

# What does it mean to be “doing phenomenology”?

## Reasons for reflecting on personal experiences used as case studies

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### Abstract

From her time as a student to the present day, the author has had dealings with children through having been a volunteer at children’s homes and elementary schools, and has researched case studies from the theoretical background of phenomenology. In addition to presenting a case study from a children’s home, this paper discusses two issues. The first issue is that, within the process of conducting research using case studies taken from personal experience, there are encounters with three kinds of ‘Others’; the children from whom the line of enquiry starts, the improvised actions of the ‘Self’, and the audience for the research. The second is the consideration that the activities involved in “doing phenomenology” are case study research, with its opportunities for encountering the three kinds of ‘Others’, and a series of cyclical changes in the ‘Self’.

### Keywords

doing phenomenology, case study on children, reflection on personal experience, the three kinds of others

## Introduction: Composition of this paper

From her time as a student to the present day, the author has had dealings with children through having been a volunteer at children’s homes<sup>1</sup> and elementary schools, and has researched case studies from the theoretical background of phenomenology. In addition to presenting a case study from a children’s home, this paper discusses two issues. The first issue is that, within the process of conducting research using case studies taken

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<sup>1</sup> A children’s home is a type of children’s welfare institution established by the Child Welfare Act which provides a home for children between the ages of 1 and 20 who cannot live with their own families due to abuse. The author has been conducting research at a certain children’s home for a dozen years and has been involved with the children there once or twice a week.

from personal experience, there are encounters with three kinds of ‘Others’; the children from whom the line of enquiry starts, the improvised actions of the ‘Self’, and the audience for the research. The second is the consideration that the activities involved in “doing phenomenology” are case study research, with its opportunities for encountering the three kinds of ‘Others’, and a series of cyclical changes in the ‘Self’.

## 1. Case Study

The event described in this case study relates to an occasion when two boys who had been living in a children’s home for approximately one year were faced with separation from the other children, because the other children were being taken to new homes by their mothers<sup>2</sup>. The narrator of the events is the author herself, but the names of the two boys have been changed.

As soon as the other children who had come to say good-bye were out of sight, Kohta (8) came back to where I was standing. He grinned, and then suddenly started slapping Yuuto on the face and head while saying, “Yuuto’s an idiot! Yuuto’s stupid!” As he was saying this, Kohta continued to hit Yuuto relentlessly. “Doesn’t hurt! You idiot!” said Yuuto provocatively. “Kohta, stop it. Yuuto, don’t provoke him,” I screamed while trying to protect Yuuto with my arms. However, Kohta laughed to himself as he reached in through the gaps between my arms to thump Yuuto’s head and face several more times with his fists. “You can’t hurt me, you idiot! I hate you! Kohta, I hate you!” All the while Yuuto was being attacked, he continued to provoke Kohta. “Kohta, Yuuto, what’s got into you? Both of you, stop it please!” I shouted. I could feel that, by avoiding my arms, Kohta was still using his fists to hit Yuuto, but all I could do was to scream at him to stop. At that moment, one of the staff of the children’s home was passing and held Kohta firmly before leading him away.

## 2. The meaning of a marginal existence: Confronting two types of the ‘Other’

The author feels that she has a “marginal existence” when dealing with children because her identity is neither that of a child nor of an adult, neither that of a childcare

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of writing this paper, minor additions and revisions have been made which do not affect the content.

worker nor that of someone being cared for, neither that of an educator nor that of someone being educated. A marginal existence is different to being a childcare worker or a teacher because there is no clear educational intent in spending time with the children and does not fit into the ‘mold’ of being either a childcare worker or an educator. Because the author met the children without typical educational objectives and did not fit into a typical ‘mold’, the children behaved outside the framework of being cared for or educated. For this reason, the improvisation and uniqueness, which are built-in features of dealings with the ‘Other’, stand out in the practical experiences of the author. For example, in the case study mentioned, the author reacted instantly (reflection *in action*)<sup>3</sup> when Kohta suddenly started to hit Yuuto. In that situation, the two boys were encountering the author as an overwhelming ‘Other’ who was beyond their expectations. For this reason, after the author’s dealings with the two boys had come to an end, the author asked herself the simple question; “Why did Kohta suddenly attack Yuuto, and why did Yuuto provoke him further?”

Another simple question arose concerning the author’s ‘Self’ at the time of the events in the case study. This was because the author’s ‘Self’ in the past, which had acted impulsively on a sudden decision, was an unknown ‘Other’ to her present ‘Self’ as it reflected on the events in the case study. From the very fact that her involvement with children was always a one-off matter, with no opportunity for making amends later, the author felt regret that she could not answer the question of, “Should I have tried to restrain Kohta more forcibly when he started to hit Yuuto?” It was because the author was a marginal existence and did not have a typical educational intent or fit into a typical ‘mold’ that she always faced children as a unique individual with the way of thinking, way of behaving, and way of living of her own ‘Self’.

The process of putting an experience into words and doing a mental reconstruction of the experience which provided the opportunity for the author to consider the question of the two kinds of ‘Other’, namely the children and her ‘Self’ in the past, gave rise to a fresh realization and another question (reflection *after action*)<sup>4</sup>. In the case study described, “I had not been aware of it at the time, but while I was trying to protect Yuuto with my arms, Kohta was trying to hit only Yuuto in the spaces which remained between my arms. This goes to show that Kohta was completely composed at that time. That being the case, there must have been some meaning behind the attack.” This reflection prompted the author to realize something new and to ask yet another question of herself.

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<sup>3</sup> Shön, D. 2001. *Senmonka no chie* [The Reflective Practitioner]. Translated by Manabu Sato and Kiyomi Akita. Yumiru Publishing.

<sup>4</sup> Shön, D. Previously cited.

The author thinks that this realization and self-examination was prompted by writing her experience down in order to record it and becoming aware that her ‘Self’ in the past had become objectified as the ‘Other’<sup>5</sup>.

Through the medium of case study research, as the author confronted the two kinds of ‘Other’ which were the two boys and her ‘Self’ in the past, she took a step towards understanding the subject of the research (the ‘Other’ and the circumstances surrounding her practical experience). The author also took a step towards understanding her ‘Self’ when dealing with the ‘Other’ in that situation, and to changing her perceptions and her recognition of things. Through that moment of realization and understanding, by changing her perceptions and her recognition of things, the behavior of the author also changed when she was dealing with children. As shown in the case study, by observing the event with a knowledge of phenomenology<sup>6</sup> the author came to understand that, “for some types of children violence is a means of communication”. The author’s automatic perception of children’s violence as negative disappeared, and she became able to deal with it as violent behavior directed towards the ‘Self’<sup>7</sup>. When this happened a new relationship developed between the boys and the existence of the author.

In other words, the “reflection *on* action” involved in researching a single case study, changed the author’s ‘Self’. As a result, further “reflection *in* action” made the author ask another question. That question produced, in turn, further “reflection *on* action” and reflections on that produced further changes in the author..., and so a cycle of behavior was started. Within this cycle of conducting case study research and having practical experiences, if there is also reinforcement or conclusive evidence which leads to tentative answers regarding understanding the ‘Other’, in cases where the relationship between the researcher and the children was successful, then it produces a recollection of further incidents which exceed assumptions of having been successful, and changes become necessary. The author considers that this cyclical series of self-changes is the essence of conducting research (phenomenology).

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<sup>5</sup> Phenomenologist, Yasuhiko Murakami said, “When Husserl recorded the stream of his own consciousness, the phenomenon took on a kind of ‘Otherness’. (Abbreviated) In other words, even when you are analyzing your own experiences, you are analyzing them as the experiences of the ‘Other’ (Murakami, Y. 2016. *Sennin to mousou deto suru* [A Delusional Date with a Mountain Hermit]. Jimbun Shoin. p.230). In this way, for “qualitative research in phenomenology” it can be said that the ‘Self’ which experienced the event appears as the ‘Other’ in relation to the ‘Self’ which analyzes the event as a case study.

<sup>6</sup> For further reading about observing case studies, refer to chapter 3, section 4, of Otsuka, R. 2009. *Shisetsu de kurasu kodomotachi no seicho* [The Development of Children Living in Institutions]. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.

<sup>7</sup> The author, who does not fit a typical pattern and therefore has a marginal existence considers that behavior which is produced through the understanding of the ‘Other’ gained through case study research could be said to be the author’s individual pattern.

### 3. Encounters with third-party ‘Others’ in the course of presenting research

The previous section of this paper outlined; (1) that the author herself was a marginal existence without fitting into a typical ‘mold’, (2) that for that very reason, within relationships in which improvisation and uniqueness stand out, encounters with the two kinds of ‘Others’ as represented by the boys and her ‘Self’, became the opportunity for case study research, and (3) that one case study research is not a complete ending, but produces further case study research and a series of cycles in understanding of the ‘Other’. This section focuses on how the verbalization of experiences as case study research can lead to a dialogue with third-party ‘Others’.

The case study which the author has presented was a unique incident between the author and the two boys which cannot be replicated. In spite of this, when the author describes this case study in presentations, she often receives feedback such as, “I can empathize, because I’ve had similar experiences”. People who offer this kind of feedback are not limited to those connected with child welfare; some have connections to formal school education, some are medical personnel, some are parents, and some are students. Despite the fact that the circumstances in which an incident occurs, and the relationship between the people involved and the ‘Other’ will be completely different in each case, the people who give feedback to the author have experienced “similar”, that is to say analogous, experiences, and the author’s words have “reactivated” those people’s experiences<sup>8</sup>. The author considers that whether or not the experiences of her audience can be “reactivated” is a measure of the validity of her reflections on case study research<sup>9</sup>. In the previous section, within the series of cycles of case study research and practical

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<sup>8</sup> Husserl, E. (1974). *Yōroppa shogaku no kiki to chōetsuronteki genshōgaku* [The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology]. Japanese trans. Tsuneo Hosoya and others. Tokyo: Chuokoronsha.

<sup>9</sup> The author considers that her marginal existence is a consequence of her not fitting into a typical ‘mold’, and for the author, an understanding of the ‘Other’ based on case study research, and the existence of behavior created through that understanding of the ‘Other’, could, perhaps, be said to be the author’s own type of ‘mold’. The reasons for this are as follows. In phenomenology based on a theoretical background, as exemplified in the expression “individuality is expressed through universality”, there are indications towards a fundamental understanding of the essence of ordinary human experiences which are gained from personal experiences (“zu den Sachen selbst her = from the things themselves”). Accordingly, the author thinks that discussion about case study research is close to the essence of ordinary human experiences when case study research produces empathy within people who come from a variety of practical backgrounds. Certainly, within qualitative research incorporating case study research, there is little objectivity in terms of potential for replication. Instead, case study research produces reactivation of similar experiences in many readers or listeners and allows for vicarious experience of the case study. In other words, the validity and universality of qualitative research is secured because it includes this kind of potential for replication.

experience, it was mentioned that, by making successful relationships with children, a tentative answer leading towards an understanding of the ‘Other’ can be reinforced or conclusively proved. However, the same kind of reinforcement or conclusive proof can also be produced by empathy from readers and listeners.

Conversely, there are also times when suggestions or criticism from her audience in regard to the author’s practical experiences, writing style, or considerations regarding a case study, can elucidate fresh viewpoints and realizations. For example, in connection with the case study described, although the author came to realize that “for some types of children, violence is a form of communication”, people often opine that, “violence must not be tolerated in any situation”. When people make suggestions like this, the author searches for an expression which shows that she is not condoning violence, and she questions anew whether her understanding is appropriate. The very fact of doing research into case studies which are personal experiences means that suggestions and criticism from other people have a direct influence on the author herself. Sometimes people express empathy and sometimes people offer suggestions or criticism. Encounters with the third-party ‘Others’ who are the people who attend a research presentation are outside the series of personal case study and practical experience case studies outlined above, and this produces a series of cycles based on third-party ‘Others’ who have listened to the research. This duality in the cycle of research results in the continued changing of the ‘Self’ and this is probably what is meant by phenomenology.

## Conclusion

Within improvised relationships consisting of chance meetings, a confrontation with children in the role of being the ‘Other’ was an opportunity for questions to be raised. In order to answer those questions, the author described the situation as a case study and her ‘Self’ in the past which appeared as an ‘Other’. A single example of case study research can be brought to completion by writing a paper or giving a presentation, but the fact that it has been made into a formal style allows for encounters and dialogue with new ‘Others’ who are the audience for the research. This kind of dialogue with third-party ‘Others’ leads to a reinforcement of the validity of the author’s interpretation and produces a fresh set of questions.

This process can be described as a double cycle. The first cycle is the cycle of case study research and practical experiences, and the second is the cycle arising from dialogue with third-party ‘Others’ who have observed the presentation of research results.

It is because the author has been researching case studies based on personal experience that this series of double cycles inevitably becomes harmonized with normal changes in the author. Each individual case study can be brought to a conclusion, but the very act of researching personal experiences results in changes in the author's 'Self', which continue to develop based on satisfaction, indecision, and trial and error, without reaching a conclusion.