

Using second person interview techniques

Thi Bich DOAN

thibich.doan@gmail.com

Martial arts teacher, Cultural manager, PhD candidate at CREA
UMR 7656 (Ecole Polytechnique/CNRS) et Université Panthéon Sorbonne, Paris, France

The study of perceptive and cognitive processes makes us realize clearly that we as human beings, behave in a complex and subtle way that scientific theories and methods cannot entirely explain. Until recently, scientific issues were using only experimental observations carried out by neutral and objective observers, who were definitely outside the context and the content of the object of experience. In order to get valid outcomes, measurements tools should provide reproducible data, demanding extremely rigorous experimental protocols in the very specific conditions of a laboratory, which are far from the ecological state of a natural event. These methods enable one to acquire third person data, so called as they came out from an objective and reliable experimental material, gathered by a neutral and external observer, the « he or she ». The data obtained by neuro-imagery techniques or by tests in cognitive psychology should however be interpreted with the help of the subject under study, who will therefore have to describe his subjective experience during the experiment. This generally occurs after the experiment, by means of verbal reports or questionnaires. This personal information is then used as some extra data which can transform the interpretation of the very scientific data in a positive or negative way, but in any case must not themselves be considered as scientific inputs.

Nowadays a growing part of the scientific community progressively accept as obvious that subjective experience is necessary to really understand cognitive functioning. These researchers, especially in cognitive science, are beginning to take into account « the subjective dimension of cognition as it is lived from within ». Not only as an extra comment, but as a datum that should be studied on a par with ordinary scientific data. In fact, not only are direct descriptions given by the subject richer et more precise, but it is sometimes the only way to gather some data that proved to be impossible to get otherwise. A cognitive activity could for example occur without any behavioral cues or without any visible neuronal activation because its cues are too weak or too scattered into the brain to be recorded by neuro-imagery techniques. These data are called first person data, as they are provided directly and without any intermediary by the subject of the experiment, who speaks as « I ».

But once they have accepted this idea of taking first person data into account, scientists have to face another problem. It turns out that describing one's own subjective experience is very difficult. Subjective experience is often a pre-reflective experience, which can occur without being aware of it. In order to study this subjective experience as precisely as possible, some researchers, like Vermersch and Petitmengin, have developed, for about twelve years now, very rigorous methods of description. These methods mainly consist of interview techniques requiring the skills of a competent interviewer to help the interviewed subject to become aware of his lived experience, to define it in a precise way and to express it verbally. These techniques are called second person methods, as the subject provides his personal experimental first person data to a second person whom he addresses using the « you ».

Second person interview techniques require from the interviewer a serious training, sometimes in the long term. Some interviewers might have to be trained during several years

before mastering the method in a proper and effective way. On the other hand, a subject who has not been trained or who is not even aware of his subjective experience should be able to become aware of his lived experience and to describe it with great accuracy under the guidance of the interviewer.

These second person interview methods were largely inspired by meditation and mindfulness techniques used in Indian Buddhism (*samatha-vipassana*, to concentrate and calm the mind – to observe objectively the mind and body). They also borrow from Neuro-Linguistic Programming modelling interviews, and from techniques employed in psychotherapy like focusing (Gendlin), in person centered approach (Carl Rogers) and in introspection (Titchener). Lastly, they are philosophically connected to the phenomenological tradition from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty.

My interest for second person interview techniques and for a training given par Claire Petitmengin was motivated by my need to study and analyse in a rigorous way a corpus of subjective data which constitute an important ground of my reflexions and experimentations. I currently work on the edge of practices that allow the fields of perception and consciousness to expand, and of a more abstract reflection in cognitive science and philosophy. The aim is to present these practices in a theoretical framework and integrate them in the general field of scientific research. I started from my own practice of martial arts and of meditation. I have been practicing several martial arts for about thirty years : judo, karaté, aikido and kung fu. I also teach taiji quan and qi gong, and I've attended roughly 30 sessions of silent retreats in either buddhist monasteries or lay centers. I also use the informal discussions and interviews with artists, therapists and spiritual teachers I had during the last ten years of my professional activities as a cultural manager (organization of artistic exhibitions, art and science meetings, lectures ; therapeutic care).

My topic is the scientific study of direct perceptive experience (or consciousness) and how artistic, bodily and meditative practices can contribute to the field of cognitive science.

I am preparing a PhD at the laboratory CREA (Ecole Polytechnique/CNRS) and at the University of Panthéon Sorbonne (Paris), under the supervision of the philosopher Michel Bitbol, and in collaboration with neuroscientists.

I intend to bring out the existence of an underlying mode of perception often referred to as “energetic”, liable to help to deepen and to refine the perceptive and cognitive conscious processes. I then use my own experience in a first person introspective investigation. I also base my work on second person interviews of experts from different fields. These data will be confronted to scientific and philosophical reflection, grounded on a bibliographic synthesis that will gather scientific works already done.

During the workshop, I will present a small talk introducing the main practical aspects of second person interview techniques, as they have been developed and taught by Claire Petitmengin. A set of exercices, for small groups of 2 or 3 persons, will give the opportunity to get in touch with these techniques. At the end, each participant should begin to become aware of one's own subjective experience and to help others to learn how to describe their own subjective experience in a precise and valid way.

References

Petitmengin, Claire (2006) *Describing one's subjective experience in the second person : an interview method for the science of consciousness*. *Phenom Cogn Sci* 5:229-269