



# Relating Cultural Psychology and Eco-phenomenology – Setting the Seeds for a Fertile Cooperation

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## Abstract

In the present paper, I relate cultural psychology with eco-phenomenology. I am showing that both sciences draw on similar scientific underpinnings. Here, it is to note that cultural psychology as well as eco-phenomenology analyze a person's relatedness towards an object. In phenomenology we speak of human landscapes whereas cultural psychology draws on the notion of action fields. Yet, both sciences only come into being while analyzing a person-environment-unit. Moreover, an action field (or landscape) develops between past and future, thus has a horizon of former and further experiences. However, this experience is shaped by other people's experience, limited or expanded. Furthermore, it is only possible to analyze—in cultural psychology—as well as phenomenology—those meaningful environments by immersing into the action field of the social other. Statistical methods do bracket that environment. However, it is from cultural psychology that phenomenology can learn to incorporate a theory of activity, thus of psychic and physical energy. It is from phenomenology that cultural psychology might incorporate a complex theory of the phenomenological reduction with various opportunities for its application fields such as for the dialogical-self-theory. I end the article in appealing to path a way for a fertile cooperation.

**Keywords** Cultural psychology · Eco-phenomenology · Phenomenological reduction · Action fields · Person-environment units

## Purpose of the Paper: Relating Phenomenology and Culture

Relating two disciplines is always a difficult endeavor. This is especially true when it comes to the disciplines of culture and phenomenology. Both terms are highly polyvalent as they have both a controversial history and are widely used nowadays by different researchers for multiple purposes (Giorgi, 1970; Graumann, 1984). In the present paper I do not have the goal of showing the different definitions of culture and phenomenology in all their controversies (see for example Giorgi, 2010 for phenomenology or Toomela, 2021 for culture). This is not only worth a paper but a volume for itself. No, the goal of the present paper is

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to show some access roads to the terms of culture and phenomenology and to path a fertile way of understanding the relation between phenomenology and culture. As I am an ecological psychologist, I will look at this relationship from an eco-psychological perspective, defining both terms within this particular meta-code (Valsiner, 2017). Before elaborating on the specific relationship between culture and phenomenology and its implications for psychology, I will separately define both terms in an understandable manner. Phenomenology, in particular, had always the issue of being a linguistically complex endeavor as authors such as Husserl (1900/01) and Heidegger (2001) had their own writing not paying attention to the readability of their works. I have never understood how a science wanting to decipher the complex interactions between phenomena relies on a language that is not accessible to the general reader. We need to stop that. The goal of the present paper is to show similarities and differences between a specific sort of eco-phenomenology and cultural psychology in order to path a way of a fertile cooperation between the two fields in the future.

## The Phenomenological Attitude: Investigating Meaningful Environments

What is then psychological phenomenology? Graumann explains (1984):

Phenomenology is not a philosophical or psychological meta-code or theory but a methodological attitude of defining problems, to reflect them and to ask specific questions. As problem-oriented attitude, phenomenology is not fixed which is the reason why it is not yet codified in a particular canon of methods. Its openness is strength and weakness. (p. 3)

Having clarified now that phenomenology is a specific stance on seeing and defining problems, we need now to define some core elements of an ecological phenomenology. Graumann (1960, 2002) explains that within all phenomenological analyses the core element of intentional subject-environment relationship is fundamental. Intentionality means in this regard a specific relatedness towards different objects (Graumann, 1984; von Fircks, 2021a, c) or in other terms different interpretation processes in regards to a specific object (Toomela, 2021; Valsiner, 2014, 2019).

Poetry is an illustrative example to shed light onto different kinds of relatedness towards the same object (Pfeiffer, 1946; von Fircks, 2022c). Love might be the object of different poems, yet different poets might relate to love in a very divergent way. The loss of a beloved one might be seen in the light of betrayal for a first poet whereas the second poet realizes that the loss of the beloved one brings him unknown freedom. The third poet might see in the loss of the beloved one the natural flow of life. Love comes and goes. And all different kinds of relatedness will make the poet to structure his work in a different way than the other. What is ecological in this specific example? The answer is trivial: The poem itself is an externalization of the poet relating to his/her environment. The poem itself is the ecological result of the poet interpreting the loss of the beloved one. In phenomenology, a specific person relates to a specific object. Yet, this relatedness is always a product of a person relating to a specific object against the background of his relationship with his environment, people for example (von Fircks, 2021a). The relatedness of the poet onto the object of love is only possible

within his complex experience of his environment (here the loss of the beloved one). Without the loss, without the experience of the environment, there will be no poem at all and thus no phenomenology. Separation of subject and environment is thus not possible within a phenomenological attitude. Let us turn to Graumann (1984):

As intentional states and acts are related to a specific correlate (object) (...) intentionality is a term of an active relationship whose relates need to be called person and environment. Persons, if seen as individuals or groups, are always related towards their specific environments; environments circulate always around persons and groups for whom they exist. This intentional interlocking of person and environment implies a first methodological postulate of a phenomenological analysis. The unit is not the individual per se or a specific stimulus, but the intentional person-environment relationship. Within all necessary dissection one should not dissolve this relational character. If one – [as a researcher] – is interested in persons (individuals and groups), he approaches their environments within the phenomenological attitude, and vice versa environments are approached as correlates of personal or group-specific correlates of human conduct and are analyzed in a way how subjects relate to them. In other words, intentional analysis is always situational analysis as the intentional subject is principally situated in his environment. (p. 4)

If a psychologist was interested in understanding the different kinds of relatedness of our three poets, he would approach them by entering their specific environments (von Fircks, forthcoming). If he were to visit the first poet, he would see another kind of structured environment than for the second poet. The first poet as loyal lover might have ornamented his whole house with cultural material of his relationship. The psychologist was to find eventually love letters of how the two former lovers had surpassed difficult times together. Now, within the conversation with the poet it becomes clear that he was betrayed by his partner. So, the loss of the beloved one needs to be seen in the light of a betrayal towards a loyal lover.

Then, the psychologist goes his way and approaches the third poet. Entering his house, he is surprised that there are almost no material objects. He sees a yoga mat, meditational spaces, and tea ceremonies. He observes the poet walking in nature, doing Tai Chi and doing zazen (sitting meditation). On the floor, he finds specific books like the Tao te King of Laozi or the I Ging. Clearly, the psychologist entered a taoistic environment when visiting the third poet. By talking to the poet, he realizes that his mother died. Yet, the poet had come to terms with the loss as the poem indicated, equally. It is within this experience that the psychologist understood the meaning of the poem more clearly than before. “Meaning is phenomenologically spoken not to be found within the inner core of the subject nor in the nature of the objects but is constituted within the intentional relationship between person and environment” (Graumann, 1984, p. 5). Our poet example indicates that clearly.

The second postulate of a phenomenological attitude becomes now obvious. Within the intentional relation of individual and environment, a subject-independent objectivity will remain that implies a potential meaningfulness. Environment appears primary as meaningful for someone. (...) Acting needs then to be understood against the background of a person relating to his meaningful environment which includes relating to our very own psychological environment for instance in terms of self-reflection. (Graumann, 1984, p. 5)

## The Horizon of Experience: Including Temporarily

Again, poems are an illustrative example as they express a meaningful relationship between a person and his environment that includes people, developmental tasks, strokes of fate, relationships with people, and so on (Pfeiffer, 1946). If we remain within the example of the third poet structuring his environment differently than the other poets, the complex quote of Graumann becomes clearer. How? The environment is structured. First, it is blank. It is there. It exists. Before the poet has built his taoistic oasis he might have bought a normal house. It is while relating to this environment that he decided to transform it and to make it personally meaningful in terms of his taoistic life philosophy. The house that now became transformed on a spiritual basis was only re-structured as the person related himself with a taoistic way of life. The psychologist wanting to shed light onto the different interpretation processes of the poets, only becomes aware of those while entering this specific person-environment relationship and understanding it, situationally and in time. Our example of the psychologist understanding the taoistic poet shows the third postulate of Graumann's phenomenology:

Every experience has its horizon (...) which points to further opportunities of experience. This is especially true for the perception of people and objects but is equally valid for every conscious activity. (...) The horizon of experience is therefore the scope of experiential opportunities. Within the inner horizon of an object, experience can be validated if relating to the outer horizon of co-objects. (Graumann, 1984, p. 6)

The psychologist experiencing the taoistic poet's poem enters the horizon of his taoistic attitude and thus the opportunities of further experience of the poem's nature. It is within his decision of meeting the poet and stepping into his environment, that the horizon became then the foreground of the psychologist's endeavor and thus his experience of the taoistic teacher's structuring of his environment, e.g., his meditation, tea ceremonies and walks in nature. This is especially true in sciences if we decide to investigate theme A or B and to slowly read the literature about the different themes and gaining more and more experience of theme A or B as well as themes that are in relation to them. Again, let us look at Graumann (1984).

For the phenomenologically understood human conduct we need to account equally for the multiple opportunities of conduct, the intentional correlate of such conduct is horizon-wise, thus potentially open. The seen comes with the not seen; the visible comes with the non-visible (...), the real is co-constituted by the potential. In this way every experience is inductive; there is no final point. It is here that the world from which we relate and towards which we relate is constructed as an open space of opportunities. (p. 6)

This is something especially valid for young people thinking about their own career paths. The readers might remember similar scenarios when confronted with the question what to study or where to work. These questions are highly complex as young people try to anticipate the potential experience of their decisions. Every decision (I go with literature rather than engineering), bears a different potential of experience and environmental demands which cannot be fully foreseen but only unfold in the moment. The horizon-wise character of phenomenology opens up the horizon of temporality. I, as person-environment unit, do have a history. It is a history of my relations. Relations with my school. With my parents. With friends. With people for whom I did

an internship. The horizon of potential experience opens up the realm of the future which I try to anticipate and that will alter ultimately my person-environment unit. Phenomenology tries to shed light onto the experience of the present moment that is constrained by the past experiential qualities as well as future potentially experiential qualities (Sato & Tanimura, 2016; Sato et al., 2009). But coming back to our taoistic example, we became aware of a fourth postulate of phenomenology, the corporeality of a phenomenological endeavor. Let us hear Graumann (1984):

The unabbreviated description of the situated subject needs to be seen from his corporeality. Not only because subjects have a location from which they perceive and act (...) but also the corporeal constitution alters the relatedness towards objects, experiences and states such as for the ill, the person at-ease, the pregnant woman, the child, the obese, the disabled. Psychology with its Cartesian separation of mind and body has limited itself onto the mental states of person and handed over the somatic to the medical disciplines. For the intentional subject-environment interlocking, the dichotomous separation of mind and body is more than questionable, the differences secondary. (...) The determination of the phenomenological subject pays tribute not only to the person's lived body (...) but also refrains from making the cognitive or the reflective absolute. (pp. 6-7)

## The Corporeality of Phenomenology

Applying the corporeality onto our taoistic example, the taoistic teacher meditates, he does his tea ceremonies, he walks in nature, he reads his books, he teaches students and so on. All these activities imply the teacher's body. When he walks his body is different than when doing meditation. When he teaches, his body synchronizes with different actions than when doing the tea ceremony. When he has back pain, he might do another type of moving meditation (Qi-Gong) and so on. The body is the same in every example, yet the corporeality alters with the different activities and experiences of these activities. This relationship is bi-directional as bodily demands can alter the experience of the environment, but the mind can equally alter the experience of bodily demands when doing for example mindfulness or biofeedback. Either way, in all of the taoistic teacher's activities we cannot separate the body from the mind. This is especially true for our meditational example. There is no mediation without body and without the mind. This accounts for every human activity (Graumann, 2002; Luft, 2012; Merleau-Ponty, 1966).

Yet, we lack something crucial in phenomenology. The taoistic teacher relates to his environment that can be near or far away, that can be reachable by car or by walking, an environment that attracts him or distances him, an environment that might be enjoyable or repelling (Graumann, 1960, 1984). It is these human qualities and valences of a spatial environment that shows our appropriation but also our distance. Phenomenological researchers have described this human quality of the intentional environment as landscape to differentiate it from the simple objective environment (Linschoten, 1953). Every human organizes different landscapes for work, leisure, family and friends—among many others. It is the task of the phenomenological psychologist to decipher these landscapes, thus their phenomenological structure (relatedness) in irreversible time (Valsiner, 2017).

## The Sociality of Phenomenology

However, it is important to bear in mind that we are not socially isolated beings (May, 1969, 1981 1991). Of course, our experiences have historicity as well as a horizon that we need to take into account (Husserl, 1900/01). Yet, this is only half of the truth. From the very beginning of our lives, there is the social other (Schapp, 1975) from which we learn and appreciate language as well as other organizational syntaxes such as cleaning oneself or caring for oneself or for the other. The taoistic teacher did not become the taoistic teacher himself. No, he was part of a complex network of teachers, role models, authors who all taught him indispensable lessons of becoming a taoistic teacher. But he did not copy them. No teacher does that. No, it is while relating towards his teachers, role models, leaders, and authors that he developed a relationship with them; he might have discussed important issues of cultivating the Qi, of doing meditation and helping other people; he might have even fought with those teachers in order to come to terms with his unique relatedness towards Taoism. Our experience of the world is necessary interlocked with the experience of our unique activity networks (Engeström, 2000) that develop in time. Yet, it is while relating towards the different activities of these networks that we as human beings develop our specific unique relatedness that is phenomenologically important in our lives (von Fircks, 2021a, c). Or in Graumann's terms (1984):

To our history – my history strictly speaking does not exist – belongs from the very beginning the social other with whom, since the beginning of our own thinking, we do communicate and speak our language. Our horizon of experience is opened up by our fellow man, expanded as well as limited. I have called the criterion of intentional sociality the communicative situatedness of man. (...) The corporeality of intentional subjects is only experienceable by means of relating to other people or ourselves; the intentional environment is shared with other beings, and we learned to appropriate it by our own means for example by work, language and art. (...) In the final analysis, man's task is to transcend all social and cultural structured entities which after coming into being are limiting and restricting ourselves in particular ways. (pp. 8-9)

## What Is the Task of Phenomenology?

Having clarified some basic concepts of a specific sort of eco-phenomenology, we need to ask the question what is then the task of a psychological phenomenology<sup>1</sup>? The answer is complex. Phenomenological psychologists have argued multiple times that the task of phenomenology is to observe and to describe (Adams, 2019; Graumann, 1984). It is within

<sup>1</sup> It is at this point of the manuscript that I want to clarify myself about the differences between a philosophical kind of phenomenology and an eco-psychological phenomenology. Phenomenology as initially conceived by Husserl (1900/1901) and further developed by Heidegger (2001) focused too much onto the individual creating meaning in various situations (Pfeiffer, 1952)—which is an undeniable human attitude called natural attitude (Cassirer, 2015; Luft, 2012). Yet, meaning making happens in a social structure and it is the individual appropriating cultural texts (Lotman, 1990) and expanding them personally (Stern, 2020) what describes an eco-phenomenological kind of phenomenology. I have called this kind of eco-phenomenological psychology *Alltagspsychologie* (von Fircks, 2022a, 2022c). This is further evidenced by the fact that Husserl (1900/1901) was mostly preoccupied with abstract thought experiments that were more or less distanced from human conduct within their everyday occurrence.

this specific set of methodological pureness that we can approach the person-environment unit.<sup>2</sup> Yet, for science this is not sufficient. We as psychologists are all confronted with the ultimate task of explaining and finding reasons for a specific set of actions (Graumann, 1984) and to eventually re-direct them when appropriate such as in therapy (Schneider & Krug, 2010). Graumann explains that describing is not explaining but why are these things separated (1984)?

It becomes separated if describing is purified for scientific description in which objects and movements are purely and intersubjectively observable. Everything that might seem like an interpretation is rejected. It is here that after the description, causal analysis takes place such as within the experiment. Yet, language does not play such an easy game; language does not primarily fulfil the function of observing things but is colloquial language. If somebody explains me how to deal with a computer, the construction of a pump or the way to the station, he explained me everything that is necessary for my everyday actions as well as for my everyday curiosity. (p. 12).

Staying within this example, it is important to bear in mind that me meeting the social other does not causally translate in me finding the right way to the station or to deal appropriately with my new computer. No, the meeting might be the beginning of me finding the right way. This meeting opens up the possibility of new experiences that will help me to find the right way to the station. Yet, I need to go the way myself. I need to check if I am on the right track. I might ask people on the way if I am lost or not. So, the meeting as initial experience opens up the realm of new experiences that will enhance and sharpen my relatedness towards a specific object, here a location. Causal analysis is not of great help here. Instead, we need an analysis of potentiality (Graumann, 1960, 1984).

But how does all that relate to our psychic functions? If somebody argues that he is hungry, does he describe how he feels or does he explain descriptively what we might perceive as bodily contractions or are the contractions an explanation for what the person calls hunger? The question is asked in a wrong way as it intermingles two discourses. The sentence of the social other *I am now hungry* is not a simple description nor an explanation for something. No, it is rather the verbalization of an intention such as *I am now going to eat* which could mean *Do you want to go with me?* I as recipient do not simply understand that intention but also why the social other has become sassy or looked impatiently at his watch or in other words the meaning of his conduct. (Graumann, 1984, p. 12)

Graumann (1960, 1984) continues to explain that the task of psychology is then to not separate meaning from human conduct while accepting that this particular human conduct is a specific theme and reconstruction of a meaning pattern of situated relatedness.

<sup>2</sup> One of the reviewers asked me kindly to specify the term of person-environment-unit—which goes back to Lang’s cultural psychological work (1988, 1992, 1993) as well as the work of Lewin (1926, 1933). We cannot conceive the person without his environment nor the environment without the person. Thus, we need to focus upon the person verbalizing specific—urgent—needs in particular environmental conditions. Work is an interesting phenomenon in this regard: The pediatrician interacts differently with his clients than the family doctor. In order to do his job appropriately, he needs to find peculiar ways to deal with the children adequately – ways that cannot be applied to the treatment of adults. Yet, there are multiple ways how to do that. Thus, there is no universal recipe and it depends upon the person appropriating this environmental task creatively in order to do justice to it (von Fircks, 2022b). Again, we cannot bracket the person nor the environment in this example. Hence, we speak of a person-environment-unit.

It is then the task of the psychologist to decipher this situated relatedness of the person-environment unit. It is here that the initial contradiction of description and explanation is resolved. “The explanation lies in the intentional description of person-environment unit” (Graumann, 1984, p. 12). In our taoistic example this means the following: The psychologist would describe the third poet’s relatedness towards the loss of his wife in a way that the description expresses his sadness but also the acceptance of this particular sadness by means of his taoistic way of life expressed in meditation for example or in a quote of Laozi that might have been shared with the psychologist. The explanation lies in the intentional relatedness towards the specific object which can be described and observed by the psychologist (von Fircks, 2021a, b, 2022a, b). Or in Graumann’s terms (1984):

It is worth the effort to ask the question how many psychological problems can be solved if we understood the reasons for specific actions and if we were to reconstruct how people relate to a situation and act in this regard or become frustrated. That these problems are of a different kind than stimulus thresholds, IQs or the tunnel effect is undoubtable, and I do not want to translate one problem into the other. Yet, I want to consider whether the number and meaning of the first kind of problems are greater than the literature suggests – and insofar the field of phenomenological inquiry. The demonstration of the intentional analysis should have made clear that one must not intermingle phenomenological description with scientific causal explanations (p. 12).

Graumann (1960, 1984) adds further that statistical methods, in general, do have a blind spot in shedding light onto the specific kind of relatedness towards an object that develops dynamically in time. If we were to imagine that our psychologist would have used a questionnaire to analyze the taoistic poet’s relatedness, he would not have understood his sadness as well as its acceptance. No, it is while meeting the poet and entering his environment that the psychologist could observe and describe his situated relatedness towards the loss of his wife (see also von Fircks, 2022a, b). Statistical methods unfortunately separate the individual from the environment (Valsiner, 2017) and are henceforth difficult to combine with a phenomenological kind of scientific inquiry.

## The Phenomenological Reduction

We have now discussed several postulates of a psychological phenomenology. But before turning our gaze to the inquiry of culture, we need to discuss first the complex function of bracketing in phenomenology that is discussed in various articles such as in Luft (2012). Human beings do have the tendency to perceive the world, naturally or to be related to their world without reflecting about this relatedness. It appears normal. It appears natural. In phenomenology, by means of the reduction, a third dimension comes into play if the thinking and corporeal human being becomes aware that his world is constituted by his experience and by the experience of his fellow man (Luft, 2012). It is within this realization that the human being performs the phenomenological reduction which transforms his whole being and adds a further dimension of him living and acting in his world. If I realize that my world is constituted by my experience and by those of my significant social others, I realize that I can willfully reject these constitution processes or try to advocate alternative ones (see also Heidegger,



2001). This opens up the realm of culture as constructed and co-constructed entity that is not an external force (Cassirer, 2015) but a subjectively transcendental drive of every human being performing the phenomenological reduction (Luft, 2012). It is in this regard that I consider the task of the psychological phenomenologist to shed light onto the interpretation (constitution) processes of a person in his specific environment that is necessarily co-constructed by his network of important social contacts such as professors, teachers, friends, parents, role models, authors, books and so forth.

## Summarizing the Phenomenological Postulates

Within our scientific inquiry of looking into different phenomenological postulates, we can capture the following:

1. Persons and environment are interlocked one with the other. Intentionality does not emerge without a person nor without an environment. It is a person relating to specific environmental demands and experiencing them. This makes a phenomenological inquiry indispensable that does not separate person or environment one from the other. It is in this regard that our environments become personally meaningful, and we can speak of human landscapes for example.
2. Every psychological landscape develops in time and has a historicity. Yet, there is more than that. Every psychological landscape possesses equally a horizon of further experiences, of openly constructed opportunities that unfold only in the present moment. This horizon is not to be understood causally.
3. The psychological landscape and its elements are perceived and interpreted by a subject with his body. Corporeality plays a major role in phenomenology and relating towards something does not happen without the body relating to the object, equally. By turning my gaze onto a specific object and interpreting it, my body synchronizes with my mind. The example of willfully deciding to do and experience meditation shows that human activity cannot be separated by mind or body. We need to reject the Cartesian split within phenomenology.
4. The historicity of my landscape as well as its opportunities only come into being by means of co-construction of my significant others (teachers, friends, and families). My world is not my world but also the world of my fellow man who shapes and transforms it by his very own means. The horizon of further experience can be thus altered, expanded, or limited by other people as my psychological landscape overlaps with theirs. Co-construction is a key-term for that.
5. Doing psychological research can be facilitated if people are observed in their natural way of relating towards their environments. It is within this specific relatedness that we are able to unravel their specific intentionality directed towards their environment. "The explanation lies in the intentional description of person-environment unit" (Graumann, 1984, p. 12).
6. Applying a phenomenological reduction helps us to realize that our world is constructed by ourselves co-constructed by your fellow man. This adds a further dimension of perceiving the world as culturally constituted. It is within this realization that we can willfully decide to question our relatedness and to possibly alter it.

## What Is Culture? Defining Culture as an Action Field

Before investigating the relationship between culture and phenomenology as well as the question what culture can learn from our phenomenological postulates and vice versa, we need first of all to clarify the term culture.

Culture can be understood an action field that is constituted by overlying needs and goals (Boesch, 1991, 1998). Yet, these needs and goals develop at the intersection of the person experiencing his/her environment and interpreting it (Lewin, 1926, 1948). I am aware that this might sound complex. Let us turn to an example for that: If I am hungry, I turn to my environment to satisfy my need. I go the fridge to get some food and to prepare it in the kitchen. My physical and psychic energy is directed towards the food, e.g., to grab it and to prepare it. My need transforms into an action that changes my environment—the food becomes unavailable for my partner—as well as for myself (from hunger to satisfaction). The food gets a positive valence, attracts me and helps me to satisfy my need. After satisfying the need, the food returns into a neutral valence and my action field gets relaxed (Lewin, 2013). My psychic and physical energy is no longer directed towards the food and can be re-direct towards the satisfaction of other needs and goals (von Fircks, 2022b). Yet, in another scenario I might not be able to satisfy my hunger as my partner had eaten all the food that I now wanted to eat. This changes the whole dynamic of the scene. Now, I need to go to the supermarket to get some food. I might phone my partner asking why s/he had not left anything for me and so forth. Our action fields are always overlapping with the ones of other people which changes the way how we organize the action field of ourselves (Valsiner, 2014). And our actions bear symbolic meaning (Boesch, 2002, 2005, 2006). That my partner had eaten all the food becomes a sign for me of being disrespected and not cared for which makes me phone her in order to yell at her. It is not a surprise that Boesch called his theory of culture symbolic action theory as our actions bear symbolic meaning for ourselves as well as for the social other whose action field overlaps with ours.

### The Symbolic Quality of Our Action Fields

Translating that into a more psychological example we could envisage the following: My partner is angry at me—because I might have eaten all her food. I experience the anger that is now necessary a part of my cultural environment as it blocks the need satisfaction of being cared for and being loved (social need). The need develops of clarifying the conflict in order to smooth things between my partner and myself as I experience my environment – here the anger of my partner. Yet, my reaction towards the anger is necessarily cultural. There are multiple opportunities that we could envisage how I am addressing the conflict. Yet, it needs to be understood against the background of my action field. How? I might have organized my personal action field (partnership) in a taoistic way which makes me interpret the anger differently than when having organized the action field in a revengeful way. The anger is an emotion for me that needs to be lived out and that should not be suppressed. So, I accept the anger and I do not resist it as I am convinced that once lived out, it will clear the air between us. However, if I have organized my action field in another way, I might react with sadness towards the anger accusing my partner because she does not come to terms with her emotions. In either way, the anger becomes a symbolic quality (Boesch, 1991; Toomela, 2021) against the background of my action field. It is this symbolic sign that changes the whole way how I interact with my environment and how I might transform

it. The task of cultural psychology is to shed light onto this relatedness that is a function of the person's action field (Boesch, 2002).

### Semiotic Extensions of Cultural Psychology

Lang (1992, 1993, 1997) as well as Valsiner (2014, 2019) have extended Boesch's symbolic action theory by means of a theory called cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics. Both have addressed how things and situations can become symbols (signs) for a person—within different interpretation processes—that organizes the way how people structure their environment. Signs and symbols within person-environment units—called ecological units (Lang, 1992, 1993)—are at the foreground of their theory. Let us illustrate their theory by a concrete example (von Fircks, 2021c). As I have visited one of my friends in the French pyrenes, I have been hiking with him in the mountains. He is one of the last cow farmers in the French pyrenes, and we were looking for his cows in order to check if they are good and at ease. While we were hiking, he told me that one of his cows died in the last year because it was struck by lightning. I was answering *Poor her*, and he was just looking at me in a very confused way. Only now I became aware of his confusion. As I am coming from an action field where animals are interpreted mostly as pets, I was sympathizing with the cow and not him. Yet, losing a cow for my friend means a loss of several hundreds of euros for him. The cow is a complex symbol of his work, the time and effort he invests into them; caring for them is caring for himself and the financial basis of his life. So, *Poor you* might have been a statement that would have been more appropriate for showing some respect with his complex action field. This small anecdote shows that our action field triggers the habitual ways how we see—or better interpret—things in our environment as well as act within our environment that is necessarily social. It becomes clear why statistical analysis will not yield into a sufficient understanding of people and their cultures as signs are organized in very unique ways against the background of the person's action field. Analyzing culture is thus only possible if entering the action field of our research participants and observing how they act within their action field (Boesch, 1978, 2021). No statistical tool—be it as advanced as it might be—can substitute the fact that action fields are only understood if discovered by oneself (Marrow, 1969).

### Summarizing Cultural Psychological Postulates

1. Culture is an action field that is constituted by a person's needs and goals. These needs and goals develop within the person relating to his/her environment. The need for social equality develops in a person when experiencing social injustices. The experience becomes personally meaningful as it is interpreted personally. Yet, there are multiple ways how the need and goal pursuit manifest themselves and they depend to a large degree onto the action fields of the significant others who are entering my action field or whose action fields I do enter, temporarily. Culture is actional. Yet, these actions do not happen in an empty space but against the background of overlapping action fields. Boesch's theory is therefore necessary social.
2. Based on the unique structure of a person's action field, things and situations become personally meaningful. Animals are seen and dealt with as pets as my action field is organized in a way of treating them as friends, siblings and so forth. The animal unfolds a different symbolic quality for me than for example for my friend living in the French pyrenes and who sees animals in a way of his financial existence.

3. This cultural relatedness organizes the way how I structure and interact with my (cultural) environment. The symbolic sign unfolds clear effects within my environment, the way how I perceive things and how I act within it. Misunderstandings and conflicts emerge if action fields are contradictory, thus negatively interdependent. Me showing sympathy with the pets is negatively interdependent with the farmer growing cows and selling them for slaughter. Based on these conflicts and misunderstandings people become aware of the action field of the social other, thus of the social other's unique, personal culture. This opens up the notion of temporality, me realizing how I had structured my environment as well as how the social other had structured his environment, in the past to now. Yet, this might be also the trigger point of me changing the way how I define my culture from now to the next present moment (future). Action fields are thus folded between the past and the future (von Fircks, 2021d).
4. Unraveling the unique structure of a person's culture is only possible if a researcher immerses into exactly that action field and observes the way how the actors act, move and talk within that action field. Statistical analyses bracket that environment and do isolate the cognitive from the mind–body unit.

### Similarities Between Culture and Phenomenology

All of this seems similar to our eco-phenomenological postulates that we have elaborated in the very beginning. The pyrene's example shows that people-environment units are the necessary analysis topoi of a cultural analysis. The human landscape that has been phenomenologically evaluated is in Boesch's theory the action field that is symbolically meaningful in very divergent ways for different persons implied. Corporeality plays a major role in cultural psychology too as for example the farmer and me were looking after the cows and our body synchronized with our needs and goal pursue. The specific relatedness was unraveled by observing verbal and non-verbal human conduct towards the same object (cow) and applying the phenomenological reduction helped me to realize that our action fields are structured psychologically and physically different but are for sure prone to our very unique relatedness. The body is the primary meaning making arena of human beings (Valsiner, 2014, 2019) as it became visible in my friend's confusion. The explanation of me and my friend's conduct lied in the intentional description of person and environment unit. Bracketing my initial relatedness helped me to realize that I am coming from another cultural background which organized my interaction with farmers and animals in a very different way. This opened up the realm of relating myself differently towards the cow and therefore towards the work of my friend and which helped me to get rid of my friend's confusion in my next visits. I have summarized and described these major similarities between Cultural Psychology and eco-phenomenology in Table 1.

### What Culture and Phenomenology Can Learn from Each Other

Comparing the phenomenological postulates with the theory of cultural psychology lets me summarize the following: Culture is phenomenological. And phenomenology is cultural. Both terms are not the same, yet they both unravel in their very unique ways how people relate to their environments. I do not want to make scientists to use those terms interchangeably but to become aware of the premises they share one with the other and how they interact. The phenomenologist can learn indispensable lessons from the cultural

**Table 1** Similarities between cultural psychology and eco-phenomenology

Cultural psychology	Eco-phenomenology
Action field (Boesch, 1991)	Landscapes (Schapp, 1975)
Ecological units (Lang, 1992)	Person-environment units (Graumann, 1984, 2002)
Man's situatedness within the action field (Boesch, 1991). Body is the primary meaning making arena of human beings (Valsiner, 2014, 2019)	Corporeality (Graumann, 1984, Luft, 2012; Merleau-Ponty, 1966; von Fircks, 2021a, b, c, d)
Folded action fields (e.g., Sato et al., 2009; von Fircks, 2021b)	Phenomenological horizon and historicity (Graumann, 1960; Luft, 2012)
Overlapping action fields (Lewin, 1926; von Fircks, 2021b, d)	Sociality of human situatedness (Graumann, 1984, 2002)
Understanding culture by means of immersing into the action field (Lewin, 2013). Statistical methods bracket the environment (Valsiner, 2017)	Understanding the human landscape by describing intentional relatedness of person facing environmental demands (Graumann, 1984, 2002). Statistical methods bracket the environment

psychologist how actions are symbolically loaded. He can realize that an action field moves always between a tense and relaxed state concerning the person's needs in his environment. It organizes psychic and physical energy (Lewin, 1926, 2013).<sup>3</sup> Yet, the cultural psychologist might learn from the phenomenologist indispensable lessons in applying the phenomenological reduction or the bracketing. Bracketing my initial way of interpretation (symbol), helps me to realize that there are multiple ways (horizons) of seeing the object and relating to it. This is especially important in times of conflicts and misunderstandings (von Fircks, 2021b).

In re-organizing my interpretation or my relatedness in phenomenological terms, I change the whole way how I act and interact within my environment. This adds a further dimension to cultural psychology; the realization of culture as something constructed and co-constructed by an individual and his fellow man that can change every moment in time. Phenomenology and cultural psychology share similar grounds of theoretical underpinnings (see Table 1). Yet, they can learn valuable lessons from each other. The bracketing function of phenomenology has been long ignored in cultural psychology (except for von Fircks, 2021b), and phenomenology did not pay attention how needs and goals organize psychic and physical energy and therefore how action is catalyzed within our very unique action fields (see Table 2 for blind spots).

The advantage of culture is its actional topoi whereas phenomenology has been over-focusing specific sorts of perceptual relatedness; yet the bracketing function can benefit cultural psychology in terms of creating cultural interventions at work, in therapy, in school

<sup>3</sup> Again, one of the reviewers asked me to clarify my concept of ecological psychology, for example in regards to Barker & Gibson relying on the notion of affordances within particular environments (Heft, 2016). While I consider the theory of Barker and Gibson fruitful for further research bridging psychology and phenomenology, I want to remain in a Boeschian and Lewinian framework of psychology. For what Barker and Gibson (Heft, 2016) call affordances, both psychologists use the term valences. A chair presents us with the positive valence to sit down. Yet, it depends upon the person for which reason he wants to sit down. Does he want to sit down because he wants to eat or to read? The action is similar from the outset, the valence remains the same (to sit down and to structure a specific action) but the intentional relatedness differs drastically (Lewin, 1927). Thus, we need to analyze person, intention, object, valence in a square-like relationship.

**Table 2** Blind spots in cultural psychology and eco-phenomenology

Cultural psychology	Eco-phenomenology
No theory of bracketing	Bracketing helps me to realize that my landscape is constructed and co-constructed in time (Luft, 2012)
Psychic and physical energy gets catalyzed by means of a person's goals and needs (Lewin, 1926). People are actional Relatedness is expressed in symbols (Toomela, 2021) and signs (Valsiner, 2014)	Relatedness is analyzed starkly in a perceptual way (Graumann, 1960; Husserl, 1900/01; Merleau-Ponty, 1966) No major theory of human sign and symbol use

and so forth which makes people realize the construction and co-construction processes of their very own culture that can be willfully transcended.

### Applying the Phenomenological Reduction onto the Dialogical Self-theory

I am aware that the above-described might seem abstract for the readers. That is why I want to apply the phenomenological reduction onto a cultural psychological theory, briefly. The dialogical self-theory is a prominent example of cultural psychology that has been applied to a variety of psychological application fields such as the leadership domain (von Fircks, 2020). The dialogical self-theory draws upon multiple I-positions that people cultivate in their lives. Yet, these I-positions develop at the intersection of a person relating to his/her environmental demands (Hermans, 1999, 2001). A father cultivates his I-position the moment his wife gets pregnant. What does it phenomenologically mean for a man whose girlfriend has told him I am pregnant. Confusion? Pride? Fear? Fascination? Out of all this *mélange* of feelings begins to grow the I-position I-as-Father.

In the very beginning of the conversation, the man begins to worry about the duties and responsibilities for a newborn baby. Is he able to do justice to the needs of the new being? Will it affect the relationship to his wife, in a negative way? Does he need to reduce the hours he is working, weekly? The man in the example needs to develop a stance towards these questions. Yet, he might develop a stand that is over-dramatically worrying such as "I will not be able to do this." His wife might tell him: "We're in this together, and together we will make it no matter what happens." It his wife's statement that will allow him to bracket his initial worry and to realize that both can transcend the duties and responsibilities by developing a jointly negotiated stand. The bracketing allows man and woman to realize that these questions and the overwhelming feelings that come with them are a natural way of relating to a pregnancy. Yet, they can be overcome by means of constructing a concrete answer towards them. The bracketing of the questions allows them to come to terms with their worries and to then reach an agreement how to jointly develop a stance towards the issue at stake.

von Keyserling (2016) wrote an interesting short story illuminating some of the phenomenological dynamics of bringing an illegitimate child to birth. The female protagonist Kersta starts to develop a love affair with a forestry assistant while her husband (soldier) needed to leave his home for a mission. Suddenly, Kersta gets pregnant and is full of self-doubt. She knows that she did something wrong, yet she cannot change it. People in the

village started talking behind her back but her mother tried to support her in these difficult times. Sooner than foreseen, her husband Thome came back home as he got injured. Both talked about a juridical affair—for which Kersta represented her man—in their home while all of a sudden Kersta heard a whimpering.

Kersta eifrig hervorpreschend, erhob sich mechanisch, ging zu der Wiege hinüber, nestelte ihre Jacke auf, nahm das Kind und gab ihm die Brust. Sie erhob ein wenig die Stimme, um aus der Ecke verstanden zu werden. (...) Thome kam schon auf sie zu, langsam, den Kopf vorgestreckt, als wollte er etwas fangen. Schnell legte sie das Kind in die Wiege zurück und stellte sich davor. Sie wurde sehr blass, schob die Unterlippe vor, und die runden Augen öffneten sich ganz weit und wurden glasklar wie bei geängstigten Tieren. Weil die Hände ihr zitterten, faltete sie sie über dem Bauch. (...). „Was ist das?“ sprach Thome leise, als würgte ihn einer. (...) „Ein Kind – nu ja. Wo soll’s denn herkommen?“ (...) „So – so – eine bist du“ fauchte Thome. Er fasste ihr Handgelenk und zerrte sie in die Mitte des Zimmers. (...). Er begann Kersta zu schlagen, unbarmherzig. (von Keyserling, 2016, p. 88)

Kersta stood up mechanically, went to the cradle, took the child and gave it her breast. She raised her voice to be understood from the corner. (...) Thome approached her, slowly, thrusting out his head as if he wanted to catch something. Rapidly, she put the child back in the cradle and stood in front of it. She got pale, moved her lower lip, and the round eyes opened fully and became crystal clear like frightened animals. Because her hands trembled, she put them in front of her stomach. (...). “What’s that?”, spoke Thome quietly as if someone choked him. (...)” Well, a child. Where should it come from?”. “I did not know you were such a person”, Thome hissed. He took her wrist and pulled her in the middle of the room (...). He started to beat her, merciless.

The narrator continues to explain that the very first time the joint living was painful for Kersta and Thome, and Kersta needed to hide her child, continuously. Yet, after a while Thome did not speak of the child as much as in the beginning and concentrated himself fully upon the juridical affaire as well as agricultural questions. Suddenly, when he came back from the city and when they had won the juridical affaire, Thome said the following:

“Hier ist was für dich.“ Er legte Kersta ein rotseidenes Tuch auf den Kopf. (...). „Na so.“; und halb abgewandt, wie verlegen, warf Thome eine Semmel auf den Tisch. „Und das da – habe ich gekauft – für – den da ...“ „Für wen?“ „Nu – für den Balg.“ Kersta nahm die Semmel und drückte sie andächtig gegen ihre Mieder. So, jetzt kam vielleicht auch für sie in bisschen gute Zeit. (von Keyserling, 2016, p. 90)

“I got something for you.” He put a red headscarf on Kerster’s head. “Well, okay.”, and Thome looking away as well as embarrassed, threw some bread rolls on the table. “And this, I bought – for – him”. “For whom?”, “Well, for the child”. Kersta took the bread rolls and pushed them devoutly against her costume. Maybe now a better time has come for her.

In the very beginning of the short story, we see that Thome acted within an I-position that we could call I-as-betrayed husband. His wife as well as her child were seen in the light of the betrayal, for Thome. This interpretation dramatically increased when Thome decided to beat Kersta as well as got in a bad mood when seeing the foreign child. Yet, Thome did overcome this rigid I-position after a while and after some success in his job as well as the juridical affair. He started to value Kersta for her involvement in the juridical affair and got her a present.

Symbolically, he started to accept the child the moment he brought something for him from the city. This surely is an act of care. A fatherly act. And it is in this moment that he started to develop an I-position I-as-caregiver which changed his interaction with the child as well as his wife. The story ends after the last quote, and we do not know how the story proceeds. Yet, the short story is sufficient to show that Thome was bracketing his initial I-position I-as-betrayed-husband, slowly refraining from beating Kersta as well as shouting at her (von Keyserling, 2016, p. 90) embracing hesitantly a caregiver I-position which changed the whole way of Thome acting in his environment as well as interacting with his wife and the foreign child (e.g. tender and thoughtful interactions). The phenomenological bracketing allowed the protagonist to relate to his family in a new way changing the whole story to come that we do not know as it ends after the last quote. I call such a theory cultural psychology of phenomenological dynamics.

I'd like to complement this theory with a more contemporary example. The prominent Gestalt therapist Polster held a seminar with Fritz Perls in order to train future therapists (see Polster & Polster, 1973). Yet, Perls realized that the group was not interacting one with the other. They were rather passive not asking any questions to Perls or between each other. That's why he asked Polster to question everything that he might feed into the group discussion in order to stimulate interaction. And Polster did that. The result was that the group was developed a genuine atmosphere of interest and interaction as they began to ask more frequently questions (Polster & Polster, 1973).

Relating phenomenology with the dialogical self-theory, we could analyze the following: Every I-position has a different correlate of relatedness. Perls was leading the seminar in the very beginning, so he was drawing upon his I-position I-as-leader. This was surely beneficial in order to organize the group, thus meeting the environmental demand of structuring the seminar. Yet, Perls realized that the group needed something different in order to proceed with their training, here discussion and interaction. That's why he bracketed his I-position I-as-leader and began to re-direct himself towards the I-position I-as-teacher which was more in accordance with the need of stimulating active discussion. Performing a personal phenomenological reduction helped Perls to re-organize his Self and thus the way how he relates to his environment. This is pure phenomenology. And it is even more than that. It is a specific sort of Cultural Psychology of phenomenological dynamics as his environment (trainees) began to relate to Perls in a different way, too.

## **Outlook: the Need of Initiating a Fertile Cooperation**

Therefore, I want to appeal the readers to approach the two disciplines and to hold joint seminars. We can learn from each other. And we might create a study field where we can draw upon the fruits of our cooperation. Incorporating a major theory of the bracketing function of phenomenology within cultural psychology would be such a first cooperation that could be beneficial not only for cultural psychology as a science but as a field of application. Incorporating a major theory of psychic and physical energy as done by Lewin (1926) in (cultural) psychology would be beneficial for phenomenology going beyond simple thought experiments and our perceptual relatedness as done in Husserl (1900/01) or Merleau-Ponty (1966) for example. Culture becomes a specific sort of phenomenology if it will account for the important function of the phenomenological reduction. And phenomenology will become a theory of culture when accounting for physical and psychic (tensive) states.



The present article is a first—humble—try of relating phenomenology and culture and showing what both fields could learn from each other on the basis of similarities and blind spots. The lessons that I have been drawing upon are not exhaustive. No, they are more of a shy beginning in relating phenomenology and culture. Drawing upon the fruits of that cooperation is the next step as shown for example in phenomenologizing Herman's dialogical self-theory. This first bridging work between cultural psychology and eco-phenomenology has evidenced the benefits of relating two scientific disciplines. It has shown us that our Self is relative—culturally co-constructed. Yet, this co-construction can be overcome any minute in time and depends upon the personal stance towards the cultural givens. Thus, the Self is dynamic and needs to be re-organized based on specific needs that develop between person and environment. For this particular re-organization, we need to bracket dominant I-position while shifting them to the background. This does not mean to eliminate those (von Fircks, 2020) but to adapt them situationally. Our cultural-phenomenological inquiry has shown us this relativity of the Self, illustratively. Now, it depends on other researchers to meditate about the above-mentioned and to develop their personal stance towards the text in order to harvest the fruits (von Fircks, 2022d).

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