

Rhythms of intuition. Methodological reflections in phenomenological psychology

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This paper discusses how different concepts of rhythm apply to phenomenological psychological research. We suggest that viewing phenomenological research in psychology as rhythmic not just enables us to notice how the research procedure implies certain shifts within in a series of temporally structured movements of repetition and change; it also enables us to deepen our understanding of the manner in which the researcher engages with the studied phenomenon through intuition. In other words, we argue that rhythm is fundamental to the method of how we understand “the things themselves.”

Keywords: Giorgi, intuition, Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology, rhythm, rhythmanalysis

Introduction

On a Wednesday in October 2020, I¹ visited the Danish art museum Glyptoteket to conduct interviews for a psychological study on the experience of beauty. In my research, beauty experiences are investigated empirically through descriptions of museum visitors’ experiences with visual art.

On this particular afternoon, I wander through the half-empty museum halls, searching for possible interviewees. I stop as a painting catches my eye. It is as though this particular painting shines, exceeding the limits of its frame. With suddenness, my mind leaves walls, sculptures, and other paintings

behind. In this moment, it is as though the painting is in charge while I obediently listen. No specific thought on the configuration of the painting announces itself, but waves of emotion move through me. It is like a force flowing from my toes and to my chest, a force appearing with such a conviction, such an energetic sense of contentment and pleasure that I immediately feel certain: This can only be an experience of beauty.

Astonished by this sudden occurrence of beauty, my heart still racing from the experience, I return to my search for interviewees. In a secluded exhibit room, a museum visitor agrees to participate in an interview. As the conversation gradually discloses his experience with an artwork, I no longer think of the painting. Yet, having just encountered beauty, I listen to the interviewee's words with a compelling bodily sense of knowing how to listen for its reverberations.

The process repeats for the rest of the afternoon. Each time an interviewee describes an experience, my experience of the painting reoccurs, not in its original form but with variations. Nevertheless, something similar shines forth, and the bodily sensations return, thus pulling together parts of the experiences described by interviewees and the experience I had earlier that afternoon. In between interviews, I return to the painting, and each time, a sense of reappearance of the phenomenon of beauty occurs as if my body were reminded of its radiant manner of announcing itself.ⁱⁱ

These reflections from the field serve to hint at two distinctive ways in which phenomenological psychological research may be interpreted as rhythmic. Firstly, the research process described illustrates how phenomenological psychological researchers, such as those who employ Amedeo Giorgi's method (2009) might work within repetitive patterns of data collection. Secondly, as illustrated here, rhythmicity of phenomenological psychological research consists of an intuitive manner of being involved with a phenomenon by attuning to the subject matter without aiming at controlling it. This intuitive continuous return to the phenomenon constitutes the rhythmicity of phenomenological methods in psychology by flowing through and thus uniting different parts of the investigative process.

Part one: Phenomenology and rhythm

The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposes that rhythm is fundamental to being. In this paper, we suggest that rhythm is just as fundamental to the *investigations* of being that are carried out by phenomenological psychologists. Through reflections on rhythm, the paper thus aims at extrapolating a conception of phenomenological methods in psychology that is aligned with human experience. This perspective is not in opposition to established ideas within phenomenological methods in psychology; rather, it aims to highlight established ideas by identifying an inherent rhythm within these.

In the early 20th century, the philosopher Edmund Husserl created the theoretical basis for phenomenology, which, decades later, inspired psychologists such as Amedeo Giorgi to design methods that strive to listen attentively to how the world shows itself in experience. We suggest considering this very act of listening as a matter of attending rhythmically to the appearance of phenomena. Thus, this paper aims to show how basic phenomenological principles employed in psychological research may be understood as inherently rhythmic.

The starting point for this paper is to apply a concept of rhythm to principles of phenomenological methods in psychology in order to shed light on oscillatory shifts inherent to the method. In this regard, we discuss how rhythm may be inherent to Husserlian principles and to the research procedures of Giorgi's *Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology* (2009). There are other methods within the field, but we consider, with phenomenological psychologist Frederick Wertz, this to be the foundational one for psychology, since other methods appear as later variations of this (Wertz, in press).

This paper's initial reflections from the field display how a rhythmical form involves a series of components that are repeated and thus structured in time. However, as the sections below will show, without a gathering force running through such series of components, actual rhythm will be missing from the structure. In this paper's reflections on method in phenomenological psychology, we identify intuition as this gathering force. The bodily engagement of intuition is itself an act of attunement to the rhythms of the phenomenon. Through the employment of intuition, the phenomenological psychological researcher grasps the rhythmical existence of the studied phenomenon by listening to it with sensitivity, by being grasped by it, by letting it be.

Rhythms of the world

If we view phenomenology as “an account of ‘lived’ time, of ‘lived’ space, of the ‘lived’ world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. xxi), perhaps rhythm—understood as movements in time—in a sense resides at the very heart of phenomenology. At one point in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty proposes:

My life is made up of rhythms that do not have their *reason* in what I have chosen to be, but have their *condition* in the banal milieu that surrounds me. A margin of almost impersonal existence thus appears around our personal existence. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 86)

This margin of impersonal existence, Merleau-Ponty explains, is defined by our anonymous bodies, which refer to a general and pre-personal level of existence. Rhythms, according to Merleau-Ponty, spring from the way the anonymous body thrusts forward in life while adhering to the general form of the worldly milieu. In Merleau-Ponty scholar Galen A. Johnson’s words, these worldly rhythms are to be found within this forward-thrusting movement; this pre-conceptual, pre-reflective momentum of existence is “the forward thrust of life that is rhythmically paced” (Johnson, 2010, p. 199).ⁱⁱⁱ

Similar to Merleau-Ponty, the sociologist Henri Lefebvre operates with an idea of rhythm as fundamental to being. Stressing what he takes to be a wide-ranging relevance of rhythm, he states, “Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm” (Lefebvre, 1992/2004, p. 15). In his writings on what he titles “rhythmanalysis”, he develops a transdisciplinary approach to grasping relationships between the multiple internal and external rhythms that he argues are constitutive of any worldly living or non-living being. In line with what Merleau-Ponty proposes in the quote above, Lefebvre (1992/2004) suggests that we think of rhythm as a defining feature of existence that functions prior to knowledge hereof.

Lefebvre’s method of rhythmanalysis is not committed to phenomenology. In *Rhythmanalysis—space, time and everyday life*, Lefebvre distances his work from parts of the phenomenological tradition and criticizes phenomenology for neglecting how rhythms characterize existence. Nevertheless, contemporary scholars have associated Lefebvre’s work with phenomenology (Crespi & Manghani, 2020; Kinkaid, 2020; Schmid, 2008). He shares with Merleau-Ponty the ambition to create an account of space, time and “the lived” that challenges the Cartesian world view (Lefebvre, 1974/1991).

If the world is made up of rhythms, the question that follows is: How are we to acquire an understanding of the features of this rhythmicity? Rhythm, Lefebvre states, is something that “enters into the lived; though that does not mean it enters into the known” (1992/2004, p. 77). Rhythms become epistemologically accessible only through rhythmanalysis; processes of analysis of space and time, and of “the lived” which Lefebvre regards as a philosophical term for everydayness (Lefebvre, 1965/2016).

The everyday or “le quotidien” which means “the mundane life” of ordinary people signifies the simple temporal pattern of repetition characteristic of what happens *every day*. Thus, according to Lefebvre, rhythms are, by nature, constituted by repetition. But an “absolute repetition” in which “A=A” is only “a fiction of logical and mathematical thought” since “the second A differs from the first by the fact that it is second” (Lefebvre, 1992/2004, p. 7). As the quote argues, rhythmic repetition is not mechanical or rigid, and it does not exclude the organic occurrence of differences. Repetition, according to Lefebvre, produces differences. Studying the center of Paris from his open window, Lefebvre (1992/2004) takes notice of the city’s recurring peak hours, the daily stream of people from the outskirts entering the city to do their shopping, the tourists visiting the same places; all interrupted by the night, which then again is interrupted by the morning’s noisy traffic and piercing sounds of children on their way to school. Watching and listening to all of this, he notices the repetitions and the diversity characterizing the polyrhythmic field in which everyday life plays out.

We recognize the rhythmic for its repetitive structure, but, importantly, Lefebvre’s (1992/2004) rhythmanalysis is a process that takes more than applying a pre-defined rhythmic structure to a phenomenon. Rhythmanalysis, rather, is a matter of listening that requires an attentive ear and a willingness to let go of the desire to possess that which is listened to. Lefebvre states: “In order to grasp and analyse rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them, but not completely ... To grasp a rhythm is necessarily to have been grasped by it: one must let oneself go, give oneself over, abandon oneself to its duration” (1992/2004, p. 27). Thus, knowing or capturing rhythm is to be captured by its organically developing movements.

Rhythms of the body

To Lefebvre, the body serves the rhythmanalyst as a metronome: “He draws on his breathing, the circulation of his blood, the beatings of his heart and the delivery of his speech as landmarks ... He thinks with his body, not in the abstract, but in the lived temporality” (Lefebvre, 1992/2004, p. 21). The analytic capturing of rhythms of the world happens, not just from the

place of, but *by means of* the rhythmical body. Embedded in a world of rhythms, humans are, as rhythmical bodily beings, continuously affecting and affected by rhythms of the world. Attending to the external rhythms of the world means finding ways of adjusting the relationship between internal rhythms and external rhythms. When synchronicity of polyrhythmic relations occurs, what begins as a manifold of rhythms becomes an integrated and comprehensible totality resulting in what Lefebvre calls isorhythmia. Isorhythmic relationships are rare, he states, but can be identified in certain co-creative dynamics, for instance, in the relationship between a conductor and an orchestra. Isorhythmia implies that separate rhythms interact in ways enabling them to reach equivalence regarding rhythm's features such as measure, repetition, and change, which is what the rhythm analyst, from the position of her rhythmical body, sets out to achieve.

In line with Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), Lefebvre's (1992/2004) rhythm analysis is attentive to the practical and theoretical relevance of the body. However, it appears that Lefebvre's understanding of the body mainly attends to rhythms of internal bodily functions. Except for briefly declaring that acts of movement ("gestes") is a rhythmical matter, he does not consider what the features of bodily movements can reveal about rhythm itself.

While Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) has placed great emphasis on movement as an aspect of being, the connection between rhythm and bodily movement is subtle and somewhat concealed within the prose of his language. Within the field of phenomenological philosophy, such connection has been made more explicitly by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2015), who examines the concept of rhythm in an investigation of the phenomenology of dance. As a prototype of rhythmical movement, dance serves as a key illustration of how the phenomenon of rhythm is constituted. In line with Finlay (2008), who has described the phenomenological psychological attitude as "a dance between the reduction and reflexivity" containing "sharp shifts of focus and rhythm" (p.3), rhythm in dance is a concept that captures important aspects of the method of interest.

To understand the rhythm of dance, Sheets-Johnstone (2015) distinguishes between a) rhythmic structure and b) dynamic line (p. 90). A rhythmic structure is a reduction of movements in time to a series of individual components (e.g., the sequence of steps in a choreography). There is a "static temporality" to such an understanding of rhythm in which "each instant is apprehended as a separate unit" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015, p. 13). In contrast, the dynamic line, which is a phenomenological concept of rhythm, implies that the moments of a rhythmical structure have an internal relationship. Sheets-Johnstone (2015) provides

several examples. Here is one: If an arm is abducted and then adducted immediately after, the completion of the initial abductive movement is simultaneously a preparation for the adductive movement that follows. The dynamic line, and thus rhythm, implies that the line of movements is not illogical or arbitrary; it follows “the guiding thread in the development of a form” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015, p. 83). There is, Sheets-Johnstone proposes, a projectional force relating the first movement to the second. The projectional and tensional qualities of each movement affect the temporal flow, which is what makes the line lively, vibrant, dynamic. In dance, there is no actual line understood as a static or rigid architecture of action but rather a perpetual projection of force (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015).

Sheets-Johnstone stresses that while awareness of a given rhythmic structure can work as a tool with a possible practical application (e.g., knowing the order of the steps of a dance), actual dance, and thus actual rhythm, is only brought to existence if the “mere series of movements becomes a dynamic flow of force” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015, p. 89). Dance and thus rhythm, she explains, does imply a rhythmic structure that reveals particular tempi and particular accents. In other words, knowing a rhythmic structure means to be aware of the specific series of moments implied in a specific rhythm. However, on an experiential level, rhythm does not exist as a series of moments but as a continuous flow. Rhythm, as lived, is “a perpetually moving form, a unity of succession, whose moments cannot be measured,” ... “whose ‘moments’ are all of a piece” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015, p. 16). Importantly, Sheets-Johnstone does not make this distinction between rhythmic structure and dynamic line in order to simply replace the first with the latter or to remove a concept of rhythmic structure from our understanding of bodily movements in dance. Rather, what she suggests is a reconsideration of the very idea of rhythm as the mere structure of individual movements or mere moments in space and time and a consideration of the dynamic line that gives union and flow to rhythmic phenomena.

Waves and rivers

According to the French structuralist Émile Benveniste (1971), the Greek term “rhythmos”, “ῥυθμός”, derives from “ῥεῖν”, which means “to flow.” Within the field of comparative grammar, it has continuously been suggested that we understand the connection between rhythm and flow by the intermediary metaphor of the movements of the waves of the sea (Benveniste, 1971). However, one may ask, as Benveniste (1971) did in an etymological analysis of the notion of rhythm: Isn’t this association inaccurate, impossible even, since what

flows is not the waves but rather the stream of the river? The flowing stream of the river, Benveniste declares, simply does not have rhythm in the sense that the regular pulsating movements of waves do.

Lefebvre (1992/2004) recognizes this apparent contradiction while asking his reader to observe the waves of the Mediterranean Sea closely. Waves move rhythmically toward the shore in the sense that the same monotonous episodes repeat themselves. Waves move with a measurable regularity, and as something that is defined by measure, they seem to be governed by something like a law. They move in a manner that is calculated and expected as if they were obeying an obligation or carrying out a project (Lefebvre, 1992/2004, p. 8). Understanding rhythm's measure through a metaphor of waves, he emphasizes rhythm's repetitive and therefore somewhat predictable nature. However, Lefebvre (1992/2004) also draws in expressions such as stream, current, perpetual flows, and finally, the phenomenon of time when discussing features of rhythmicity. Like Merleau-Ponty, Lefebvre was highly inspired by Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time* (Elden, 2004). Reflecting on the phenomenon of time, which, at first glance, "seems to escape measure on account of its fluidity" (Lefebvre, 1992/2004, p. 10), he unifies these only apparently oppositional conceptions of rhythm. While the waves seem measured, looking carefully at each wave approaching the shore will reveal their spontaneous, ceaselessly changing, and interrelated nature. Correspondingly, while time appears fluid, time flow is as quantifiable and therefore as measurable as anything else. That which flows and that which comes and goes in motions of waves can be viewed as cyclical, predictable, and measurable, yet both may also be understood as linear and spontaneously unfurling. Rhythm is the structured repetitive movement *and* the flowing force carrying forward its elements.

In accordance with Sheets-Johnstone (2015), the concept of rhythm that Lefebvre (1992/2004) proposes is twofold: First, a rhythm is a series of moments, or in Lefebvre's account, elements. Second, similar to what Sheets-Johnstone (2015) calls a "force of the dynamic line", Lefebvre (1992/2004) identifies in each rhythm an extensive energy capable of "taking with it" each rhythmic element. While the rhythmic structure consists of repetitive, somehow predictable movements like those of the waves, the dynamic line is rhythmic in the sense of a flowing force, perhaps analogous to the metaphor of the stream of a river or the progression of a poem.^{iv} Thus, both stress that although a rhythm necessitates a series of moments or elements, it fundamentally relies on a structuring, interrelating flow of force.

A related understanding of rhythm can be identified in the phenomenologist Jessica Wiskus' (2013) interpretation of Merleau-Ponty in regards to rhythm. She quotes Merleau-Ponty:

We are experiences, that is, thoughts that feel behind themselves the weight of the space, the time, the very Being they think, and which therefore do not hold under their gaze a serial space and time, nor the idea of series, but have above themselves a space and a time that exist by piling up. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 115)

Being is defined not just by “a serial space and time, nor the idea of series” but by “space and time that exists by piling up.” This perpetual piling up means that elements in time are not individual but rather, as Merleau-Ponty continues, “nodes and antinodes of the same ontological vibration” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 115). Interpreting Merleau-Ponty, Wiskus asks, “This ontological vibration, this movement of depth: what is it but rhythm? (Wiskus, 2013, p. 37). The “piling up” of space and time interconnects each of its moments, not by comprising a series, but through rhythmical, perpetual vibration. It seems that grasping rhythm consists not merely of uncovering a series of movements but recognizing the way we are already moving along with phenomena within the rhythmical worldly milieu.

The question then is: What happens if this twofold understanding of rhythm is applied to the context of phenomenological research in psychology? Returning to the field note that introduced this paper, the process may be understood in terms of its rhythmical *structure*, which would reduce the process to a series of steps following upon each other. The structure of the process is repetitive; the phenomenon of beauty appears and reappears throughout the process. Interviews and encounters with the painting interchangeably occur in an apparently ordered series of events by means of which the process obtains a pattern. Lefebvre (1992/2004) would characterize this pattern as the measure of the process. But these somewhat measured movements also imply a constant variability within the perpetual flow of the research process, a flow in which multifaceted and unsettling cognitive, emotional, and bodily processes in a polyrhythmic field become what they are in relation to each other. Analogous to Sheet-Johnstone's (2015) point that a rhythmic structure in itself does not provide us with an understanding of the nature of dance, awareness of the rhythmic structure of a research process, stepwise and repetitive, fails to reveal anything about the interaction between the steps or the source of energy that flows through them and interconnects them. Further, if we employ Lefebvre's (1992/2004) notion of isorhythmia, the rhythmicity of the research process can be

understood as bodily and emotional attunement to the rhythms of the phenomenon. Listening to the silent presence of the phenomenon as it shows itself in the encounter with the painting and in the interviewee's descriptions can be understood as a yielding towards an isorhythmic relation between the researcher and the phenomenon. Applying Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis* (1992/2004) to phenomenological psychological methods thus encourages us to notice how the very appearance of phenomena may be understood in terms of rhythms.

Part two: Rhythms of method in phenomenological psychology

Various approaches exist within the field of phenomenological psychology.^v This analysis begins by consulting two central principles as they were originally formulated by Husserl: the concepts of phenomenological reflection and intuition. However, rather than examining Husserl's complex system of concepts in depth, to highlight the psychological perspective of this paper, this section will examine *The Descriptive Phenomenological Method* by Giorgi (2009), a method directed explicitly at research in psychology. By means of these two perspectives, this section reflects on how the understandings of rhythm described above may be analogous to certain basic principles within this phenomenological psychological method.

The first part of this section aims to show that an aspect of what appears as rhythmic within Husserl's principles is the researcher's ever-changing manner of evaluating the available data or possible knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation. The researcher interchangeably enters a position of reflective uncertainty and a position of knowing^{vi} through intuition. We return to the question of how the different concepts of rhythm sketched out in the above apply to this oscillatory movement between positions. First, let us consider what can be referred to as uncertainty of scientific research practice. Uncertainty can be understood as that which makes us question possibly misleading theoretical, methodological, and personal beliefs. Thus, in any qualitative investigation, we somehow rely on our ability to feel uncertain. As producers of knowledge, researchers ought to welcome a sense of uncertainty and hesitate with regard to the assumption that their conclusions truly reflect the world. Uncertainty is essential to the discipline of scientific conduct because it reflects a sensitivity to the complexity and possible ambiguities of the studied phenomenon. But what does such uncertainty amount to within phenomenological methodology? In an often-quoted paragraph, Husserl states that the philosopher must begin in "absolute poverty, with an absolute lack of knowledge" (Husserl, 1960, § 1).^{vii} Within phenomenological methodology, starting with a lack of knowledge means attempting to set aside assumptions regarding the phenomenon, that is, beginning an investigation with an attitude of uncertainty regarding the psychological meaning of the

phenomenon. More specifically, the idea of uncertainty as a necessary scientific principle is embedded within the fundamental phenomenological act of “bracketing” (Husserl, 1913/2012). In this act, one “disconnects” from that which, based on theoretical abstractions or past experience, is assumed to be true of the phenomenon of interest. This act is applied to our hypotheses or theories about the phenomenon of interest and the fundamental assumptions one might have about the constitution of worldly phenomena. In the context of this paper, the point is that by means of this act, one attempts to disconnect from a sense of knowing and enter into a sphere of uncertainty. Husserl expresses the radicalism of the act:

The whole world as placed within the nature-setting and presented in experience as real, taken completely “free from all theory”, just as it is in reality experienced, and made clearly manifest in and through the linkings of our experiences, has now no validity for us, it must be set in brackets, untested indeed but also uncontested. (Husserl, 1913/2012, § 32).

This lack of validation of fundamental assumptions ultimately implies an inactivation of all judgments that have, up until this very moment, been regarded as knowledge. In the disconnection-aiming act of bracketing, a fundamental shift happens. Our thesis of the phenomenon undergoes a sort of transformation that Husserl calls a “transvaluing” (Husserl, 1913/2012, p. 58). The shift occurring in this act of “transvaluing” is not a transformation in the sense that we reject what is assumed, nor in the sense that former theories about phenomena are replaced with novel ones, but in the sense that what was known is now held in suspension.^{viii}

Such an act of reflection, of “transvaluing”, of questioning, needs to be understood in relation to the type of act that enables the researcher to obtain a sense of knowing. With regards to this type of act, Husserl’s “principle of all principles” guides us in the direction of what presents itself to intuition. What presents itself to intuition, Husserl states, is “simply to be accepted as it gives itself to be” (Husserl, 1913/2012, § 24). Within the context of this paper, Husserl’s original account thus calls our attention to two important acts: 1) the reflective questioning of assumptions and 2) the employment of intuition. Following Husserl, phenomenological researchers are confronted with the need to find ways to balance these acts. How can we question what we assume to be true and yet trust our intuition with regard to what is given? And, if both these acts serve important functions in phenomenological inquiries, how should researchers deal with the dynamics of their seemingly oppositional nature?

In this paper's search for an answer to these questions, yet another question arises: Is it possible that what appears to be acts-in-conflict is more accurately understood if viewed as acts complementing each other in a rhythmically organized structure? Applying what Sheets-Johnstone (2015) and Lefebvre (1992/2004) have both pointed out as inherent to rhythm, phenomenological acts of reflection and intuition can be understood as a structured series of varying and repetitive elements. Phenomenological inquiries, then, are like the pulsating movements of waves, varying yet somehow regulated and somewhat repeating themselves. Yet, what is lacking in this understanding of phenomenological research as rhythmic is what Sheets-Johnstone (2015) calls the "dynamic line" of rhythm; the perpetual projection of force which in Lefebvre's (1992/2004) vocabulary "takes with it" all the elements. What is missing in this understanding is, in other words, a common source of energy that interconnects each element of the series, the overall force flowing through and uniting the movements. At first glance, it seems as if there is no common force governing the position of uncertainty through reflection and of knowing through intuition. It seems as if they are two conflicting forces pulling the researcher in opposite directions.

Let us briefly return to Husserl's "principle of all principles" for guidance with regard to identifying this missing rhythmical force within phenomenological methodology. If we envision a practical application of this principle, phenomenological intuition seems to be about creating an authentic relationship with the phenomenon of interest in which the researcher attunes to the phenomenon. What if the "acceptance" of phenomena as they "present themselves to intuition" and "give themselves to be" (Husserl, 1913/2012, § 24) is understood not just as an element in a series of positional shifts and repetitions but as the energetic force uniting and thus carrying forward the movements of research? This interpretation of rhythm within Husserlian principles will guide the following reading of Giorgi's (2009, 2017) modified Husserlian approach.

Based on an extensive reading of Husserl's phenomenology, Giorgi developed a method that aims at applying phenomenological principles to qualitative psychological research. Giorgi's *Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology* (2009, 2017) is not a data-gathering method. Rather, it is an analysis method designed to identify psychological meanings within descriptions of experience. To psychological researchers studying consciousness, meeting scientific criteria such as the requirement that "measurement processes have to be applied to the data" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 3) is a challenging task that prompts Giorgi to raise questions such as: "How does one analyze a description of a concrete experience in a

psychologically meaningful way and achieve at least the same degree of objectivity that quantitative analyses reaches?” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 121). Consequently, Giorgi describes a phenomenological research method that comprises a series of steps providing this type of research with a systematism and a transparency that does not compromise the aim for a rigorous understanding of the data.

In the first of three steps^{ix}, the researcher reads the experience description to obtain “a general sense of what the description is about” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 128) from within the attitude of the scientific phenomenological reduction^x. Secondly, the researcher rereads the interview and breaks the description into what Giorgi calls “meaning units” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 129). Dividing the descriptions into a series of smaller parts helps the researcher by “making the descriptions manageable” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 130). In the third step, each meaning unit is “transformed by the researcher” into “psychologically pertinent expressions” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 137). Within this step, Giorgi requests that the researcher “once again goes back to the beginning of the description” to interrogate each meaning unit, and finally repeat this process “until all of the meaning units have been transformed” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 133).

This structured analysis process provides the data with manageability by means of repetition. Within the descriptions of each of the steps, Giorgi (2009) suggests overcoming various challenges through processes of repetition and returns: “One goes back to the beginning of the description and begins to reread it” (p. 129), “once again goes back to the beginning of the description” (p. 131), “goes back to the data” (p. 133), “reread the description” (p. 130). Not just within each analysis but on a more general level, the process is structured by repetition: He recommends that “invariant meanings should be repeated in subsequent research” (p. 131) and that the entire process is repeated to achieve general structures through “data from several individuals” (p. 131).

By repeating specific acts and by continuously returning to the data, this series of steps, of movements, achieves a circularity providing it with what we may view as analogous to what Sheets-Johnstone (2015) calls rhythmical structure. These repetitive steps resemble steps of a “dance of research.” One moves around the phenomenon in a pre-structured manner that repeats itself like the movements of the waves cyclically progressing toward and pulling back from the shore.

In part one of this paper, reflections on possible defining features of rhythm also displayed how Lefebvre (1992/2004), in line with Sheets-Johnstone (2015), operates with a twofold understanding of rhythm, in which one level is concerned with rhythm’s structure.

Within such structures, repetition is a key feature in the sense that repetition provides the series of elements with a measure that divides the whole into smaller parts (Lefebvre, 1992/2004). The application of measure by means of repetition seems to arrange Giorgi's (2009) method in a rhythmical form.

However, reading Lefebvre (1992/2004) and Sheets-Johnstone (2015) along with Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968, 1945/2012) made it clear that, for rhythm to arise, a series of elements must be somehow connected and thus flowingly carried forward by a uniting perpetual force. The description of the steps of Giorgi's (2009) method does not directly state what binds the steps together, what provides the guiding thread, what allows for unity within the procedure. But reviewing the descriptions of the steps more closely reveals that each action of the steps relies highly on intuition. The meaning unit division, for instance, is not only concerned with shifts in meaning, and although the process of reading the interview works in a pre-structured, repetitive way, the process is far from mechanical. As Giorgi puts it, the process is a "spontaneous activity" that "has a certain arbitrariness to it" (2009, p. 130). Likewise, when transforming the units of meaning, it may occur that "an important implicit psychological meaning is not stated anywhere, but it has a strong background presence" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 134), in which case the researcher's descriptions rely not solely on carrying out a pre-given action but also on her intuitive sense of a presence of psychological meaning. This intuitive sense runs through the research process as a guiding thread.

Thus, within Giorgi's method, phenomenological analysis has to rely on not just a pre-structured series of shifting and repetitive actions but as well on a willingness to "dwell with the data" (p. 131), and on the "psychological sensitivity the researcher brings to the task" (p. 130). Carrying out the steps may be understood as the rhythmic structure of the method, but intuition seems to be what Sheets-Johnstone (2015) would label the "perpetual projection of force" that makes a rhythmic structure truly rhythmic.

Finally, Giorgi (2009) emphasizes that carrying out this analysis procedure requires the adoption of an "intersubjective attitude" (p. 133) and "a sensitivity toward the phenomenon being researched" (p. 137). Without explicating its meaning, the notion of sensitivity is used numerous times in the account and seems to be a guiding thread in the progression of the method. Considering this along with Lefebvre (1992/2004) suggests an understanding of this method as essentially constituted as rhythmic not just by being a series of pre-given steps but by means of an attunement to phenomena. The process of the steps moves forward, not according to a manual, but according to how the phenomenon manifests itself as intuitions.

Thus, intuition seems to be the perpetually flowing force providing the repetitive structure of phenomenological psychological inquiries with a sense of rhythmicity.

Part three: Rhythm of phenomenological intuition

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) devotes an essay to discussing different understandings of intuition. With a critical eye, he examines the notion of intuition posited by Husserl and Henri Bergson, respectively. What Husserl claims to be intuition is, to Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968), trapped in an epistemology that assumes a hypothetical and disengaged “pure spectator” capturing the “essences of the world” from a distant place, while to Merleau-Ponty, essences show up primordially, that is, in bodily engagement with the worldly “flesh.” The flesh is the fabric of being through which all sensible beings are interconnected. Because of this kinship, embodied human beings and worldly objects “encroach” upon each other or even “overlap” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 248). Aiming at an account of intuition that situates humans in this worldly fabric, he states:

Under the solidity of the essence, and of the idea, there is the fabric of experience, the flesh of time ... The visible can thus fill me and occupy me only because I who see it do not see it from the depths of nothingness, but from the midst of itself. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 113)

This “midst,” our field of experience, is an environment we cannot exit; there is no other environment for us to enter, no “ontological void” or environment of nothingness from where we can grasp the world in a pure manner.

By opposing a view of intuition posited by Bergson, details of which we will not outline here, Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) enriches his account on intuition by stating that intuitive givenness of things is not accessed by “coinciding with” or “fusing with” things. If we were to grasp a thing through fusing with it, becoming unity, the thing itself would vanish. Philosophy is, Merleau-Ponty says, “a manner of letting the things themselves speak” (1964/1968, p. 125), while the view of intuition that Merleau-Ponty here opposes results in the “silence of things” (1964/1968, p. 127). As it appears in *The Visible and the Invisible*, intuition is a distant yet attentive way of being present, not just with things but specifically with the universe of appearances that things seem to produce.

Through this critique of two distinct views of intuition resulting in viewing things either by a “soaring over or as fusion,” from an “infinite distance” or by “absolute proximity”

(1964/1968, p. 127), Merleau-Ponty arrives at a somewhat ambiguous place in between. Although the distant “pure spectator” remains a hypothesis that cannot be attained, it is true, he states, that “every being presents itself at a distance, but this does not prevent us from knowing it” (1964/1968, p. 127). On the contrary, distance is what keeps us from merging with other beings in ways that annul their being, their thingness as thing. There is, he writes, a “thickness of flesh between us and the ‘hard core’ of Being” (1964/1968, p. 127).

Merleau-Ponty rejects the possibility that intuition means to detect the essence of things from an infinite distance, but the alternative that he provides also operates with a notion of distance. As he suggests, “We should have to return to this idea of proximity through distance, of intuition as auscultation or palpation in depth” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 128). Let us consider the medical metaphors employed here. In medical procedures of palpation, the examined body’s inner condition is known through a touch of the body’s outside, the skin. Similarly, in procedures of auscultation, the inner condition of the body is known through the sound released from the inside to the outside, where the examiner is listening with a stethoscope. Through touch or listening, the examiner obtains knowledge of characteristics of the inside of the examined. For example, low density inside the examined body part may produce a hollow sound. If intuition, as Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) here suggests, is an indirect yet insightful examination in depth, it means that we as examiners of the world rely heavily on the sensibility of our perceptory apparatus and a sensitivity that allows us to “listen” at a distance.

Lefebvre’s *Rhythmanalysis* does not explicitly employ a notion of intuition, nor does it operate with an ontology of “flesh”, and yet it seems to arrive at an understanding of intuition somewhat similar to Merleau-Ponty’s account in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) and Lefebvre (1992/2004) share an idea of proximity as a necessary component of intuition: What Lefebvre calls isorhythmia is found within a proximal relationship between what makes the noise and he who listens, rhythmic phenomena and the rhythmanalyst, orchestra and the conductor, painting and the spectator. As highlighted earlier, the rhythmanalyst strives to listen attentively to the world. Listening is inherent to Lefebvre’s mode of inquiry: “He will come to listen to a house, a street, a town, as an audience listens to a symphony” (Lefebvre, 1992/2004, p. 22). But in line with Merleau-Ponty, the rhythmanalyst listens at a distance: “In order to grasp and analyse rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them, but not completely” (Lefebvre, 1992/2004, p. 27). Like Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968), Lefebvre

uses the metaphor of auscultation to illustrate this. By listening attentively but maintaining a distance, rhythms of the world become detectable.

Considering Lefebvre (1992/2004) and Sheets-Johnstone (2015) led to a common understanding of rhythm as dependent on a flowing force of energy connecting a series of moments or elements. Applying this understanding of rhythm to phenomenological methods in psychology suggested that intuition is the uniting force of such inquiries. Merleau-Ponty's (1964/1968) understanding of intuition read along with Lefebvre (1992/2004) suggests how such intuition, as the uniting principle of phenomenological methods in psychology, consists in an attentive yet distant modus of listening common to the rhythm analyst and the phenomenological psychologist.

If intuition in phenomenological inquiries is understood as “a manner of letting the things themselves speak” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 125), and if grasping a rhythm is “to have been grasped by it”, to “let oneself go, give oneself over, abandon oneself to its duration” (Lefebvre, 1992/2004, p. 27), then listening is a matter of balancing the interest in the phenomenon with the being of the phenomenon itself. The worldly beings which the philosopher desires to know, Merleau-Ponty writes:

offer themselves therefore only to someone who wishes not to have them ... but to let them be and to witness their continued being—to someone who therefore limits himself to giving them the hollow, the free space they ask in return, the resonance they require, who follow their own movement. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 101)

The phenomenological psychologist following Merleau-Ponty, it seems, shares with the rhythm analyst the intention of giving the phenomena “the resonance they require” and of “following their movement.” But most importantly, they both strive to listen intuitively and sensitively to the phenomena by *letting* them *be*. The philosopher Kym Maclaren (2002) and the cognitive phenomenological researcher Hanne de Jaegher (2019) both emphasize in this quote by Merleau-Ponty the specific expression of “letting be.” As de Jaegher (2019) points out, acts of letting be hold a tension between moving close to and staying distant from the phenomenon of interest. With this balancing act, we aim at, on the one hand, not to break the phenomenon down by projecting our intentions onto it and on the other hand, not engaging so much that we end up being determined *by* it. The epistemology that the notion of “letting be” implies has a softness to it in the sense that the type of knowledge it involves is sensitive to and

continuously moldable by encounters with the phenomenon itself. The expression of “letting be” emphasizes this sensitivity, humility, and absence of control with which the phenomena of interest are listened to.

These acts of letting be are at the heart of phenomenological methods in psychology. In *Descriptive Phenomenological Methods in Psychology*, Giorgi defines what he calls “the attitude of description” as “one that only responds to what can be accounted for in the description itself” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 127). Distinct from methods that embrace interpretation, construction, or explanation, the method of description in phenomenological method in psychology requires great caution with regard to any “nongiven factors” such as assumptions, hypotheses, and theories (Giorgi, 2009). Phenomenological psychological descriptions are merely “satisfied with the given, it dares not go beyond what is present” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 127). When one uses description as a means of analyzing phenomena as they are given in experience, phenomena remain fairly intact, because the descriptive method intuitively and sensitively listens to phenomena in the sense that it lets the phenomena be.

The importance of intuition in psychological science

What does the concept of rhythm bring in relation to phenomenological methods in psychology? As we have shown, reflecting on the method as rhythmic points toward intuition as a pivotal element of phenomenological psychology. In *Psychology as a Human Science*, Giorgi’s (1970) historical analysis shows how psychology tends to adopt the objectivist attitude of the natural sciences. This attitude implies the assumption that the world can be grasped independently of human mind. Viewed from this “naïve realist” position, the term “subjective” used in relation to science can only be pejorative since it indicates that the particular method is unsuccessful in making a sharp distinction between objects of the world on the one hand and affects, thoughts, judgements etc. of human mind on the other (Giorgi, 1970, p. 113). However, as Giorgi points out, even the notion “objective” indicates that the researcher is oriented toward an object, that is, toward something other than herself, which makes “objectivist” research an activity of intentionality (1970, p. 116). The field of what Giorgi refers to as “human science” generally acknowledges the inevitable presence of the researcher-subject in the process of research but as Giorgi stresses, it is crucial that such embeddedness of subjectivity in the research situation is not just recognized theoretically, but explicitly and concretely dealt with within methodological practice. In the context of this paper, this may be interpreted as an encouragement for

scholars within the field of phenomenological psychology to provide detailed descriptions of how their research makes use of intuition. This paper's reflections on rhythm of psychological phenomenological method underline an active and explicit use of intuition as a way of specifying how psychology as a human science transparently employs rather than avoids subjectivity.

Conclusion

If rhythms are movements in time, space, and everyday life, then rhythmicity is not a structure that the researcher strives for but something that always already is present. Through rhythm, we have attempted to show that intuition is a principle, a *modus*, a sensitivity with which we return to the “things themselves”—return to the phenomena in the research process. The entire descriptive research process is about arriving at the phenomenon through intuition. We listen and attune sensitively and repeatedly to the phenomenon, describe and understand it through proximity and distance. Although the method is separated out into a variety of steps, intuitions about the phenomenon flow through the process of analysis and unites these steps beyond measure. Rhythms are central to the research process as we listen to phenomena that are essential rhythms of the world.

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Notes

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- ⁱ The “I” of the field note is the primary author of this paper.
- ⁱⁱ The inclusion of this first person experience is not an expression of a favoring of the method of introspection or of the viewpoint that psychological phenomenological research requires the researcher to have had experiences with the investigated phenomenon. For example, a researcher might study the experience of psychosis without ever having had a psychotic episode.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly, as Levin, Roald, and Funch (2019) demonstrate, phenomenological thought fosters an understanding of rhythm as a “pre-individual force” that “explains the becoming or the perceptual unfolding of subjectivity” (p. 291). In their analysis of how visual art experience may be conceptualized as rhythmic, they suggest that the concept of rhythm characterizes the process of emergence of the artwork to the subject. What makes this process rhythmic, they propose, is not “the extended rhythm of a subject in front of an object” but rather “a rhythmic co-presence of the work of art and subjective sensibility” (p. 292).
- ^{iv} As suggested here, perhaps rhythm as flow is more accurately understood if one considers the vital energy that carries forward the stream of words in a poem. As Johnson (2010) points out, rhythm’s Latin equivalent and graphic variant rhyme reminds us that rhythm resides within the sphere of poetry. The poetic connotation may hint at an understanding of rhythm beyond the regular repetitive pattern of movements that we recognize in the waves.
- ^v Among other approaches not included in this paper are the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach and the microphenomenological approach. We choose not to review IPA because it is considered hermeneutic rather than descriptive/Husserlian while the microphenomenological approach is mostly concerned with cognition rather than psychological research in a broader sense.
- ^{vi} As Halling (2010) advocates, phenomenological researchers in psychology are obliged to aim for knowledge, or truths: “However problematic it may be, the notion of truth is indispensable to our work” (p. 131). In line with what this paper suggests, Halling develops an understanding of truths as embodied and rhythmical.
- ^{vii} Although the “neo-cartesian” writings of Husserl have received heavy criticism, the radical uncertainty that this quote illustrates is, nevertheless, one of the foundational descriptions that have inspired the definitions of key principles within contemporary methodological approaches such as Giorgi’s (2009).

^{viii} Within the field of phenomenological psychological methods, consensus has not been reached with regard to what exact part the act of “bracketing” should play within research procedures. However, according to Giorgi (2009), bracketing refers to our handling of “past knowledge,” that is, knowledge of the phenomenon that we have acquired in the past rather than in the present encounter. Giorgi writes, “It is not a matter of forgetting the past; bracketing means that we should not let our past knowledge be *engaged* while we are determining the mode and content of the present experience” (2009, p. 92). In the act of bracketing, the phenomenological psychological researcher following Giorgi positions herself as uncertain with regard to the possible knowledge at hand deriving from past experience.

^{ix} In a newer but briefer description of The Descriptive Phenomenological Method, Giorgi et al., 2017 have described the same method but divided it into five steps. The general content of the method has not changed. ^x

Giorgi et al. (2017) specify the attitude as follows: “this special attitude shift involves the epoché, which means to set aside all knowledge not being directly presented to consciousness, and then to consider what is given not as actually existing but merely as something present to consciousness” (p. 180)

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Acknowledgments

This work was generously supported by the Carlsberg Foundation.

Thank you to Charlotte Wegener for supporting the writing process and to the anonymous reviewer for providing vital feedback.