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## **Social Phenomenological Analysis as a Research Method in Art Education: Developing an Empirical Model for Understanding Gallery Talks**

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### **Abstract**

Social phenomenological analysis is presented as a research method to study gallery talks or guided tours in art museums. The research method is based on the philosophical considerations of Edmund Husserl and sociological/social science concepts put forward by Max Weber and Alfred Schuetz. Its starting point is the everyday lifeworld; the researcher interprets the phenomena that can be observed there as an individual, intersubjectively accessible reflection of subjective meaning. This approach is suitable for research projects that seek correlations and structures of certain typical situations in domains that are theoretically few prestructured. The article explains the methodological principles, the use and the profit of this research method.

## **Research Context**

### ***Research Question and Research Context***

How is it possible to carry out a meaningful study of a complex situation in arts education that remains largely unresearched? In my research project (Hofmann, 2015), I looked at a typical situation in art education and museum education, namely: group guided tours, and particularly traditional tours of art museums in which the tour guide talks to the group while standing in front of a work of art. However, very little is known about this everyday situation in art education and museum education (Hein, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007).

So it requires exploration. It is important to understand the situation's structures in order to design and carry out practices that are based on expert knowledge. This is irrespective of which *form* of art education is considered desirable or appropriate. First of all, it is necessary to reconstruct the behavioural patterns and structural contexts of such situations.

### **Social phenomenological analysis as a research method and an example of its use**

Social phenomenological analysis was selected for the research project. This involved educational videography and participatory observation, so the work was carried out within the paradigm of sociological ethnography.

In this article, I will first present social phenomenological analysis as an approach, along with its premises and epistemological foundations (2.1). I will then describe the usual procedure (2.2) and the aim of the approach (2.3). This is done from the perspective of a researcher in art education, and focuses on the usefulness of this approach for research in this field. In the second part of this article, the methodological approach will be exemplified within the framework of my research project (2.4).

### ***Social Phenomenological Analysis***

#### ***a) Phenomenological analysis as a concept of sociology and social science***

The sociological approach of phenomenological analysis should be understood as a development of philosophical phenomenology and hermeneutics for sociological research (cf. Bortz & Doering, 1995, p. 278). The approach essentially involves reconstructing the participants' subjective attributions of meaning in order to penetrate the essence of the phenomenon. Phenomenological analysis should be understood more as a "metatheoretical position of qualitative social research" (Lamnek, 2005, p. 48 f.) than as a formalised method. For art education, the approach was made more fruitful by the works of Maria Peters and Georg Peez (cf. Peters, 1996; Peez 2000; Peez, 2007).

As a concept of sociology and social science, phenomenological analysis was formulated in the tradition of Alfred Schuetz and Max Weber, building on the work of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Edmund Husserl developed phenomenology with a view to creating a basis for all sciences, as a bridge “between ideal laws and real experience” (Waldenfels, 1992, p. 14), whereas for Max Weber and later for Alfred Schuetz, the focus was on understanding the subjective meaning of social actions. The concept will be described in more detail below.

*b) The lifeworld as a starting point*

In line with Husserl's principle of “back to the things themselves”, phenomenological analysis begins with the “lifeworld” (Husserl, 1936/2012): the everyday, natural, normal things in life. This should be understood as criticism of a “positivist reduction of everything that exists to natural and historical facts and mathematical formulae” (Lamnek, 2005, p. 35). To paraphrase Edmund Husserl's position, the use of methods that are derived from a scientific concept results in solely artificial constructs that have more to do with the theoretical framework than with the subject of the research (cf. *ibid.*). Instead, he believed it was necessary to develop methods and ways of thinking that were derived from the lifeworld.

*c) Constructivism, corporeality and intentionality of social action*

Yet “the focussed ‘things themselves’ are not obvious to us” (Waldenfels, 1992, p. 17). From a constructivist point of view, it must always be borne in mind that the way the perception of things is not the same as the things:

“The object *is* not simply one and the same, it *reveals itself* as the same in the interplay of circumstances and intentions [...] in which it is perceived, remembered, expected or imagined, in which it is judged, treated or striven for, in which it is thought of as real or possible, dubious or negated” (Waldenfels, 1992, p. 15, emphases in original).

So the lifeworld's phenomena must be differentiated from the perception that we have of them. Our only access to the world is through our own perception, so each access is (also) subjective. For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, corporeality plays a central role in this, as the body is the “‘third dimension’ on this side of pure consciousness and pure nature, of activity and passivity, of autonomy and dependence, and also this side of reflexive and positive knowledge” (Waldenfels, 1992, p. 59). The intentionality of human action also has to be considered: people carry out actions for specific purposes, and the actions of others are interpreted as intentional – and in doing so, the interpretation also has to be seen as intentional. So every creation of meaning arises from processes of understanding and the attribution of meaning of subjects in the social world; these are always only fleeting, they change constantly and the action in turn influences the deed in circular processes (cf. Hitzler, 2010, p. 112). The sociologist Ronald Hitzler views social phenomenology as having more

than just protosociological and parasociological parameters:

In as much as it is generally a question of [...] reconstructing social constructs of reality, preoccupation with the experiences of the subjects is certainly not a *marginal* topic of social sciences, but its systematic core issue. As living, experiencing and acting in the strict phenomenological sense is a primordial sphere that is only ‘really’ accessible by the living, experiencing, acting subject, then so-called objective factualities are only empirically (evidently) comprehensible as subjective realities of consciousness” (Hitzler, 2010, p. 134, emphasis in original).

*d) Phenomena as individual reflections of subjective meaning*

Phenomena as observable reflections and traces of subjective meaning are indeed our only available route to understanding social action. By analysing them we can reconstruct people's attributions of meaning. Therefore the claim to validity of phenomenological analysis does not relate to the recognition of reality in any shape or form but:

because reality does not consist of brute facts, but of meanings, it is above all the ‘essential’ task of social sciences to understand how meanings arise and persist, when and why they can be termed ‘objective’ and how people *construe* the social, ‘objectivised’ meanings and bring forth their own ‘subjective’ meaning – and in this way play their part in the construction of ‘objective reality’ (Hitzler, 2010, p. 135, emphasis in original).

***Approaches in Phenomenological Analysis***

To do this, we will look at the “targeted analysis of individual phenomena” (Mayring, 2002, p. 108) rather than undertaking a broad description of different fields. This involves a precise description as the basis for a comprehensible interpretation of a phenomenon in order to ultimately penetrate its essence. Philipp Mayring presents the phenomenological analysis approach as follows:

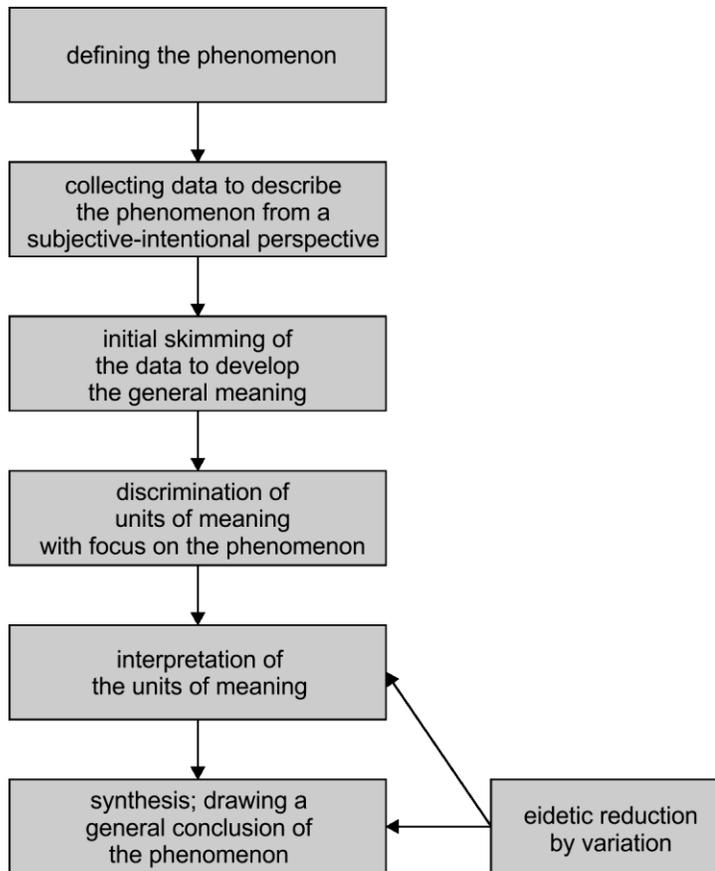


Figure 1. Approaches in phenomenological analysis (Mayring, 2002, p. 110)

It begins with “focusing on the phenomenon to be examined by means of one or several research questions” (Peez, 2007, p. 29), followed by the gathering of relevant material and “exemplary description” (ibid.). Material is collected that is useful for revealing the essence of the phenomenon. These might be records of participatory observation, photographs, video recordings or material evidence of artistic activity such as drawings or sculptures. This material is described, so it is put into written form.

The description and selection of materials based on the research questions is followed by analysis and explanation (cf. Lippitz, 1987; Mayring, 2002, p. 108 f; Lamnek, 2005, p. 56). The analysis includes an initial skimming of the materials “to gain a general overall understanding” (Mayring, 2002, p. 108). The second stage of the analysis involves creating units of meaning from the material. These units of meaning are then “interpreted in terms of the phenomenon” (Mayring, 2002, p. 109); this is carried out using hermeneutical premises (cf. Rumpf, 1991, p. 327 f.; Rittelmeyer, Parmentier, & Klafki, 2001, Wernet, 2006). The art educator Georg Peez states that those that interpret themselves in the course of the interpretation should “also be aware of the subjective constitution of the phenomena in the

consciousness of the person who gathers and interprets the material” (Peez, 2007, p. 29).

Finally, the interpreted units of meaning are compared, linked, connected and a “general interpretation of the phenomenon” (ibid.) is carried out by means of variation and reduction: “The objective of the analysis is, however, to penetrate to the core, the very essence of things” (Mayring, 2002, p. 107 f.). All elements that detract from the focus on the essence should be removed, in the sense of summarising the key elements. The sociologist Siegfried Lamnek refers to “capturing the essence [...] by analogy with eidetic reduction in the Husserlian sense, in that one tries to consider and describe the subject being investigated from as many angles as possible in order to peel away the layers and reveal the core of the subject” (Lamnek, 2005, p. 57). Finally, the results of the study are summarised.

### ***Objective and outcome: reconstructions as intersubjectively comprehensible interpretations***

The “subjective perspective of an individual actor as the *last* point of reference for sociological analyses” (Hitzler, 2002, p. 134, emphasis in original) is the reason why the objective and outcome of phenomenological analysis is the reconstruction (not an understanding or explanation) of subjective meaning. It demonstrates sociological approaches as constructs above constructs of the subject from everyday life, so second-rank constructs. A total adequacy between the researcher's construct of subjective meaning and the actor's construct of their subjective meaning is therefore an “unachievable ideal” (Hitzler & Eberle, 2001, p. 114). According to Alfred Schuetz, holding on to the subjective perspective offers “the only, and of course the only adequate guarantee that social reality is not replaced by a fictive, non-existent world that has been constructed by some scientific observer” (Schuetz, Parsons, & Sprondel, 1977, p. 65 f.). The principle of phenomenological analysis in subjective meaning, which is accessible as a path to the phenomena of the lifeworld, does not lead to ‘objective’ findings, but to intersubjectively convincing interpretations (Peez, 2007, p. 29). In this sense, the research has to assess whether its point of view is convincing: “Exemplary description is an act of meaning, which has to ensure it can be monitored in communicative and intersubjective terms” (Peez, 2000, p. 162). So the recipients and readers of research studies become “co-thinkers and co-researchers” (Peez, 2000, p. 161). “Phenomenological statements do not fulfil the requirement for generality in the positivist sense, as they contain specific implications, yet a high degree of engagement can be achieved in dialogue with real or imaginary others” (Lamnek, 2005, p. 57).

It can be most helpful to “work out the ambiguity of a situation and clarify the different perceptions to the extent that meaningful (pedagogical) action is possible” (Rauschenberger, 1988, p. 279). Georg Peez says that it is precisely through the variation of similar situations (which, however, may generate different meanings) or through exposure to opposing opinions, that it is possible to “penetrate to the essence of research subjects” (Peez, 2000, p.

163). This should also be understood as “rejection of linear attributions” (ibid.) and as “recognition of contingency aspects” (ibid.).

***Specific approach in the study entitled “Pedagogical Art Communication between acquirement and imparting. Empirical case studies of two school classes and a kindergarten group at art exhibitions”<sup>1</sup>***

Case studies were carried out of three situations involving different works of art, groups, educators and exhibition contexts. Material was gathered using educational videography and participatory observation within the paradigm of sociological ethnography. Finally, cross-case structural characteristics of the interplay between aesthetic object, recipient group and educator were reconstructed within the framework of social phenomenological analysis.

*a) Case study selection*

The case study (or, more precisely, the description and interpretation of a case study) should be as useful as possible, and communicate both general and specific elements in an adaptable and innovative way (cf. Fatke, 1997; Lamnek, 2005; Peez, 2007). So a case study was selected that can be described as a core situation for art education: a talk to a group about a work of art. In this way, art education is a process that takes place with other people, in front of the original artwork. It is not simply a linguistic process (but also visual and performative, for example) and is led by an educator. This kind of situation constitutes a case study in this analysis.

*b) Surveys*

The surveys were each carried out by two people. I carried out the participatory observation while a colleague produced a video recording. The focus was to be on observing interactions, the internal viewpoint of the participants and aspects that cannot be captured on camera. The observations were recorded in writing and using sketches of the surroundings.

It was not possible to set up a fixed camera for the video recording because the group moved around the exhibition space during the tour. We also believed the interaction could only be properly observed if a mobile camera was used to record interactions. Depending on the particular situation, these focused on individual people, the whole group, the work of art etc. The recordings were made using a hand-held camera. A dictation machine was also used. This

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<sup>1</sup> This is the title of the dissertation that was accepted in 2014 by the Goethe-University Frankfurt am Main (Germany). The work was awarded the Arnold-Vogt-Prize by the HTWK University of Applied Sciences Leipzig. See Hofmann, 2015

was fixed to my clipboard and allowed me to record conversations from a second position in the room. It was not necessary to draw up a data collection record because the information was already recorded in the participatory observation.

### c) Procedure

The field notes on the participatory observation were transferred to an observation protocol. This has a narrative format and describes the tour from a first-person perspective, from the moment the observer/researcher arrives at the museum until the educator says goodbye to the group.

The video observation data was edited using video editing software from *Pinnacle Studio 14*, so that the whole tour was contained in a single file. It was then split into individual segments, each containing a talk. All segments were listed in a summary table, combined with a video still and notes on the key incidents during the tour.

Audio data was recorded using the video camera and the dictation machine. This was used to produce audio records of selected talks (see below on how the talks were selected). The selected talks were then described; depending on the research question, the focus here was on the interplay between the aesthetic object, the recipient group and the educator.

### d) Interpretation

The interpretation was carried out within the framework of social phenomenological analysis. The definition of the phenomenon and construction of the case studies has already been presented in the section entitled 'Case study selection'. Material was gathered, cases were observed and an exemplary description and case description drawn up.

For the interpretation/case study analysis, first the video material of each full tour was viewed and interesting points were noted. The video recordings of the school classes each involved a tour with nine talks. The recordings of the kindergarten group involved a tour with six talks.

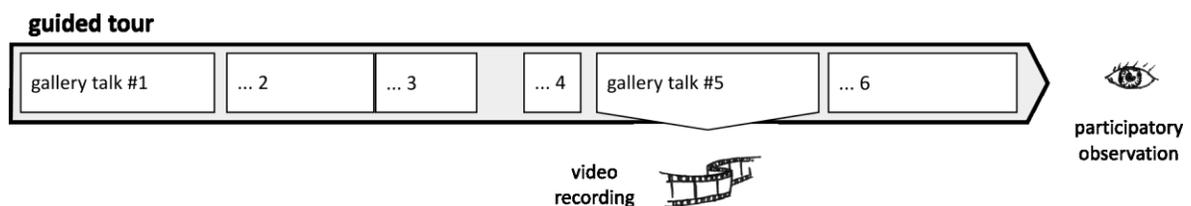


Figure 2. Overview of the data selected for evaluation using the example of the kindergarten group case study

A video recording of one talk per group was selected: A talk was selected that was typical of

the tour given to the particular school class or kindergarten group. Reasons for the selection were presented on a case-by-case basis. An initial assessment (cf. 2.6) of the selected talk aimed to capture the essence of the situation: typical factors, actions, constellations, utterances, etc. Later this stage was repeated for other talks in order to revise the material selection or add in other talks.

For each case, one typical talk was interpreted sequentially in order to be able to understand correlations. The interpretation was carried out on the basis of the description and using the audio transcription or video material as necessary. First a description was drawn up, then the units of meaning within the individual sequences were distinguished. Finally the units of meaning for the whole situation were interpreted.

The next step was to proceed a triangulation for each of the three groups using the data collected from the participatory observation for the whole tour. Then - after a reflection on the subjective observation content - it was checked whether the units of meaning derived from the video observation could be confirmed, changed or completed. By the end, there were about ten interpreted units of meaning for each of the three cases for which a talk was analysed.

Finally, a synthesis was produced (known as an 'eidetic reduction' in phenomenological terminology, cf. 2.6). The interpreted units of meaning from all three cases were summarised with the aim of presenting the essence of the situation and its structural characteristics. Ten cross-case categories were used:

1. The participants have aesthetic experiences. The educator's communication focuses on transmitting knowledge and at the same time on creating and maintaining a pedagogical communication.
2. It is clear that a form of socialisation is occurring alongside the pedagogical activity.
3. The educator's methods are based more on specific understandings of art, institutions and roles than on expert didactic concepts.
4. Differences between the imparting and acquirement of knowledge
5. There is a correlation: original art work – body – acquirement.
6. There is a correlation: institution – compulsion/power - imparting.
7. Complex, dynamic and contingent situations are coordinated.
8. The original art work enables and forces a dialogue.
9. The observed didactic vacillates between play and appearance.
10. The role of the chaperon school teachers remains undetermined.

Using variation and reduction to the essence, the situation was classified under these categories or sub-headings; this led to a general interpretation of the phenomenon, a summary

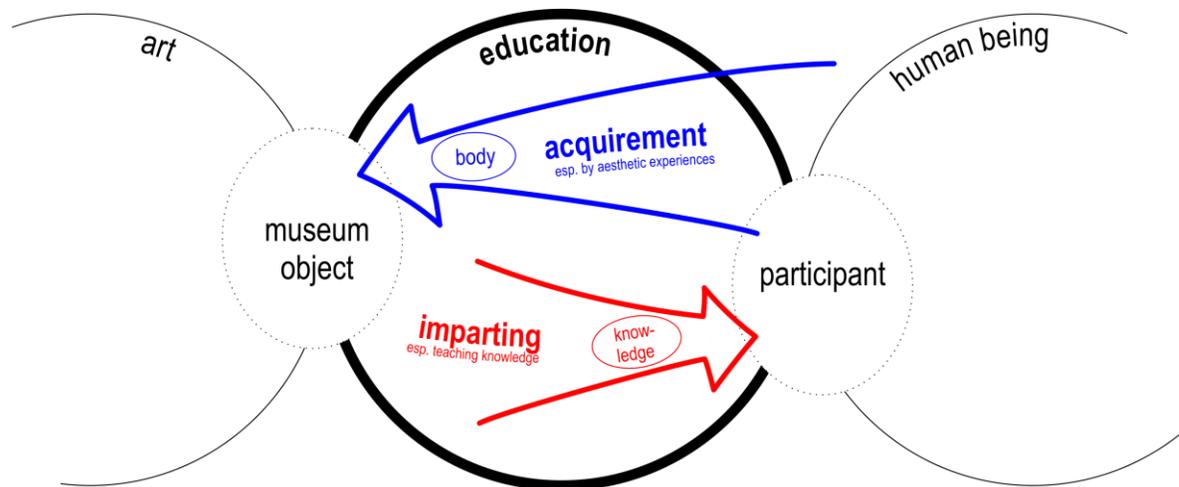
of the essential and a structural generalisation. The characteristics of the individual cases were synthesised to produce an overall statement. This general structure was then looked at in the light of the state of current research and developed into a functional structural model for art and museum education.

### ***Benefits of the method***

The approach that was selected allowed the situations that were being observed to be studied in a comprehensive and methodical way, along with the development of cross-case structures. This allowed the reconstruction of key characteristics of the interplay between aesthetic object, recipient group and educator. A heuristic, descriptive model of “pedagogical art communication” was developed linked to the summary of the current state of research and the theories discussed (particularly Kade, 1997; Hausendorf, 2010; Gruetjen, 2013). Therefore the evaluations provided a model, a typology or an example of this situation, which allowed generalisations to be drawn despite its specificities. Now it is possible to use this model to view the situation differently and act in other ways; pedagogical reflexivity is stimulated to view such situations ‘differently’ in order to act in a more professional way (cf. Peez, 2000, p. 161).

***Result: a heuristic, descriptive structural model of “pedagogical art communication”***

## **pedagogical art communication**



*Figure 3.* Research outcome: Schematic presentation of the basic structure of pedagogical art communication

The interplay between recipient group, aesthetic object and educator in a specific exhibition context can be characterised by saying that on the one hand participants proceed an acquirement that is strongly imbued with aesthetic experience, and on the other hand an imparting takes place that essentially consists of knowledge transfer and the creation and maintenance of “pedagogical communication” (Kade, 1997). There is a difference between the acquirement and the imparting; there is a close correlation between the original work of art, the body and acquirement and between the institution, compulsion/power and imparting. This difference is inevitable and indissoluble. So it cannot be expected that imparting and acquirement form an contemplary process or melt together. However imparting is not impossible in this way. It is urgently needed as one side of the coin, with acquirement on the other side. Without imparting there could be no pedagogical art communication.

In future therefore, art education and museum education needs to focus less on dissolving this difference (in the sense of ‘methods that work’) and spend more time on finding ways of sensibly dealing with the difference between imparting and acquirement of art. So the practice of pedagogical art communication means imparting what can be imparted to the extent that it is ‘impartable’; stimulating and enabling the acquirement of knowledge – and, at a broader level, coordinating the interplay of imparting and acquirement of art socially, performatively and in the space.

### ***Specific experiences: strengths and limitations of social phenomenological analysis***

The strength of the selected approach is certainly that it is able to retrace complex situations, integrate various aspects of these situations and consider their interdependencies. From this, it is possible to put together a comprehensive overview of key features and structures.

This approach allowed me to do justice to the complexity of the research subject. The detailed description and analysis allowed me to consider the complex and multilayered situation of a talk about a work of art. The situation in focus is very complex, as there are interactions between the participants, with the educator and with the work of art, and in turn these interactions are based on certain pedagogical and institutional settings and influenced by social frameworks. With this ‘holistic’ view of a complete phenomenon it was possible to make useful connections between various elements such as the influence of the space on the group, the actions of individual participants, external influences and stimuli from the educator. This made it possible to make a comprehensive analysis of the situation.

In this context, it was very helpful to be able to integrate linguistic and non-linguistic utterances. In many situations, gestures, posture and facial expressions were very important; in some situations verbal utterances had to be interpreted quite differently in light of the speaker's body language. This would not have been possible if a purely linguistic approach

had been used.

I believe one of the main advantages is that the individual aspects are not looked at in isolation but can be analysed in their context. This allowed the interplay of institution, behaviour, interaction, pedagogy, etc. to be studied and the 'lifeworld of the talk' could be reconstructed, along with all its influences and developments.

As a non-sequential approach, social phenomenological analysis makes it possible to take into account time-spanning correlations within a situation, such as the influence of the greeting on the later situation.

After focusing on the specific situation, this approach then allows differences and similarities between the various cases to be summarised, as phenomenological analysis uses coding to create cross-case categories. In the end there is an actual 'outcome': the reconstruction of the essence of a phenomenon. Critical "structures that certainly have an effect but that previously could not be explicitly appreciated in scientific or lifeworld terms" can now be reconstructed through phenomenological analysis within the lifeworld, and general connections can be derived (Peez, 2000, p. 161).

However, this strength also delineates the limitations of phenomenological analysis. Reconstructing structures means presenting the status quo of a phenomenon. So, for example, it is not possible to use this method to evaluate the phenomenon. It is not planned to make comparisons with other phenomena or carry out an evaluation using existing benchmarks in this approach. Phenomenological analysis also does not allow the generation of instruction manuals. It is only possible to reconstruct existing things, so this approach can be described as retrospective rather than prospective – as is the case with most empirical approaches. However, phenomenological analysis goes beyond the observed situation. Through the precise reconstruction of a phenomenon, it is possible "to understand educational reality as a meaningfully structured, culturally formed reality in its meaningfulness and normative structure" (Friebertshaeuser & Prengel, 1997, p. 20) Thus it is possible to generate models and perceptions which may be used more pragmatically in future by educational and other actors in similar situations (cf. Peez, 2000, p. 325 f.). Therefore phenomenological analysis offers an opportunity to gain a better understanding of a phenomenon, to grasp its structures and relationships and hence to amend future actions.

As with all interpretative approaches, social phenomenological analysis also harbours the danger of giving too much weight to individual, always subjective, interpretations. So here it is all the more necessary to carry out a painstaking reflection of subjective observations and methodically allow for multiple perspectives, such as through triangulation (cf. Mayring,

2002; Lamnek, 2005; Flick, 2010; Flick, 2011). For example, this could be carried out through “data triangulation” (cf. Denzin, 1970; Denzin, 1978) of verbal and visual data or “investigator triangulation” (ibid.) in evaluation groups and study workshops, or also through “systematic perspective triangulation” (Flick, 2010, p. 161; Flick, 2011, p. 20 f.), in which different research approaches are triangulated with the methods and data linked to them.

Personally, I found this detailed and initially meticulously descriptive and then precisely interpretative approach to be very practical, though time-consuming. The description of the video sequences was very demanding because I had to write down a wide range of impressions from the video recording (actions, atmospheres, utterances, room layouts, movements, etc.). It was difficult to present simultaneous actions within a meaningful sentence structure. In the interpretation, it was also a challenge to keep track of everything at the same time while still focusing on what was important. Anyone who wants to use a phenomenological approach therefore has to find their own structure for the material (or, to be more precise, work out a structure from the material), particularly when formulating structural characteristics, and then bring them together to come to an overall conclusion.

### **Conclusion**

By using social phenomenological analysis in my research, I was able to make a very detailed assessment of the different cases in all their complexity, including linguistic and non-linguistic interactions and other external factors. It was also possible to work out possible, cross-case structural characteristics. I believe I succeeded in understanding and presenting a key situation in art and museum education with all its structural relationships. In future this can be expanded upon in theoretical, empirical and practical terms.

I found this method was practical because it is very low-tech. There was no need to use special software or complicated methods. Social phenomenological analysis is a descriptive/interpretative approach that is easy to learn and put into practice. It is more important to understand it as a “metatheoretical position” (Lamnek, 2005, p. 48 f.) and take a corresponding attitude towards the research. It also requires a very detailed approach, a high degree of self-reflection and transparency, and the ability to recognise and develop structures. I believe this research method is suitable for arts education, because this is an extremely complex field that in the past has had little theoretical structure. Therefore social phenomenological analysis is recommended as a research method that can be applied in the “lifeworld” (Husserl). It takes a comprehensive view of a phenomenon and derives general correlations that can then be used in research and practice.

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### **About the Author**

Fabian Hofmann, Dr., M.A. (\*1978), is associate professor at Flidner University of Applied Studies Duesseldorf (Germany). Dr. Hofmann served a carpenter apprenticeship and studied art education, art history and psychology at Justus-Liebig-University Giessen (Germany). He has been head of education at Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, a leading european art gallery. Dr. Hofmann did research about interaction in guided tours at art galleries (awarded with the Arnold-Vogt-Prize), teaches on early childhood art education and fosters the idea that a museum is a place for multiple forms of experiences (Preuss and Hofmann 2017). He is interested in questions of interaction, experience, aesthetic experience and transformation. Dr. Hofmann is scientific consultant of the german museum education formation programme “The language of the objects” and board member of the german Network Research on Cultural Education (NFKB).

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