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Center for Subjectivity Research: History, Contribution and Impact

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Abstract

In this article, we describe the history and impact of the Center for Subjectivity Research (CFS) since its inception in 2002 and until 2020. From its very beginning, CFS was structured to facilitate and carry out interdisciplinary research on human subjectivity, taking phenomenology as an important source of inspiration. We cover some of the most important research areas in which CFS has had a national and international impact. These include developing the field of existential hermeneutics, opening a dialogue between phenomenology and analytic philosophy, creating a multi-dimensional account of the self, exploring the interrelations between I, you and we,

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and conceptualizing and assessing self-disorders in schizophrenia spectrum disorders. Over the years, research at CFS has demonstrated the vitality of the phenomenological tradition, and shown how phenomenology can contribute to contemporary theoretical and scientific debates.

Keywords

Center for Subjectivity Research – phenomenology – analytic philosophy – hermeneutics – selfhood – sociality – psychiatry – schizophrenia

1 Introduction

In 2001, Dan Zahavi (Professor of Philosophy), Josef Parnas (Professor of Psychiatry), and Arne Grøn (Professor of Ethics and Philosophy of Religion) submitted an application to the Danish National Research Foundation concerning the formation of an interdisciplinary and cross-faculty center for research into human subjectivity. The application was successful and in March 2002 the Center for Subjectivity Research (CFS) was established at the University of Copenhagen. But why that name, why call it Center for *Subjectivity* Research? The concept of subjectivity is a concept with a long and complex history in Western thought. Since Descartes, and in particular since Kant, subjectivity has been a persistent concern to many philosophers working within the German and French traditions. In the period from Kant to Hegel, sometimes labelled as the reign of the philosophy of subjectivity (Bayne et al., 2009, 618), subjectivity was even considered to constitute if not the most, then at least one of the most important themes and principles of philosophy. In 20th century philosophy, this theoretical orientation probably found its most significant continuation in phenomenology. By letting a seemingly outdated concept like subjectivity figure in the name of CFS, the co-founders intended to signal their conviction that if we ignore traditional resources, we might not only risk reinventing the wheel but also miss out on crucial insights of relevance to contemporary theoretical and scientific discussions.

From the outset, CFS was structured to facilitate and carry out interdisciplinary research on subjectivity. CFS sought to open a dialogue not only between different traditions within the humanities and theology, but also between philosophy and the empirical sciences. Indeed, research at CFS was consistently driven by the convictions that the complexity of the study object, viz. human subjectivity, requires the adoption of conceptual and methodological pluralism, and that such an eclectic approach is precisely and acutely what

has been missing in much of the contemporary debate. Since the inception of CFS, phenomenological thinking has been a structuring and guiding force, opening dialogues between traditions and disciplines. The phenomenological motto 'To the things themselves' calls for us to let our experience guide our theories. In other words, one way in which phenomenology enriches the theoretical efforts of other disciplines is by requiring that we pay close attention to how investigated objects appear to us in experience, so that we may then use these insights to inform our theoretical approach to these very objects. Crucially, the route that CFS has followed has not been a one-way street where phenomenological theorizing has simply offered analyses and conceptual resources to other disciplines. Empirical sciences have also provided concrete findings that phenomenological theorizing has engaged with, as well as evidence forcing a revision or refinement of basic phenomenological analyses. Ideal interdisciplinary research is very much a two-way street of mutual enlightenment.

Over the years, CFS members have worked on a number of different topics including intentionality, imagination, empathy, action, perception, embodiment, naturalism, self-consciousness, self-disorders, schizophrenia, autism, normativity, ethics, anxiety and trust. They have engaged with the work of a number of classical thinkers including Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Schleiermacher, Brentano, Husserl, Heidegger, Schutz, Levinas, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur. They have collaborated and co-authored pieces with psychiatrists, neuroscientists, anthropologists, theologians, developmental psychologists, clinical psychologists, cognitive scientists, nurses, semioticians and Buddhist scholars. In addition, CFS has along with the University of Memphis been the home of the journal *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*.

In the following, we present some of the core research areas in which CFS has made substantial contributions to contemporary research. In section 2, we focus on contributions that broadly fall within the categories of existential hermeneutics, phenomenology, analytic philosophy, and interdisciplinary research on sociality. In section 3, we present one of the cornerstones of cross-faculty research at CFS, namely the collaboration between philosophy and psychiatry.

2 Existential Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, Analytic Philosophy, and Interdisciplinary Research on Sociality

The dialogue between different philosophical traditions has played a central role in the research activities of CFS since its very beginning and has profoundly shaped its research ethos. One branch of the center's research, led by Arne

Grøn, can be subsumed under the heading of existential hermeneutics. Drawing on resources from German idealism, Kierkegaard's philosophy, Heidegger's and Ricoeur's hermeneutics, and Theunissen's philosophy, Grøn developed an existential form of hermeneutics, addressing problems of human existence such as identity, freedom, time, history, normativity, and trust (e.g., Grøn 2002, 2004, 2013). Grøn's existential hermeneutics does not provide normative guidelines on how to live one's life but seeks instead to articulate the structures of individual human existence (Hansen et al. 2019, 10). Grøn was thereby reasserting and developing the classical idea that the existing subject or self is not simply or automatically itself but has to continuously become itself. From this perspective, to exist is fundamentally to relate to oneself, as Kierkegaard famously put it, and the ways in which one relates to oneself are decisive for who one takes oneself to be. Yet, one's self-understanding, Grøn emphasized, is not somehow self-enclosed or self-sufficient, untouched by one's interactions with others and with symbolic, cultural objects in the shared world. Furthermore, it is a characteristic feature of human self-understanding that it can break down, and that one can thereby become alienated from oneself. In his analyses of the breakdowns of self-understanding, Grøn argued that experiences of self-alienation, though obviously distressing, entail a unique potential for acquiring an enriched and more nuanced self-understanding. Investigating the close-knit relationship between self-understanding and self-alienation in the context of the human self-relation has been central to this branch of research at CFS (e.g., Michaelsen et al. 2019).

Two other traditions that have had a prominent role in the research agenda of CFS are classical phenomenology and analytic philosophy. In spite of counting as two of the most influential traditions of the 20th century, the relationship between them has not been always characterized by fruitful exchange and cross-fertilization. In fact, most of the time it has ranged from disregard to outright hostility. This is surprising, though, not only because of the presence of common themes in the work of founding figures of both traditions—consider Frege's and Husserl's critique of psychologism—but also because recent developments have led an increasing number of analytic philosophers to engage with topics such as phenomenal consciousness and embodiment that have been extensively analyzed in the phenomenological tradition. Before elaborating on these points, it is worth highlighting that CFS has contributed to the dialogue between phenomenology and other philosophical traditions by developing in the first place an inclusive conception of phenomenology. Like all traditions, phenomenology is one that encompasses many differences. But appreciation of these differences should not lead one to endorse the once influential view that post-Husserlian phenomenologists distanced themselves to such an extent from the work of the founder, that any systematic continuities

with Husserl's work were thereby erased. To a large extent, this misinterpretation hinged on a very impoverished interpretation of Husserl's phenomenological philosophy, an interpretation that has been decisively challenged in the last two decades (Zahavi, 1996, 2003, 2017).

If we now turn to some of the themes on which phenomenology and analytic philosophy have remarkably converging interests, and that have been at the forefront of research at CFS for many years, we can start by considering the increasing interest within analytic circles in the first-personal or experiential dimension of consciousness. After a long period of neo-behaviorist functionalism, and in the wake of contributions by philosophers like Nagel (1974), Searle (1983) and Strawson (1994), it has become evident to most analytic philosophers working on consciousness that a satisfying account of consciousness cannot make do with a merely functional analysis of intentional behavior. Even advocates of a strong reductionistic approach to consciousness now recognize that a plausible theory of consciousness must be phenomenologically adequate, and that subjectivity and experience are topics of philosophical importance in this regard. Until recently, however, very few analytic philosophers had taken the trouble to engage with the resources to be found in phenomenology. Typically, they have done what Searle and Nagel did, that is they have tried to start from scratch. Rather than making use of results already obtained, they attempted to analyze the experiential dimension on their own. While there might be something laudable about this endeavor, there is however also a real risk involved: the risk of reinventing sliced bread. In the last years, the situation has changed, and CFS members have played a prominent role in fostering the long overdue dialogue between phenomenology and analytic philosophy (Zahavi 2005, Overgaard 2007, Gallagher & Zahavi 2012). More and more analytic philosophers of mind have become aware of the rich and refined accounts of consciousness that phenomenology can provide. They have realized that subjectivity always has been a central concern for phenomenologists, and that the latter have devoted much time to a close scrutiny of the first-person perspective, the structures of experience, time-consciousness, body-awareness, self-awareness, intentionality etc., making phenomenologists into obvious interlocutors (see, for example, Miguens et al. 2016; Romdenh-Romluc 2017).

One important contribution by CFS has been the development of a multi-dimensional account of selfhood (Zahavi 2005, 2014). On this account, the most fundamental aspect of selfhood, also called the minimal or experiential self, is an integral part of phenomenal consciousness, and can indeed be identified with the ubiquitous first-personal character of experience. The second dimension is the self in its relation to and interaction with concrete others,

which following Neisser can be called “the interpersonal self” (Neisser, 1988). Moreover, there is also an even more normatively enriched and diachronically extended notion of selfhood, which is dependent on participation in a linguistic community, narratives, shared traditions and values. Examining the interrelations between these dimensions of selfhood has also led to further engagements with the topic of affectivity, and in particular with the emotion of shame. Shame, it has been argued, testifies to an other-mediated form of self-experience, and can help to illuminate the relation between the experiential and the narrative notions of selfhood (Zahavi, 2012, 2014).

Another area in which there are noticeable intersections between phenomenology and recent developments within analytic philosophy concerns the embodied and embedded nature of the self. Phenomenology is known for its emphasis on the embodied and world-embedded nature of the self. This, in part, is what the famous phrase ‘being-in-the-world’ is all about. In the last decades, an increasing number of analytic philosophers have distanced themselves from traditional armchair philosophy and abandoned the attempt to capture the basic structures of the mind solely by means a priori conceptual analysis. They have instead engaged extensively with empirical sciences, drawing upon resources found in cognitive science, psychopathology, neuropsychology, and developmental psychology. As a result, they have become more attentive to the interplay between subjectivity, embodiment, and environment, and have reached conclusions on issues such as the bodily roots of self-experience, the connection between exteroception and proprioception, and the existence of pre-linguistic forms of social interaction, that all bear a striking resemblance to views found within phenomenology (Bermúdez, 2000; Bermúdez et al., 1995).

According to one misconception that used to be influential in some philosophical circles, the phenomenologists’ persistent preoccupation with consciousness and subjectivity prevented them from acknowledging and developing compelling analyses of how we understand other people. Research at CFS has thoroughly criticized this misconception. It has shown that phenomenology can be a major interlocutor in debates about social cognition and interpersonal understanding, and that phenomenology’s concern with consciousness and the first-person singular perspective, far from precluding a compelling investigation of how we understand others, provides a fruitful platform for a plausible account of intersubjectivity and sociality (Zahavi, 2014). Two prominent CFS contributions on this front are 1) the exploration of convergences between phenomenological discussions of sociality and discussions to be found in the work of authors like Wittgenstein (Overgaard, 2007), and 2) research on empathy. While there has recently been a lot of interest in empathy

in different disciplines, the concern with empathy is, in fact, not new. During the second decade of the 20th century, a number of phenomenologists including Husserl, Stein, and Scheler all engaged in intense discussions about how best to analyze and characterize the nature and structure of empathy. They developed nuanced and multi-layered analyses of empathy, and investigated the relation between empathy and related phenomena such as emotional contagion, sympathy, and emotional sharing. Although these thinkers did not agree on everything, there is still a sufficient amount of overlap between their respective theories to warrant the talk of a distinct phenomenological account of empathy. This account differs rather markedly from recent attempts to explain empathy in terms of mirroring, mimicry, imitation, emotional contagion, imaginative projection or inferential attribution (see Zahavi, 2014), since the phenomenologists conceived of empathy as a distinct other-directed form of intentionality, one that allows the other's experiences to disclose themselves as other. One noteworthy feature of this proposal is that while remaining firmly committed to the first-personal character of consciousness, it also highlights and respects what is distinctive about the givenness of others.

The phenomenological investigation of empathy has in recent years been brought to bear on debates on collective intentionality. What is the status of the first-person plural, or we-perspective? Who are we, and what does it take for us to do and experience things together, rather than merely in parallel? Investigations of collective intentionality in analytic philosophy have often had a rather narrow focus on shared or collective intentions (for reviews, see Schweikard & Schmid 2013; Tollefsen 2004), and have largely ignored the resources that classical phenomenology can offer for investigating the we-perspective. In the last few years, CFS has directly engaged with these discussions. Researchers at CFS have articulated and brought resources from classical phenomenology into the contemporary debate (Zahavi, 2015; León & Zahavi, 2016; León, Szanto, & Zahavi, 2019), and one ongoing topic of exploration in this regard is the role of empathy and interpersonal understanding for the constitution of a we-perspective. A more specific proposal has been that the second-person singular perspective might be crucial for the first-person plural. The second-person perspective involves a reciprocal empathic relation between you and me, since a unique feature of relating to you as you is that you also have a second-person perspective on me, that is, you take me as your you. In short, to adopt the second-person perspective is to engage in a subject–subject relation where I am aware of the other and, at the same time, implicitly aware of myself as addressed by the other (Zahavi, 2015, 2019).

As already mentioned, various of the philosophical analyses developed at CFS were subsequently picked up by and had an impact on non-philosophical disciplines, including developmental psychology, anthropology, nursing and

cognitive science. But the influence didn't only go in one direction. Let us here only mention two examples. Jonathan Cole's work on neuropathology, especially his careful case study of Ian Waterman, who at the age of 19 lost all sense of touch and proprioception from the neck down, and whose body-awareness consequently underwent a radical transformation, led Zahavi to qualify some of his earlier claims concerning the link between proprioception and object-perception. Work done by developmental psychologists such as Philippe Rochat and Vasudevi Reddy on interpersonal understanding and joint attention in early childhood likewise fed into some of Zahavi's analyses of both empathy and shame. The most significant exchange, however, took place in the domain of psychopathology, which we will discuss in the following section.

The brief survey presented in this section is intended to illustrate the pluralistic and problem-oriented orientation that characterizes the research carried out at the CFS, engaging with resources from phenomenology, analytic philosophy, and other disciplines. This orientation is a key component of the research ethos of the CFS.

3 Philosophy and Psychiatry

One of the most fruitful areas of cross-faculty research at CFS has taken place at the interface between philosophy and psychiatry. Possibly the clearest sign of this interdisciplinary research effort is the five major international conferences on *Philosophical Issues in Psychiatry*, co-organized by Kenneth Kendler and Josef Parnas, which all took place in Copenhagen. The conferences attracted prolific researchers within various scientific fields, including developers of the *International Classification of Diseases, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, and the *Research Domain Criteria*. Drawing on their respective disciplines, they addressed fundamental issues in psychiatry such as psychopathology, nosology, and methodological and explanatory approaches to mental disorders, in a collaborative effort to advance psychiatry as a medical science and clinical profession. The conference's keynote presentations, commentaries, and replies were subsequently published by renowned University Presses (Kendler & Parnas 2008, 2012, 2015; 2017; Kendler et al., 2020).

Philosophical and especially phenomenological resources have consistently been applied to critically revise and clarify basic concepts of psychopathology such as psychosis (Parnas 2015), delusion (Parnas 2004), hallucination (Henriksen et al. 2015), first-rank symptoms (Nordgaard et al. 2008), borderline (Zandersen et al. 2019), and poor insight into illness and double bookkeeping (Henriksen & Parnas 2014). In 2003, Louis Sass and Josef Parnas proposed

the now famous ipseity disturbance model of schizophrenia, arguing that apparently heterogenous symptoms and signs of schizophrenia such as positive symptoms, negative symptoms, and disorganized symptoms may have a common basis in a frail sense of self (Sass & Parnas 2003). Compared to much contemporary research in philosophy of psychiatry, a distinctive feature of the research of CFS in this area is that it is clinically grounded. This is also the case for the theoretical and empirical work on anomalous self-experiences (i.e. self-disorders) in schizophrenia spectrum disorders, which has been carried out at the Mental Health Center Hvidovre/Glostrup by Josef Parnas and his colleagues.

One of the most important contributions in this research area was the publication of *EASE: Examination of Anomalous Self-Experience* (Parnas et al. 2005). The EASE scale offers a systematic, qualitative and quantitative, semi-structured exploration of anomalous self-experiences, which, at least to some extent, are considered to reflect a disturbed experiential or minimal self (Henriksen et al. 2019). The impetus that eventually led to the construction of the EASE scale arose from daily clinical work in a unit for young, first-admission patients suspected to suffer from schizophrenia or schizotypal disorder. In the years around the turn of the millennium, Josef Parnas and Lennart Jansson interviewed approximately 100 patients, exploring anomalous (non-psychotic) experiences of schizophrenia spectrum disorders. The interviews were phenomenologically oriented, open-ended, and sought to stimulate spontaneous self-reports about the patients' experiential life. Parnas and Jansson found that many of the patients, in quite similar ways, described a lack of identity and feelings of self-transformation. In addition to these initial clinical interviews, the EASE scale was inspired by classical descriptions of subtle psychopathological phenomena. Some prominent sources of these descriptions came from the German and French tradition (e.g., found in the works of Janet, Bleuler, Gruhle, Berze, Minkowski, and Blankenburg), the work on 'basic symptoms' by Huber, Gross, Klosterkötter, Schultze-Lutter, and their colleagues (e.g., Gross et al. 1987), and inputs from philosophy, including Zahavi's early work on self-experience (Zahavi 1999, Parnas & Zahavi 2002). The EASE scale was created in a collaboration between senior interdisciplinary scholars from Norway, Germany and Denmark and has today been translated into more than 10 languages (see www.easenet.dk for details).

The EASE scale comprises 57 main items, aggregated into five domains: 1) Cognition and Stream of Consciousness; 2) Self-Awareness and Presence; 3) Bodily Experiences; 4) Demarcation/Transitivism; 5) Existential Reorientation/Solipsism. Psychometric testing of the EASE scale has shown excellent internal consistency (Chronbach's alpha coefficient $\alpha > 0.90$ [Nordgaard & Parnas 2014]),

a mono-factorial structure (ibid.), and good-to-excellent inter-rater reliability among trained and experienced psychiatrists (Cohen's kappa values of ≥ 0.65 [e.g., Møller et al. 2011]). Yet, reliable scoring of EASE items requires extensive psychopathological knowledge, clinical experience, and training in the phenomenological use of the EASE scale.

The publication of the EASE scale spurred an interest in schizophrenia spectrum disorders but also in phenomenological psychopathology more generally. Empirical EASE studies have been launched worldwide and, in the following, a few of the central results are summarized: i) self-disorders hyper-aggregate in schizophrenia spectrum disorders but not in other mental disorders; ii) the levels of self-disorders are similar among patients with schizophrenia and patients with the schizotypal disorder, indicating that self-disorders are a vulnerability phenotype for the entire schizophrenia spectrum; iii) prospective studies have found that high baseline scores of self-disorders predict later transition to a schizophrenia spectrum diagnosis; and iv) self-disorders have been found to be temporarily stable over 5 years (Parnas & Henriksen 2014; Nordgaard et al. 2017). Since self-disorders are typically present years prior to illness onset and also tend to persist after remission from frank psychotic episodes, self-disorders are obvious candidates for early detection and intervention programmes in psychiatry, as well for etiological and pathogenetic research in schizophrenia spectrum disorders.

A clear sign of the broad impact of this research is the inclusion of 'disturbances of self-experience' as a defining feature of schizophrenia in the new 11th edition of the *International Classification of Diseases*. There have also been recent attempts to translate insights from research on self-disorders and phenomenological psychopathology into psychotherapeutic practice (Škodlar & Henriksen 2019).

4 Conclusion

Our aim in this contribution has been to cover some of the most important areas of research in which CFS has had a national and international impact. By way of conclusion, let us go back to the role of phenomenology in the research conducted at the CFS. As mentioned earlier, phenomenology has been a guiding force in the research agenda since the beginning. Research at CFS has demonstrated the vitality of the phenomenological tradition, and it has shown how phenomenology can both contribute to and learn from a variety of contemporary theoretical and scientific debates. Given that the synergy between phenomenology, other philosophical traditions, and empirical research

has proven so fruitful in the nearly two decades of CFS research, it can be expected that such synergy will continue to deliver resources of high interest for research into human subjectivity.

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