of the original meanings? Does it encompass the relevent aspects of an individual's experience? Is it meaningful to the participants themselves? Does it ring true with what we already know intuitively? The way the MST was used within the home study at least went some way towards fulfilling these demands.

Conclusion

The MST has been presented as an appropriate approach to the systematic analysis of the attributes of a given phenomena and the relationship between

those attributes. The methodology fulfils the requirements for an empirical phenomenology outlined at the beginning of the paper. From a phenomenological perspective, the following advantages are worth stressing:

i. The MST can be open-ended with a minimum of researcher intervention. This is in line with the need for a presuppositionless approach. Any outcome or generalisation is therefore data driven. Outcomes are not constrained, either by a rigid methodology, or by a priori hypotheses.

ii. Because the MST can be totally participant-generated, the MST is descriptive of phenomena as they are experienced by individuals. However, the structured format of the MST can afford generalisations between individuals.

iii. Because of this systematic format, the MST helps considerably to reduce the time/effort load in the research process. Efficiency is improved and larger samples can then be accommodated.

iv. MDS procedures offer a powerful aid to understanding MSTs. MDS is not an end in itself, but is used heuristically as a means for investigating conceptual structures derived from an MST.

v. The MST is a continual process of categorising, and explaining and justifying these categories. This forces participants into a self-conscious analysis of their own everyday experiences; to get behind the "natural attitude" to things. In this respect the MST is perhaps a more rigorous method than, say, in-depth interviewing. For example, a participant in current research by the authors said that:

> . . . the interviews were easy, that was just answering questions. But this (the MST) was more difficult, things you take for granted just don't hold up. I think I've learnt more about myself from doing it.

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