

Trauma and Intersubjectivity: The Phenomenology of Empathy in PTSD

Lillian Wilde

Abstract

With my research, I wish to contribute to the discussion of post-traumatic psychopathologies from a phenomenological perspective. The main question I pursue is to what extent PTSD can be understood as an intersubjective psychopathology and which implications this view might have. In this paper, I argue that the mode of perception allowing for intersubjective experience is vulnerable to disruptions through traumatic events. I begin with a short elaboration on what intersubjectivity entails before proceeding to illustrate how it can be impaired. Then, I focus on the concept of empathy as a mode of perception: I propose that due to a disruption of the ability to empathize an individual suffering from PTSD may cease to experience the other as another subject that offers possibilities for interaction. The traumatized individual is thus unable to establish meaningful connections with others. I offer some implications this view might entail for thinking about trauma treatment.

Keywords

Phenomenology, Intersubjectivity, PTSD, Trauma, Empathy, Edith Stein

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Introduction

With my research, I wish to contribute to the discussion of post-traumatic psychopathologies from a phenomenological perspective. The main question I pursue is to what extent PTSD can be understood as an intersubjective psychopathology and which implications this view might have for trauma treatment.

Interpersonal neurobiology confirms what Husserl and Heidegger observed a century ago: the individual and their experience exist, on a fundamental level, in relation to others (e.g. Heidegger, 1927; Husserl, 1973; van der Kolk, 2015). I argue that the mode of perception allowing for intersubjective experience is vulnerable to disruptions through traumatic events. In order to do so it will be necessary to begin with an elaboration on what intersubjectivity entails before proceeding to illustrate how it can be impaired. In the following, I will focus on the concept of empathy as a mode of experiencing: I propose that due to a disruption of the ability to empathize, an individual suffering from PTSD may cease to experience the other as another subject that offers possibilities for interaction. Rather, the other is experienced as a source of threat and incites survival mode. The traumatized individual is thus unable to establish meaningful connections with others.

I shall draw on the phenomenological works of Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein, as well as contemporary research. Phenomenology, concerned with the experiential structure of mental life, has proven to be a valuable asset in understanding the subjective dimension of mental illnesses. It has thereby contributed to the research conducted in psychology and the natural sciences. However, to date it has only scarcely been applied to the study of PTSD. Understanding PTSD as an intersubjective psychopathology may help to think about trauma not as an affliction of the self-contained individual but as an embodied and social disturbance (Herman, 1992).

Methodology

Phenomenology is a sub-discipline of philosophy that developed throughout the 20th century. Edmund Husserl is widely considered to be the founding father of this new school of thought that scrutinizes the relationship between consciousness and the world and seeks to ground the assumptions of the natural sciences in experience. Philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger have taken up and enhanced Husserl's account in subsequent years. The 1980s brought renewed interest in phenomenology when consciousness regained popularity as a research topic. Let this brief overview suffice, as a comprehensive account of the historical development of phenomenology would exceed the scope of this essay.

The fundamental idea underlying the phenomenological method is that the world is made available to the subject solely by means of consciousness. As Merleau-Ponty remarks in *The Phenomenology of Perception*: "All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, viii). Phenomenology aims to account for the way in which the objective world presents itself in subjective experience. It does not, however, question or deny the objectivity of the world, as a relativist account would. Rather, it is concerned with the *interplay* of objective world and consciousness.

The main method to achieve this is through the *epoché*, a term introduced into phenomenology by Edmund Husserl. In our natural attitude, we are deeply immersed in our habitual life world. Within this horizon, we take certain structures of experience and perception for granted, without grounding in any actual experience (Husserl, 1913a; Merleau-Ponty, 1945). The stone elephants supporting the entrance gate won't start moving when I turn my back; the auditorium won't

cease to exist when I leave it. The epoché allows me to question this experience. Not that I start doubting the existence of the room I just left; rather, I open myself to the possibility of questioning my experience of it. How do I relate to this space I am no longer in? What assures me that it is still there, the way I left it, and will still be there when I enter it the next time? What makes me so sure the elephants won't start scratching their strained backs, once unobserved? The epoché is a tool that allows me to investigate the world from an unbiased angle. I can thus notice things that would otherwise go unnoticed, veiled by habitual experiencing.

A range of literature has been added to the phenomenological canon over the last century, providing rich resources to engage with topics like consciousness, subjectivity, empathy, intersubjectivity, life world, and many more. In recent years, phenomenology has taken the subjective dimension of mental illnesses as its object of scrutiny, concerning itself with the experiential structure of mental life (e.g. Fuchs, 2002; Legrand, 2009; Parnas & Gram Henriksen, 2016; Ratcliffe, 2017). In this paper, I shall continue in this tradition, applying phenomenological research to post-traumatic experience. I propose that human experience is intersubjective, and that PTSD involves a disruption of empathy, which is a fundamental feature of intersubjectivity. In order to do so it will be necessary to begin by elaborating on what intersubjectivity entails, before proceeding to illustrate how it can be impaired.

Intersubjectivity

The individual and their experience exist in relation to others (e.g. Husserl, 1973; Stein, 1917; van der Kolk, 2015). Intersubjectivity refers to an individual's experience of and relation to another subject, and to those experiences that presuppose an 'other' (Zahavi, 2003, 112).

In his work *The Crisis of the European Sciences* (1936), Husserl introduces the concept of constitutive intersubjectivity. In this sense, intersubjectivity refers to our means of accessing the objective character of the phenomenal world. Albeit I can only ever access the objective world from my point of view, I am aware that it is available not only to me but to other subjectivities as well; I am aware of other subjectivities having an experience of the world, themselves, and others, including me. The little boat on the canal can be seen by everyone strolling along the promenade. The dragon I imagine circling above, however, is not part of the objective world as it cannot be perceived by anyone but me (Husserl, 1936; Zahavi, 2009). Apart from intersubjectivity, we have other means of arriving at the experience of objectivity; however, the constitution of the objective world is not what concerns us here. Rather, I shall focus on the implications intersubjectivity has for our experience of others and ourselves and how this can be impacted by a traumatic event. Due to the brevity of this paper I will focus on the concept of empathy, first and foremost as it is presented by Edith Stein in her work *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917).

Empathy

There is a wide range of accounts that seek to explain the experience one subject has of another *qua* subject. Theories of mind, like the (exquisitely named) theory theory or the simulation theory assume that the mind of the other is private, hidden, and only indirectly accessible by means of interpretation of outer cues like gestures, facial expressions, and actions, or through a simulation of the other's mental states, respectively (cf. Tanaka, 2017; Merleau-Ponty, 1945).

Phenomenological accounts, on the other hand, pose that one can directly access the other's mental states, grounded on the assumption that humans are embodied and thus psychophysical beings (Husserl, 1973; Stein, 1917). In order to clarify this, I will begin with a short elaboration on the concept of the 'lived body' or 'Leib' in German. My body is a physical object, and I can

experience it as that. As such, it is susceptible to gravity, takes up a certain amount of space, and is never in more than one location at once. However, I experience my body not only as a physical object. As lived body, I have an intimate experience of my body as experiencing, and of experiences as being given to my body. With my hands I feel, with my eyes I see, I have proprioception, i.e. a sense of where my body is and in which position, and relative control over when and how to move certain parts of my body. My body is my focal point of experiencing, and I cannot rid myself of it even if I tried to, eyes closed and limbs outstretched (Stein, 1916, 44f). In short, my lived body is the focal point of my subjective experiencing.¹ Thus, my body exhibits a double character: it is a physical object while at the same time being a ‘lived body’. In the following, I will imply the lived body whenever I refer to notions of the self or the other (i.e. an other’s ‘self’). My experience of my body moves between these two extremes of lived body and object body.

The way I experience my own body as lived body is distinct from the way I experience other bodies as lived bodies. I do not have the same sense of intimacy of experience. And yet, when I perceive another’s body, the other’s body appears to me as a lived body, as a “corporeal field of expression for another mental life” (Jardine, 2017). By perceiving the other’s body as lived body rather than object body, the other’s mental life is given to me in direct experiencing.

This brings me to Edith Stein’s account of empathy. Using the term in line with 20th century phenomenologists like Husserl and Scheler, empathy is a mode of intentionality. In empathy, the intentional object (i.e. the object of my perception) is the other’s experience. Just like I *see* the ferry, *imagine* a dragon, or *remember* the last time I ate pancakes, I *empathize* with someone’s experience. This view implies that, in empathy, the conscious life of the other is

¹ The question whether one could conceive of an experiencing self without a body would lead us too far astray and shall thus not be discussed here.

given to me in direct perception, just as I perceive the other's body as a lived body (Stein, 1916, 53).²

When you enter the room, I recognize you as another embodied subjectivity, with your own mental states, thoughts, and feelings. When I, as we aptly say, "see" that you are sad, your sadness is originally given to me in perception. It does not require me to interpret your hunched shoulders and tense lips or to put myself in your position by means of imagination, taking on your perspective, or to simulate your experience of sadness within myself. In some cases, it is in fact impossible for me to simulate your experience 'within me' by means of empathy. This becomes clear when we take a brief look at a disturbed mental state in which the subject is unable to have empathy: I cannot empathize with your inability to have empathy.³ Your sadness is the intentional object of my perception and as such directly accessible to my perception; this does not mean that I experience the same sadness as you.⁴ Ratcliffe goes so far as to argue that empathy is in fact an acknowledgement of difference (Ratcliffe, 2017a). By means of empathy, I appreciate that there is another mental life that is different from my own.

What is the relation of empathy and intersubjectivity? Empathy is the mode of intentionality in which another's conscious life is directly given to me in experience. This is based on the assumption that we are psychophysical beings rather than private minds hidden away in object bodies. Empathy is our means of accessing another subjectivity and in this sense a fundamental feature of intersubjectivity. It is through empathy that I become aware of the other as another subjectivity.

² This does not mean that I have sense-perception of the other's 'soul' or 'psyche' – as I have said earlier, I take the individual to be a psychophysical entity, and the other's embodiment allows me to access their mental life as forming a unity with their lived body.

³ For a criticism of simulation theories of mind, see Ratcliffe, 2017a.

⁴ It is possible for me to experience the same emotion as you; empathy can enable my sympathy for your experience. This, however, is not the topic of this paper.

How about those situations in which I do not know which mental state you are currently experiencing? I shall argue that here we are faced with a special case of empathy. Say that, on encountering you, I fail to make out whether you are sad, upset, or simply bored. Without any effort (i.e. simulation or the like), I perceive *that* you are in a mental state. Whether or not it is an unusual one for you to be in does not play a significant role; what matters is that I perceive you as a conscious, embodied being. The act of perception remains the same, while the intentional object changes. First, it was your sadness, now it is your experience more generally construed. This holds, too, for encounters in which you are un-conscious. When I come home late and find you in a deep sleep on the sofa, I encounter you as not-experiencing. However, I do not question whether you are capable of being in some mental state or other; I have a simple, direct experience of you as a conscious subject with the ability to experience—whether or not it is actualized—and can easily distinguish you from the non-conscious stuffed animal lying next to you on the floor. Empathy is thus not only the mode of intentionality that allows me to perceive your actual experience in any given case but furthermore gives me access to the very fact *that* you have an experience. In this way, it is the fundamental mode of perception in which intersubjective experience is grounded.

In reciprocal empathy, I am aware, by means of empathy, of the other as empathetically experiencing other embodied beings, including myself (Stein, 1917). I thus reach an understanding of myself not only as psychophysical subjectivity, but also as the psychophysical object of another subjectivity. Thus, “I arrive at an apprehension of myself as a human being... by way of a comprehension of others” (Husserl, 1913b). Intersubjectivity can therefore be said to not only be constitutive of an objectively accessible life world, but moreover as giving rise to an enhanced understanding of myself.⁵

⁵ Empathy in the phenomenological sense does not have any moral implications. That is, having empathy is not a positive trait, as popularly assumed. The most common example to illustrate this is the torturer: having a lot

Empathy and PTSD

Before delving into the vulnerability of empathy as a mode of perception, let me begin with a brief elaboration on trauma and PTSD. Due to the diversity of experiences that can induce stress disorders in the affected it is difficult—if not impossible—to provide a hard definition of trauma. A traumatic event is usually one that involves an involuntary, uncontrollable threat to the individual's life or bodily integrity, according to the DSM V (“Criteria for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” 2017), and can occur in the form of combat, sexual assault, robbery, terrorist attack, natural disaster, or other. We can distinguish interpersonally inflicted traumata, such as torture, from those that do not directly involve an aggressor, such as the destruction of a home through flood or fire. Not every potentially traumatic event will actually have long lasting⁶ psychophysical effects on the affected individual, while some individuals might experience post-traumatic stress symptoms despite only being indirectly involved in a traumatic experience, e.g. after the abrupt loss of a loved one. Accordingly, PTSD is notoriously difficult to diagnose, not least because symptoms often resemble or overlap with those of other psychopathologies like depression or schizophrenia, whose only feature differentiating them from PTSD may in some cases be the cause of the disturbance. I suggest this is the reason why phenomenological literature, albeit abundant on depression and schizophrenia, is scarce in the case of PTSD.⁷

Intersubjective experience is vulnerable to disruptions through traumatic events. Many accounts of post-traumatic experience involve descriptions of a sense of estrangement,

of empathy for his victim will make the torturer do a better job, as it will enable him to discern his victim's experience and thus establish what inflicts most suffering. It is thus important to keep in mind the distinction between empathy and sympathy.

⁶ PTSD is diagnosed if symptoms prevail for over a month.

⁷ In the following, I shall also draw on phenomenological literature on depression and schizophrenia due to the similarity in symptoms, without making claims as to the conditionality of the disturbances. It is however widely agreed that a traumatising event can indeed be the cause for depression, and some authors have argued that the same holds for schizophrenia (e.g. Read, Perry, Moskowitz, & Connolly, 2011).

detachment, or social alienation, which have also been reported in cases of depression and schizophrenia (Ratcliffe, 2018). The experience that one is unable to establish meaningful connections with others is a common source of distress for the traumatized individual. An individual suffering from PTSD may feel that no-one can understand their predicament, experience an inability to connect with others, and even cease to experience the other as another subject that offers possibilities for interaction.

The world offers certain possibilities, affordances, and anticipations (Fuchs, 2007; Husserl, 1913a). The glass next to my computer appears as something I can pick up and drink from. The cookies I can see on the café counter appear as something physically out of reach, but they still offer the affordance of being eaten. When I see the glass sliding off the table, I anticipate its falling and shattering. In the same way, people offer possibilities for interaction. I experience the girl sitting at the table next to me as possible to talk to, as possible to have things with me in common, and as possible to become friends with. I argue that my experience of affordances of interaction is owed to my ability to empathize. I perceive the girl as having some mental life that is different from my own, as having thoughts and ideas that I could agree or disagree with, and as having feelings that are different from my own in their actuality (albeit similar in kind). My experience of a possibility of interaction depends on this empathic understanding of her mental life.

This kind of affordance of the other might not be available to a person suffering from PTSD (Ataria, 2018; Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2015). In some cases, the other is instead experienced as a source of threat and incites survival mode in the individual, triggering a fight-or-flight response (van der Kolk, 2015). I argue that the traumatized individual is unable to perceive the affordances the other offers because their ability to empathize is impacted: the girl in the café might be perceived as a potential threat, as someone who could hurt me, or simply

as not offering the affordances described above which is reflected in a sense of alienation, of being cut off, and not being at home in the world. Because the traumatized individual struggles to empathize, they are unable to perceive the other as another subject offering possibilities for interaction.

As I have argued earlier, empathy is a fundamental feature of intersubjective experience. It seems that both the ability to empathize and to receive empathy is impacted in PTSD. Further disabling reciprocal empathy, trauma thus renders the individual unable to perceive the other's empathy for them, resulting in the feeling of 'not being seen' and 'not being understood'. As Ratcliffe points out, the absence of affordances is in many cases a *felt* absence and as such part of the individual's suffering (Ratcliffe, 2018).

Implications

Others have argued that a pervasive lack of trust and sense of safety in the world is the cause for feelings of detachment commonly described by traumatized individuals (e.g. Brison, 2013; Herman, 1992; Ratcliffe, 2018). While I do not disagree, I propose that there is an additional dimension to the disturbance which is first and foremost perceptual. The difference, I argue, lies here: a mere lack of trust or sense of safety seems to be susceptible to reasoning, whereas emphasizing an alteration of perception helps to illustrate the difficulties a traumatized individual might have to regain this trust and thereby to reconnect. I, in my non-traumatized experience, can quite easily be talked into trusting someone I initially mis-trusted and might even be able to do so myself; this does not hold for someone with PTSD. Trauma has the ability to severely impact an individual and the way in which they perceive others, themselves and the world. The very structure of experience and perception that we take for granted is, in fact,

susceptible to change.⁸ Understanding and emphasizing this adds to our understanding of PTSD. It is not an affliction of the self-contained individual but involves a disturbance of the individual's perception of the other, of their ability to empathize. It is, in this sense, an intersubjective psychopathology. This broadened understanding of the disturbances inflicted by traumatic events helps to illustrate the difficulties an individual might experience in recovering from trauma and has the potential to enable thinking about trauma treatment from a different angle. Research has already shown that individuals with strong social bonds are more likely to recover from a traumatic event. Perhaps, acknowledging the intersubjective dimension of PTSD can help to develop treatment methods to aid trauma survivors.

Conclusion

In this paper, I aimed at giving a brief insight into the phenomenology of PTSD. I began with a short overview of the phenomenological tradition and its methodologies to illustrate why it is a useful tool to investigate psychopathologies. I focused on the concept of empathy and how it is applied by phenomenologists like Husserl and Stein. Empathy is conceived of as a mode of perception. It is by means of empathy that one experiences another's mental life. This mode of perception, albeit taken for granted in 'normal' experiencing, is in fact vulnerable to disturbances. The individual suffering from PTSD might experience an inability to empathize with others, i.e. to perceive the other as another subject offering possibilities for interaction. Not only rendering connection difficult if not impossible, this felt absence of affordances is in itself part of the individual's affliction. PTSD is thus, I have argued, an intersubjective pathology. Understanding it in this way might enable different ways of thinking about PTSD and treatment methods.

⁸ Be reminded of the phenomenological concept of the habitual life world that I mentioned at the beginning of the paper, which offers a helpful framework to illustrate this.

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