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Empirical Phenomenology
An Approach for Qualitative Research

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Empirical Phenomenology An Approach for Qualitative Research

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Abstract

This paper introduces the philosophical foundation and practical application of empirical phenomenology in social research. This approach builds upon the phenomenology of philosopher Edmund Husserl and sociologist Alfred Schütz, but considers how their more theoretical insights can be used in an empirical approach. It aims at being practically useful for anyone doing qualitative studies and interested in safeguarding the subjective perspective of those studied. The main idea of empirical phenomenology is that scientific explanation must be grounded in the first-order construction of the actors; that is, their own meanings and words. These constructions are then related to the second-order constructions of the scientist. In this paper, empirical phenomenology is considered in the light of phenomenological philosophy. The bulk of the paper consists of an explication of the approach, particularly in relation to concrete methods such as interviewing and participant observation. Finally, empirical phenomenology is summarized in seven steps, guiding the researcher through her project.

Introduction*

The aim of this paper is to introduce empirical phenomenology, an approach which is useful for qualitative research projects of different scopes ranging from undergraduate theses to large-scale research projects.¹ Empirical phenomenology states that a scientific explanation must be grounded in the meaning structure of those studied. This means that the actors' subjective perspective is the starting point of the analysis. The second assumption is that the social world is socially constructed, an argument which is generally accepted in contemporary social science. Finally, empirical

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¹ The notion of "empirical phenomenology" has been used in psychology as well. Although the outlook is quite similar, the idea of scientific explanation, the role of theory and the questions asked by social scientists distinguish the approach discussed in this paper, in addition to the fact that this approach is directed at *social* life.

phenomenology acknowledges the central role of theory in research, as well as the role of unintended consequences.

To explain how to practice empirical phenomenology, I will begin by giving a brief background about its philosophical heritage. This is followed by the presentation of empirical phenomenology, in which I provide notes on how this approach was used in a study on the market for fashion photographers (Aspers 2005). Before concluding the paper, I discuss the consequences of empirical phenomenology for qualitative methods, including participant observation and interviews.

Philosophical and social phenomenology

The German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is the founding father of phenomenology. However, others have to a greater or lesser extent used phenomenological ideas, including Heidegger, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, Garfinkel, Berger and Luckmann, Bourdieu, Derrida, Giddens and Habermas. Among these there are obviously differences, but also a common core.²

This core, in short, is that analysis does not start with the objective world ‘out there’, as is the case in the natural sciences and in much of the social sciences as well, but with ‘mental directedness’, or that which the mental is about, or directed to. Husserl did not speak of the mental directedness of real people, but rather suggested using what he calls phenomenological reductions as a means to secure a foundation of knowledge, in order to grasp the essence of things.

The natural attitude

Husserl argues that each person lives in a world, in the natural attitude, as a ‘human person living among others in the world’ ([1913b] 1989: 411). In this attitude people take, for example, the social surrounding, houses, values and social life, including one’s friends and the court of appeal, for granted, and people do not normally reflect upon this. This is the attitude people hold while living in the life-world. Though Husserl gradually became more aware of the problems of applying phenomenology to social life, he never abandoned the idea that there is a kingdom of truths that is accessible to human knowledge. It is, however, not Husserl’s philosophical idea of reduction that social scientists have picked up; it is rather the ideas of natural attitude and lifeworld that have been the focus of their interest.

The Austrian Alfred Schütz (1899-1959), who is often seen as a sociologist, developed his own brand of phenomenology. In contrast to Husserl, Schütz argues that the researcher should start with the life-world, where the person acts within the natural attitude, which the actor takes for granted (Schütz [1966] 1975: 5, 51). Schütz is clear about his major break with phenomenological philosophy: ‘as we proceed to our study of the social world, we abandon the strictly phenomenological method. [...] The object we shall be studying, therefore, is the human being who is looking at the world from within the natural attitude’ (Schütz [1932] 1976:97-98, cf. 43-44). The starting point of the social sciences has to be the ordinary social life of people (Schütz [1932] 1976: 141); that is, the ‘intentional conscious experiences directed toward the

² For an overview of phenomenology, see for example Moran (2001), Farber (1943) and Spiegelberger (1982). For a good introduction and discussion of Husserl, see Zahavi (2003). See also the journal *Human Studies* for articles discussing the phenomenology of the social sciences.

other self' (Schütz [1932] 1976: 144). The scientist's material is the mental content of people's natural attitude (cf. Schütz [1966] 1975: 116-132).

One central idea is that the researcher should, in order to understand the person or persons she is studying, try to grasp what phenomenologists call 'meaning structure'. This notion refers to the web of meanings that are mutually constituted. Meanings, in other words, come in structures and attain meaning in relation to other meanings, not in isolation. This process of meaning constitution is largely a social process, which means that the researcher who is interested in this must study it when people interact.

First-order and second-order constructs

Schütz' makes a distinction between first-order constructs of the people studied and second-order constructs of the researcher that is of great importance to social scientists. By conducting empirical studies, the researcher aims at understanding actors' meaning level, their first-order constructs. Only on the basis of these first-order constructs can one make decisions about second-order constructs. Schütz explains:

The thought objects constructed by the social scientist, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of men, living their daily life within their social world. Thus, the constructs of the social sciences are, so-to-speak, constructs of the second degree, that is, constructs of the constructs made by the actors on the social scene. (1962: 59)

The researcher's second-order constructs are based on the constructions of the actors in the field. In this way, the researcher connects the 'common sense world' with the scientific world of theories.

The role of language in understanding others

Another issue that Schütz discusses, the role of language in the process of understanding the other, is highly relevant for the social scientist conducting empirical research. Understanding the other is a requirement for the empirical phenomenologist. It calls for verbal communication, which is both a means and obstacle to accessing the meaning structure of others.

But what does understanding imply in practice, and how does one reach it? Understanding a person, Schütz argues, is accomplished when one understands what the other means (Schütz 1996: 127, [1932] 1976, 1964: 20-62). Hence, the notion of meaning is crucial in order to talk about understanding. Language is seen as the medium of both objective and subjective meaning; that is to say, language is the prime vehicle for subjects expressing their mental attitudes. At the same time, however, it imposes a restriction, since language is socially, not individually, constituted. In this way, mental life is to some extent objectively structured by language (Schütz 1982: 128-131). Schütz also connects a theory of interpretation of the performer (cf. Schütz [1932] 1976: 126-132) to the theory of signs and meaning. This implies the view that meaning is not transmitted atom by atom; meaning is holistic, more like a web. Alter must interpret the meaning of ego, which is quite hard to achieve without distortion.³

³ There are some clear connections with what scholars of hermeneutics like Paul Ricœur (1981) talk about as understanding, as well as to its process.

The likelihood of understanding between two actors will depend upon several factors. Understanding is more likely to occur if ego and alter attach the same meaning to words, if they both know the subject matter well, share the same habits of communication, and so on (cf. Schütz [1932] 1976: 126-127). Another way of saying this is that the actors first grasp the objectified meaning of the (communally used) sign system, and from this and the general knowledge of the situation, ego interprets the subjective meaning (Schütz [1932] 1976: 166). A combination of observation and communication facilitates the understanding of the other (Schütz [1932] 1976: 172-176, 1982, cf. 1964: 55). By participating in face-to-face interaction, especially if two actors have prior knowledge of one another, they are more likely to get their meaning across than if they do not know each other or each other's provinces of meaning (Schütz 1962: 220). Through this process of communication, experience and interpretation that ego and alter are involved in, one reaches the meaning level of other actors and understands the way they construct ideal types, theories, codes, habits, words and other aspects of their daily life, or what Schütz calls first-order constructs.

Studying the world-as-experienced

Thus, the phenomenologist interested in social life does not study an objectively existing world, but a phenomenologically experienced world. For example, a social institution is always perceived or valued by someone, and people tend to see things differently. This is also the foundation for the theory of social constructions; the social world does not come ready-made, but is constructed and reconstructed by its inhabitants. These are core ideas of a phenomenological social science, but this says little on how this approach can be applicable to empirical research; how can this be achieved?

Phenomenology has taken three routes that are relevant to social science. The first is the one taken by Schütz and his followers, which is essentially non-empirical. The second is ethnomethodology, which only is remotely related to phenomenology, and the third and perhaps most well known is the integration of phenomenology into mainstream social science. Below I present what can be seen as a fourth route, empirical phenomenology.

Towards an empirical phenomenology

Empirical phenomenology is distinguished from the other three routes in that it is both grounded in the philosophical tradition and takes into account core insights of the social sciences such as unintended consequences and existing theory.

If we are to understand the social world and meet the demands of phenomenology, we must produce explanations that are grounded in the subjective experiences of real people. At the same time, we must not simply deliver descriptions of states of minds; social science must understand why and how things happen, and this must refer to the way people think about these phenomena. Moreover, certain methods are more likely to be used, typically those that means that the researcher interacts with those she studies.

The empirical phenomenological approach can be summarized in seven steps

1. Define the research question.
2. Conduct a pre-study.
3. Chose a theory and use it as a scheme of reference.
4. Study first-order constructs (and bracket the theories).
5. Construct second-order constructs.
6. Check for unintended effects.
7. Relate the evidence to the scientific literature and the empirical field of study.

The fact that the research process can be analytically separated into seven steps reflects a pedagogical need, in reality, the process is quite likely to iterate. For example, the researcher will go back and forth between steps one and three more than once.

Step 1: Define the research question.

It is the researcher who decides what problem is at hand (step one). The problem may emerge from his or her interests, or it can be more directly related to ongoing debates within a research community, the field of study or any other source. To find out what theory to use, the researcher must engage in the field. In one of my own projects, which will serve as a practical example in this text, I decided that to understand the market for fashion photography was a strategic way of increase our knowledge of the aesthetic economy. This I found out as result of reading and doing the pre-study.

Step 2: Conduct a pre-study.

During the pre-study (step two), the researcher attempts to discover if it is possible to address the question. The question itself may also change, as might the theory that is most suitable and the methods that can be used. During this phase the researcher interacts with people in the field and reads academic and non-academic texts. She may also do some interviews, and preferably participant observations. All this means that the researcher gets an overview of the field and, based on this knowledge, is in a much better position to make judgements about strategic research decisions than if she had not conducted a pre-study.

The point is not that the pre-study solves all problem encountered in research, but rather that it is an efficient way to come to grips with a field. In a smaller study such as an undergraduate thesis, the pre-study may consist of a couple of visits to the field or a few test interviews. In a larger research project, it may mean a month or more of interaction with members of the field, and the extensive reading of texts. Informants, or people in the field with whom the researcher can have continued contact in order to gain more profound knowledge of the field, are a great advantage, and establishing relations during the pre-study may prove invaluable. In my case, I mostly used participant observation, and I worked as an assistant to photographers to get insight into the field.

Step 3: choosing a theory as scheme of reference

Choosing a theory is an integral part of the early phase of the research process. Theories guide the researcher and tell the student which aspects of a topic are

relevant to study, as one cannot possibly study the first-order constructs of every topic. This means that the researcher uses theories as schemes of reference, which give focus to the study. For example, if the researcher is using a labelling theory in a study of social deviance, she will study questions relevant to this theory (scheme). Based on the fieldwork and reading of market theories, I found Harrison Whites theory, which stresses the interplay between producers in markets, suitable.

But how does one decide which theory to use? The chosen theory must fit the empirical evidence and research question, and it must give an answer that satisfies the demand for a phenomenological explanation. A scientific conclusion is reached only when the researcher, and ultimately the reader of the researcher's report, understands the actor's perspective. In order to accomplish this, the researcher must find ways of studying the actors that enable her to understand them.

Step 4: Study first-order constructs and bracket the theories

To understand and actor means to reach the level of actors' first-order constructs, where the researcher explicates the actors' meaning structure and the ideal types they use, but avoids reading in the theories. The focus is on the first-order constructs, not the second-order constructs. However, the researcher is not interested in all first-order constructs, only those 'covered' by the scheme of reference. The empirical material gathered is what Schütz describes as the first-order constructs. This means gathering information about what people mean when they use certain words, how these are related to each other in a meaning structure, what 'theories' they are using, and what 'ideal types' they construct among themselves. This information can be gathered by using many of the methods that fall within the broad category of qualitative methods in the social sciences. The empirical material was created using interviews, participant observation as well as documents.

In the research process, the student cannot just let her theory guide her into the details of the empirical field; the empirical material, so to speak, must be given the chance to 'kick back'. This means that the empirical evidence may reformulate the theory, alter it, or add dimensions to it. She must, therefore, bracket the theories while being in the field. To be more specific, she lets the theory guide her to certain empirical domains and to address certain themes and ask certain questions, but she does not have a set of concepts that are used as boxes to be filled with empirical material.

Social science does not aim only at descriptions of how people feel, perceive and think about things, although this is central in phenomenological explanations. Most social scientists strive for understanding and explanation, and these are gained only when first-order constructs are related to second-order constructs; that is, to theory.

Step 5: Construct second-order constructs

Developing or using a theory means that the researcher produces second-order constructs in relation to the actor's first-order constructs. The second-order constructs must communicate in two directions. On the one hand, they must comply with the demand of subjectivism; they must be understandable to the actors within the field. On the other hand, they must be connected with existing scientific theory and be understandable within the scientific community. Both dimensions are important, but the connection to the first-order constructs of actors can never be omitted in a purely empirical phenomenological explanation, i.e., an explanation grounded in the understanding of the actors or phenomena studied.

This interpretation stresses the role of second-order constructs as a way to relate and evaluate the scheme of reference the researcher chooses. The second-order constructs, or the ‘accounts of accounts’, can be theoretical notions of an existing theory. But as already said, there must always be room for flexibility and the second-order constructs may also be constructs produced and coined by the researcher. The relation between empirical material (first-order constructs, textual material and other forms of information) and the theoretical level, the second-order constructs, is well described in the large body of literature on qualitative methods and analysis (see e.g., contributions in Denzin and Lincoln 1994), and will not be discussed further here.

Step 6: Check for unintended consequences

A key question in the social sciences concerns unintended consequences. The basic idea is that unintended consequences are normally effects of actions that have certain intended results as goals. The attachment of meaning to unintended consequences is not a different process from the attachment of meaning in general. One difference is that a consequence, which the actors see as uninteresting, may be very interesting to the researcher, because actors and researchers have different horizons of interest.

Another difference with unintended consequences is that it is often the researcher’s task to establish the link(s) between actors’ perspectives on the acts and the way in which these acts relate to the effect. Thus, the actors themselves cannot foresee nor even imagine the full consequences of their acts (cf. Husserl [1954] 1970: 237). By maintaining a scientific attitude, the researcher may be able to present a picture of the actors’ life-world that connects their meaningful actions with both intended and unintended consequences. I showed, in the end, how the market for fashion photography was an unintended consequence.

Step 7: Relate the evidence to the scientific literature and the empirical field of study

The final step of the empirical phenomenological approach concerns the relationship between the empirical evidence that a phenomenological study produces and the existing body of theory and experience of actors in the field. To safeguard the subjective perspective, it may be useful to allow people from the field read a research report. I did this in my case, which essentially meant that the results were confirmed. One could never demand that they agree with the conclusion. For example, if one studies criminal gangs, members may not like that you reveal things about them, nor may they agree with a conclusion that classifies them as a menace. What one can demand, however, is that they recognise themselves and the account that you as a researcher have made.

The advancement made by empirical phenomenology over previous attempts to do phenomenological social science can be summarized in three points: first, it is empirical; second, it makes use of and integrates theory in empirical research; and third, it checks for unintended consequences. The iterative character of the process is meant to avoid being blindfolded by theories. At the same time, the approach acknowledges that every researcher uses a theory, regardless of whether it is implicit or made explicit. In the following section, I discuss the practical consequences of empirical phenomenology. How should one, for example, go about doing participant observation and interviews? This section will clarify the ethos of empirical phenomenology and will guide the practice of a researcher who wishes to employ this approach.

Empirical phenomenology in practice

Empirical phenomenology is most noticeable in how the researcher approaches her field, but there are also some practical implications, which nonetheless may be accepted by other social scientists as well. Remember the starting point of empirical phenomenology: explanation must account for actors' **first-order constructs**. This means that while the methods employed by the researcher may vary, they must safeguard the subjective perspective. Hence, the researcher cannot simply use observations – they must be combined with informal talks and interviews. In other words, the empirical phenomenological approach requires verbal interaction with those studied in the field. Meaning is primarily transmitted by words, for which interviews are most suitable (cf. Schütz [1932] 1976: 174).

Meaning, however, is not only transmitted by words; words also assume meaning in interaction and practical work. Therefore, the research benefits from observing the situation or the people studied, and ideally, one combines interviews and observations. This connection is clear in Schütz' thinking: from observation alone it is easy to make mistakes; understanding demands a combination of observation and questioning (Schütz [1932] 1976: 167-176, 229). The idea is that the pre-study guides the researcher to the most suitable methods given her field, theory and competence. Nonetheless, it is often wise to use several methods in the course of a study. For example, the first interactions in the field may be through participant observation or observation, and later the researcher can pose questions about the things that she has been exposed to, and knows or thinks she knows something about. To start asking questions before one really knows what people do in the field may often be awkward, and it is obvious that the researcher will leave out large domains due to her lack of experience in the field.

In fact, the question is not why one should combine methods, but rather why one should not. It is most of the time useful to combine methods, or use what some call the 'triangulation' approach. Below I give a short presentation of how to conduct each method from the perspective of empirical phenomenology, with the goal of describing how they are oriented in a phenomenological direction and not to discuss them in their own right.

Using participant observation

The traditional approach to participant observation and fieldwork, which originates from anthropological fieldwork, includes long-term presence and meticulous field notes that clearly separate the researcher's opinions and feeling from what is observed and said by the people studied. Interaction is a virtue, but in cases when one cannot interact verbally, observation should be undertaken. This means that field notes should be objective and give a good account of the situation. They should ideally be so clear and transparent that other researchers can read them and analyse the material. This means, in practice, that the physical surroundings and much of what goes on in the field is seen, interpreted and analysed by the researcher. Though, the material is often analysed in combination with interviews and other forms of evidence, this, does not change the fact that observational material is collected and interpreted from the researcher's point of view.

The empirical phenomenologist sees much of this as a reasonable strategy, with one main difference: she is less keen to rest with only her own objectivist accounts of what she has observed. The phenomenologist may therefore turn her own observations into research questions. Thus, what she observes can be used as a basis

for posing questions to those she observes about what is going on, what it means, if it is typical, and so on. The entire social setting, including the physical surroundings (for example, an office where the study is undertaken), may also be seen from the members' perspectives. Only through their accounts can the researcher find out what those she studies have naturalised and come to take for granted, and the meaning their surroundings have for them.

A fruitful strategy for accessing the perspective of actors is to use a video camera or other forms of visual techniques and media. To have an informal discussion or interview centred on the visual document, 'photo elicitation', is a highly recommended method. This facilitates discussion considerably, and as many people find it very difficult to express what they are doing verbally, visual tools may help them explain what is going on in their words.⁴

Obviously, this does not mean that the researcher should avoid her own impressions, as these may be extremely useful as the basis for posing questions and normally give insight into how a newcomer to a field feels and what she perceives. It is nonetheless important to separate the first-order constructs of the actors in the field from the second-order constructs of the researcher.

Using interviews

Above I have described how participant observation may be used to safeguard the subjective perspective. As already said, it implies that one must speak to people; the researcher cannot remain trapped in her own preconceptions about what people are doing, and cannot simply assume that she sees the same thing as those studied. I will now describe how one can conduct interviews and maintain a strongly subjective perspective, which of course is a fairly common theme in the literature. That is, the researcher aims to understand first-order constructions and the meaning structure.

I will here concentrate on one practical technique that the researcher can apply while doing interviews. This is an interview guide called the **A-scheme**, which is useful for non-structured interviews that aim at exploring the meaning structure of the interviewee. The A-scheme was developed for empirical phenomenological research, although I hope the reader sees that it has wider applicability. This scheme helps the researcher pose questions during the interview and to explore the meaning structure of actors starting from what they say, not from the researcher's perspective.

Organising questions in a structured interview seldom poses problems for an experienced social scientist. However, the empirical phenomenologist wants to explore the social world in a less predetermined way, reflecting actors' meaning structures rather than her own. To do this, she is likely to use non-structured or semi-structured interviews. The themes discussed during non-structured interviews, which in the approach discussed here are essentially guided by the theory the researcher has chosen as a **frame of reference**, may be more or less vague and change when the interview takes a new route. In some cases, the researcher does not even have any formulated questions, but rather a **set of themes for discussion**. An interview guide must be able to cope with this.

The scheme presented in Figure 1 makes it easier to keep control of the themes and concrete questions and to simultaneously stay focused on the interviewee and what

⁴ For more on photo elicitation, see, e.g., Banks (2001), Kretsdemas (1993). Here the researcher may also make use of quantitative survey material, or other kinds of quantitative material.

she says. When the researcher has a set of questions printed or jotted down in vertical order, she will sometimes inadvertently 'drive' the interview according to her line of questions or themes. If the researcher instead has the questions outlined graphically, she remains free to concentrate on interaction with the interviewee and subject matter.

[See Figure 1 in appendix]

Using the scheme in Figure 1 during the interview makes it easy to see the themes covered and those yet to be covered, and the researcher thereby never loses control over what needs more attention. This scheme allows for the inclusion of further themes and additional questions related to each of the themes. One may, for example, include new dimensions of the meanings structure of different themes as they are expanded during the interview. It is therefore suggested that one should, as shown in Figure 1, leave a few empty boxes within the 'field' of each theme (marked by thick black lines), as well as leaving one or two fields empty for the inclusion of additional themes. This is especially important in non-structured interviews, in which themes not thought of by the researcher may emerge. Thus, the empty boxes can be used for new themes and question as they arise during the interview. The researcher may return to one of these themes later in the interview, when the discussion makes it more relevant.

As many of us have experienced, people seldom address the issues or themes of an interview in the order we 'expect' them to. Thus, a single answer or story told by the interviewee may actually address several different themes or questions. It is therefore useful to draw lines (preferably using different colours) that indicate connections between the themes as they appear during the interview; for example how one issue under the first theme leads the interviewee to talk about an issue you have placed within another theme, reflecting your preconceptions. Later in the interview, the lines can be turned into questions about these connections. The connections may be indications that your themes are wrong or need revision. Thus, a skilled researcher's work in creating ideas and analysing connections is facilitated by the schematic outline of the interview. These are, of course, only suggestions for how one can use the A-scheme, which can be adapted to suits various purposes.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented the philosophical foundation and seven steps of the empirical phenomenological approach and hinted at some of its more practical aspects for social research. The main point of this approach is to ensure that the subjective perspective comes through; that no scientific explanation exists unless what is studied is related to the first-order constructs of those studied. Having said this, not all of the steps and techniques discussed are unique to empirical phenomenology, and it is of course possible to make use of parts of this approach while leaving others out.

Finally, although qualitative analysis must be the starting point for constructing ideal types, meaning structures, motives and other dimensions that are of interest to the researcher using the perspective to understand and explain social reality, it does not exclude the possibility of generalising the results by using quantitative methods. If it is possible to identify the meaning structure or other types of evidence produced by

qualitative research in surveys, then one may proceed and do quantitative research.⁵ One should also consider the possibility of using quantitative research techniques in the process of studying a field. This may give valuable hints and ideas that the empirical phenomenologist can use to understand and explain social phenomena.

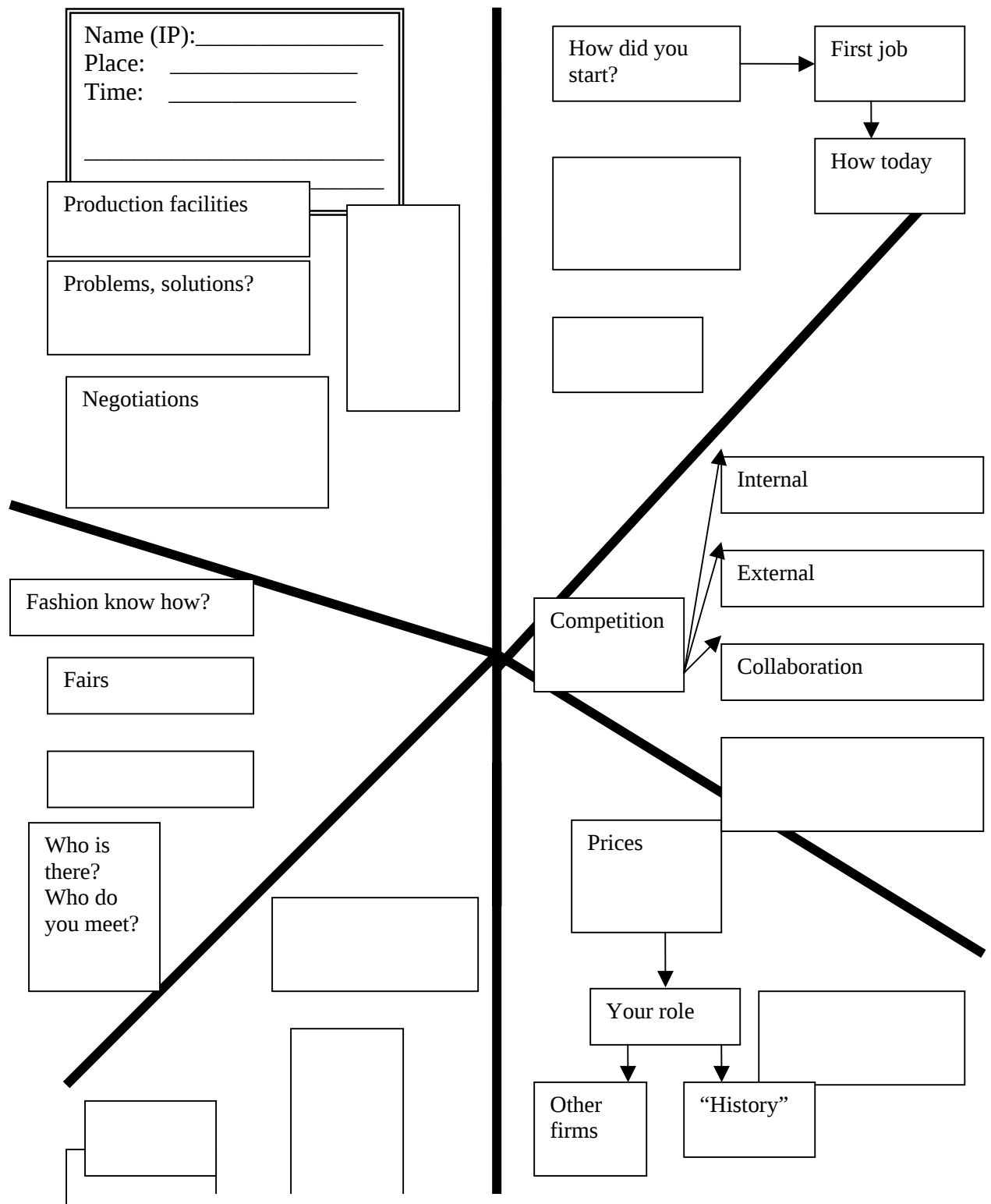
⁵ See Aspers (2005) for an example of how this can be done, using ideal types constructed by during fieldwork, which are quantified and tested using factor analysis of survey data.

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Figure 1. The A-Scheme.

Note: Figure 1 illustrates the A-scheme. The thick lines indicate different themes. A number of questions can be included within each theme and may be sequentially ordered or not (by using arrows as shown). The text in the boxes may be questions in the case of a more structured interview. Here, I have included some themes discussed in relation to the theoretical approach I am using in a study on the global garment industry.



The A-Scheme. Empirical Phenomenology by Patrik Aspers