Capturing the Vanishing Point: Subjective Experiences and Cultural Value

*This article is prompted by the observation that many accounts of the value of the arts and culture have failed to engage first-order, empirical data and to take full account of the experiences of those directly involved in cultural activities and practices. This neglect is the result of a complex path dependency. The more obvious explanation is that the current situation is caused by* ***too much humanism*** *in the field of cultural studies, i.e., the tendency to think of cultural value as an ‘‘ineffable’ human moment which somehow lies outside this purview of representational method’ (Law, 2011, p.4). This may well be true in some cases but it is not the main reason why empirical and experiential data have been lacking. The absence of the phenomenological dimension is, to the contrary, best explained by* ***not enough humanism*** *in cultural studies.**The reluctance to embrace the first-person perspective was motivated by an anxiety that this would make cultural theorists and sociologists complicit with the ‘dubious’ theories of subjecthood originating in idealism. The default outcome of this has been the preponderance of structuralism in cultural studies which led to anti-empiricism and ‘theoretical heavy breathing’ (Thompson, 1995).*

*I argue that to overcome the current impasse, cultural theorists and the theorists of cultural value specifically must revisit this self-incurred suspicion of* ***first-order constructs*** *and address their unease with the category of* ***experience*** *by actively engaging first-person data. In short, the remedy I prescribe is to embrace elements of empirical,* ***phenomenological sociology*** *as part of the methodological framework.*  *Looking at three projects funded by the AHRC Cultural Value Project, I show how this can be practically achieved. I conclude with some reflections on how the considerations presented here might have broader implications for the future research into cultural value, sociological inquiry and cultural policy.*

*Keywords: cultural value, experience, subjectivity, first-order constructs, phenomenology, methodology.*

‘There is a delicate empiricism that makes itself in the most intimate way identical with its objects, and thereby becomes actual theory…’

Goethe, Way of Science: A Phenomenology of Nature

**Introduction**

This article concerns first and foremost a question of methodology rather than that of methods. The choice of methodological frameworks grounds other decisions, including what tools, i.e., what research methods, might be used in any given inquiry. Hence, the intention of this paper is not primarily to criticise the ‘repertoire’ of methods at hand to cultural theorists. Rather, the main argument of this article is that research into cultural value has been hampered and handicapped by some of the methodological principles underlying past, and some present, research frameworks.

In a nutshell, this paper argues that there has been too much suspicion of experience and that this suspicion has to do with the methodological vision rather than the scarcity of methods. This is not to say that accounting for the so-called first-order constructs, i.e., capturing the experiences of the participants expressed in their own meanings and words – has been easy.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, this is not what explains that experiential data seem curiously absent in many accounts of the value of the arts and culture. The main argument of this article is that accounts of cultural value are at risk of been trapped in a binary opposition between an over-emphasis on 'conditions' and a too-inclusive emphasis on 'consciousness'. Structuralism, which is the position associated with the former, successfully removed the need for empirical, first-hand accounts of experiential data by arguing that experiences are secondary to social conditions - a mere product of social contexts. On the other hand, the accounts of consciousness - traceable to the idealist conception of subjecthood (Kant, 1987; Husserl, 1982) - pre-empted any attempts at empirical investigations by pursuing theoretical, a priori inquiry. Structuralism became the dominant position in cultural studies, but the outcome was the same – a neglect of empirical, phenomenological data in how cultural value is accounted for. In recent years, this refusal to engage with first-order constructs has been compounded further by a more prosaic focus on instrumentalism with respect to cultural value and an attempt to account for this value in terms of a range of auxiliary effects starting with economic impact, through effect on social regeneration, to health benefits, etc. (e.g., Belfiore, 2007; Hewison, 2012). The way the term ‘cultural value’ has been used – some would say, abused - to stand for a wide array of policy indicators in the context of cultural policy not only severed any meaningful connection between cultural value and experiences but it threatened the internal coherence of the notion altogether (e.g. Lee, 2011; O’Brien, 2015).[[2]](#footnote-2)

I will argue that, in order to redress these issues, cultural theory and theories of cultural value more specifically have to revisit the suspicion of experiences and embrace phenomenological methodology. I will show what elements of such an approach might be in practice by looking at three projects funded by the AHRC Cultural Value Project which, in their own ways, toil with ‘delicate empiricism’.

 **Cultural Value: Suspended between Consciousness and Structure?**

In the context of this article, the term ‘cultural value’ is used to refer to the value of artistic and cultural activities. These are in turn defined ostensively and include, but are not limited to, forms of artistic expression such as: theatre; film; visual arts; photography; literature; storytelling; music; monuments; and murals, as well as museums; archives; tangible and intangible heritage; and ritual. So, value is located in responses – indeed, the term ‘cultural value’ is ‘used to refer to the effects that culture has on those who experience it and the difference it makes to individuals and society’ (Crossick and Kaszynska 2014, 124). It is worth spelling this out at the outset because, this assumption has not always been taken for granted.

As we know from Williams’ notoriously oft-quoted attempt to define culture ‘Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language’ (Williams, 1983, p.87). The two most persistent definitions of the term are the one traced to the Arnoldian/Leavisite tradition of ‘best and brightest’ (Arnold, 1993; Leavis, 1963) - often caricatured as reducing the value of culture to the connoisseurship of a rarefied set of privileged cultural objects – and the anthropological accounts of culture as a ‘way of life’ dating back to Tylor (Tylor, 1974), Eliot (Eliot, 1973). Such a polarisation is also characteristic of research into cultural value.

In what is often considered the foundational text of Cultural Studies – ‘Cultural studies: two paradigms’ – Stuart Hall sketches what can be seen as the backbone for the argument of this article. The gist of Hall’s exposition is that existing accounts of culture are trapped in a binary opposition between the Scylla of **an over-emphasis on 'conditions'** and the Charybdis of **a too-inclusive emphasis on 'consciousness'**. The former, i.e., the preoccupation with the conditions, dominates the thinking of what Hall dubs ‘structuralism’; ‘culturalism’ on the other hand is fixated on the role of consciousness. In brief, culturalist accounts – in Hall’s interpretation – pivot on the primary role of experiences and subjects in explaining the character of cultural formations; in contrast, for structuralists, experience is but a derivative product and an ‘effect’ of contextual categories, classifications and frameworks structuring society at large.

Hall is at pains to stress that both positions have their drawbacks. The preoccupation with the social, political and economic circumstances characteristic of structuralism tends to dissolve human agency; on the other hand, the attempt to anchor analysis in the subjective experiences of culture carries the danger of succumbing to what Hall dubbed ‘naïve humanism’ (Hall, 1980, p.67) which risks losing sight of the fact that men are born into determinate conditions. Thus, both positions have their limitations. Yet each also carries a grain of truth, and for this reason, Hall is vehement that both positions are necessary for the purposes of anchoring cultural analysis - neither structuralism nor culturalism will do ‘as self-sufficient paradigms of study’ (Hall, 1980, p.72).

A brief overview of the history of cultural studies shows that these positions have not been treated as equally important. The methodological framework which emerged and came to dominate cultural studies effectively purged the theories of cultural value of the first-person perspectives. Structuralism, which is the position in question, successfully removed the need for empirical, first-hand accounts of experiential data by arguing that experiences and experiencing subjects are secondary to social conditions - a mere product of social contexts. This deconstruction – arguably – has been underpinning a number of pivotal accounts of cultural value: Althusser’s ideological mapping (Althusser, 2001); Barthes’ cultural textuality (Barthes, 1977); Foucault’s genealogy (Foucault, 1994); and, perhaps most controversially, Bourdieu’s field analysis (1984). With the ‘self’ stripped of her ‘creative role and analysed as a complex variable function of discourse’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 138) or a product of ideology or social processes – turning to the subject and her experiences as the primary object of analysis seemed untenable. The effect was that ‘from the 1950s to the 1970s […] the British tradition of social anthropology banished the subject’ (Biehl, 2007, p.7) and the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies swayed towards structuralism.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Perhaps this is not that surprising given how unappealing the alternative must have seemed. Structuralism was no doubt a refreshing antidote to what was perceived as pure idealist speculations about the transcendental conception of subjecthood in Kantian idealism (Kant, 1987) and classical phenomenological studies (Husserl, 1982). This way of thinking about consciousness – arguably, unconcerned with objective reality and detached from social conditions – made the inquiry into first-order constructs deeply problematic from the point of view of sociological inquiry. The sciences of consciousness seemed confined to the realm of theoretical, a priori speculation - whereas sociology is ‘an eminently empirical science' (Frade, 2013, p. 14). As a number of commentators have remarked, as long as theories of consciousness are thought of in terms of a transcendental inquiry, the project of naturalising phenomenology, or making it compatible with the language of social and natural sciences, remains problematic (Roy, 1999; Zahavi, 2004 and 2009).

This outcome can be pre-empted and avoided. In other words, the inquiry into consciousness and the stucturalist line of thought can be reconciled. As I show in what follows, experience provides such a platform for encounter provided one acknowledges the socially-mediated nature of experiences without however eliminating the subjective element of the first-hand perspective.

**In Search of Experiences**

The traditions which made experience the primary object of inquiry and set their goal unequivocally to account for actors’ first-order constructs and to safeguard the subjective perspective are phenomenology, or phenomenological sociology to be precise, and ethnomethodology. While, as it will become apparent, it is not the intention of this article to endorse these approaches wholeheartedly, adopting some of the methodological insights of these traditions might be necessary in order to make experiences ‘visible’ in the context of the inquiry into cultural value.

Phenomenology, we read, ‘may be defined initially as the study of structures of experience, or consciousness. Literally, phenomenology is the study of “phenomena”: appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience’[[4]](#footnote-4). In their various guises, all phenomenological approaches share some fundamental features. Crucially, they approach experiences from the subjective or first-person point of view of the subjects undergoing these experiences, and in order to safeguard this subjective perspective, they capture this content descriptively in the first instance, before attempting any further analysis. In order to pre-empt causal explanation, phenomenological accounts frequently ‘suspend’ judgements about the natural world.[[5]](#footnote-5)

There was however also a rift running in the phenomenological movement. There was a split between those who take the suspension of the natural world attitude as a licence to pursue a transcendental investigation, i.e., an a priori investigation into the condition of possibility for knowledge and experiences (e.g. Husserl, 1982) and those who wish to stay anchored in the experiences of everyday reality. The transcendental line of inquiry was in fact criticised from within the phenomenological tradition. The seeds of this critique are already found in Merleau-Ponty’s call to accommodate real-world considerations and to redefine the boundaries of phenomenological inquiry (Merleau-Ponty 1942) and are fully spelled out by Alfred Schütz, who can be credited with establishing a phenomenology of the social world (Schütz, 1972; Barber, 2002).

The methodological framework proposed by Schütz made it possible to investigate empirically and sociologically the modes of subjective being; it allowed to account for connections between mental contents on the one hand, and the structures of knowledge and social organisation on the other. This trend was continued by Berger and Luckmann (Berger and Luckmann, 1991) - students of Schütz – in the approach of social constructivism; it also provided much of the foundations for the ethnomethodological sociology of Harold Garfinkel (Garfinkel , 1967) and Aaron Cicourel (Cicourel, 1976). This is not the place to rehearse these theoretical positions but we should register that these schools, while retaining the methodological framework of phenomenology and maintaining the importance of subjectivity in social life, afforded the means to think of culture as simultaneously tied up with subjective experiences, but also emerging from intersubjective interactions, which are in turn subject to social forces.

These schools had decisively moved phenomenological sociology away from the traditional formulation of Husserl and provided the means to investigate culture empirically. In *The Social Construction of Reality* Berger and Luckmann map out how social interactions – rather than ponderings of isolated individuals - give rise to metal representations and concepts. In his seminal text - *Studies in Ethnomethodology -* Garfinkel makes important methodological contribution concerning the status of value-free sociological descriptions. In line with ethnomethodology, cultural value has to be apprehended through the prism of actual experiences, and these in turn must be understood and described in the terms used by the social agents themselves. Moreover, as social constructivism would recommend, before proceeding with higher level causal analysis, we have to make sure that the world-as-experienced is captured using qualitative, descriptive methods. This brings us, finally, to why the phenomenological anchoring of the analysis in the acts of consciousness themselves might be perceived as a strength rather than a weakness in the context of the current article. The reason is that the descriptive approach adopted by phenomenological sociology allows for the structuralist categories such as class or gender to be suspended in order to register less theoretically-mediated descriptions of mental contents. On the other hand, the ‘phenomenology with this social bend’, as pursued by Schütz, does not reify the subjecthood, as it was the case in classical phenomenology. Rather than imposing a ‘theory-heavy’ straight jacket of fixed and pre-defined terms, phenomenological sociology is typified by an openness to the first-person experience. It thus carries the promise of bringing cultural experiences to a level of visibility in theories of cultural value.

**Bringing the Vanishing Point back into the Picture**

A quick overview of the consultancy and think-tank research generated over recent years shows some resurfacing of interest in the properties of cultural experiences. Following a wave of criticism of the instrumentalist approach to cultural value (Belfiore, 2007; Mirza, 2007; Hewison, 2012), there has been a resurgence of attention to how the arts and culture are experienced in particular with a view to re-evaluating the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value (McCarthy et al, 2004; Brown 2004; Coles, 2008; Knell and Taylor, 2011). This change of tide can be sensed from the fact that a number of terms qualifying experiences appeared in the discourse: ‘quality’ (Knell, 2013; Annabel Jackson Associates Ltd, 2014); ‘captivation’ (Foreman-Wernet and Dervin, 2013); ‘absorption’ (Bakhshi et al, 2009), to name just some. While some of the studies produced outside of the academic framework do rely on empirical methods such as pre and post event surveying (most notably Brown and Novak-Leonard, 2007), much of this research has been pursued theoretically.

Capturing what happens in cultural experiences is not an easy task[[6]](#footnote-6) and it is clear that sophisticated ethnographic, anthropological and sociological techniques are needed to this end. While sociology and art are still somewhat ‘estranged bedfellows’, as I commented on a blog forum[[7]](#footnote-7), there is a growing body of sociological work exploring cultural experiences using a range of interesting empirical methods (e.g., DeNora, 2000; Born, 2005). Significantly, there has been an on-going effort to develop a range of techniques for describing one’s subjective experience in the second person (Petitmengin, 2006); arts-based methods to interrogate cultural experiences (e.g. Reason, 2010); and ethnographic approaches to interrogate sensory registers and the somatic dimension of cultural experiences (Paterson, 2009; Pink, 2009). I hope that the Cultural Value Project will make a major contribution here in terms of shifting the dominant framework.

The Cultural Value Project is a research initiative set up by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the autumn of 2012 with the aim of investigating the value that the arts and culture bring to individuals and to society. The Director of the Project, Professor Geoffrey Crossick and I introduced the Project to the readership of Cultural Trends last year[[8]](#footnote-8). As we explained then, the objective of the Project is to advance our understanding of cultural value and to refine the methods we use to capture this value. To this end, the Cultural Value Project has been supporting nearly 80 academically-led, separate projects[[9]](#footnote-9).

The starting premise of the Cultural Value Project is that we need to begin by looking at the actual experience of culture and the arts rather than the ancillary effects of this experience – as we emphasise in the Introduction to the Project[[10]](#footnote-10). Many of the academically-led projects funded by the Cultural Value Project share the assumption that cultural value has to be investigated using empirical techniques and that incorporating first-order constructs is essential to building a credible account of what actually happens in experiences of art and culture. In this article, I would like to focus on three projects which are testing particularly imaginative approaches.

Patricia Winter’s ‘A Somatic Ethnography of Grand Gestures Elders Dance Group’[[11]](#footnote-11) looked at cultural value in the context of dance and ageing through a case study of an Elders dance group, Grand Gestures (a group of men and women aged 57 to 87 participating in weekly dancing activities). The project set out to investigate whether the experience of participating in dance enhanced the somatic awareness of the participants and if so, what effects this had on a greater understanding of one’s self and identity and those of others. In the words of the research team: ‘The investigation focuses in particular on the significance of bodily awareness senses such as touch, sense of movement (kinaesthetic sensation), sense of where the body is located (proprioception), and physical empathy within the dance group's activity, their individual and personal development, and their interactions with others, including dance interactions and wider civic and social engagements’. The project’s ambition was to create new ways of 'speaking' of somatic awareness and to that end it utilised semi-structured and unstructured ethnographic interviews with group members, film, performance and artwork-elicitation interviews where works produced by the group members were used as the basis for interviews in order to facilitate yet another way of soliciting phenomenological data. The proposed research design capitalised thus on a ‘sensory turn’ in scholarship (Howes, 2005; Paterson 2009) and drew in particular on the methodology of ‘sensory ethnography’ (Pink, 2009) in order to capture the multisensory nature of cultural experience. Needless to say, the sensory aspects of dance become manifest through the experience of dancing and could be accessed by those involved introspectively, thereby calling for a phenomenological methodological stance.

Lynn Froggett’s ‘Public Art and Local Civic Engagement’[[12]](#footnote-12) compared two different public artworks: Alex Hartley's Nowhereisland and Damien Hirst's Verity. It looked at these two artworks in terms of their significance for the development of reflective and engaged citizens in Ilfracombe, Devon. What is of particular interest from the point of view of this article is that at the heart of Froggett’s project was developing an innovative method to work with visual data and visualisation as a way of enabling imaginative association within a group setting. In a nutshell, the visual matrix - which is the method in question – was used to enable a group of participants to reflect on their relationship to Nowhereisland and Verity by conjuring up associations in response to pictures and images of the two artworks. The pattern of collectively-shared imagery which emerged was then discussed in the group and subjected to further hermeneutic analysis. The associative process (in various guises theorised by thinkers such as Winnicott 1971; Wright 2009) employed in the matrix allows one to access complex emotional and aesthetic responses and to facilitate reflection on topics that are difficult to reach through standard verbal communication. Here yet again, the visceral nature of cultural experiences is the main object of analysis and the phenomenological methodology, together with the concomitant specific method, proved indispensable.

Lastly, Philip Davis’ project – ‘Assessing the intrinsic value, and health and well-being benefits, for individual and community, of The Reader Organisation's Volunteer Reader Scheme’[[13]](#footnote-13) – investigated the cultural value of the shared reading model of the BIG Lottery-funded Volunteer Reader Scheme. Having set out to make ‘the ‘experience’ of reading, rather than the health or social outcomes, the pivotal research priority’, the project used a number of parallel approaches and techniques. One approach I would like to consider in the context of the current article is the analysis of language carried out by Davis and his team. The researchers used language as the main point of access to the phenomenology of cultural experiences. In order to carry out the analysis, they audio-recorded and transcribed reading-group sessions; this was further supplemented by individual interviews, questionnaires, personal diaries, etc. The resulting material was used to identify ‘moments of subtle mental change and personal breakthrough, cognitive revaluation, interactive mind’, etc. The team was able to suggest how these mental processes are expressed through the participants’ own symptomatic use of language, through the linguistic traces such as the use of phrases ‘it is as though’ or ‘it’s almost as if’ or ‘it is almost like’, to give just one example. While the approach proposed here is still being tested, what is already apparent is that adopting a phenomenological methodology allowed the research team to open up a fascinating and uncharted mode of access to the experiential imprints of cultural value.

While some of the methods recommended by the three projects discussed above are innovative, other methods used by them are more traditional and include literature reviews, interviews coding, participant observation, etc. Indeed, it might be useful to point out in this context that phenomenological, empirical sociology does not have a monopoly on a broad range of qualitative methods (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). The three projects showcased here were chosen because of their methodological frameworks – their vision of what matters in researching cultural value – rather than the specific methods they employed.

The authors of these projects do not speak openly of phenomenology at any great length – what makes their projects successful, however, is their commitment to the phenomenological methodology. In line with the central dictate of empirical phenomenology, these researchers ground explanation in the meaning structure of the subjects they studied. Crucially, they allow themselves to be submerged in the descriptive material, or what we might call, the raw experiential data - before moving onto causal, theoretical and structural analysis. The innovative approaches proposed by these three projects are still being developed - we can expect to hear more about these in the forthcoming publications from the research teams – however, their potential to access hidden layers of cultural experiences and to deliver new insights about cultural value should be readily apparent.

**Sketching the Future of the Inquiry into Cultural Value**

The absence of the empirical, first-hand perspective from theories of cultural value has been on occasions cast as a reaction to positivism - i.e., the unwillingness of theorists of cultural value to engage with first-order constructs has been explained as a romantic escape from the danger of instrumentalism associated with scientific expertise (See for Savage, 2013). It has also been suggested that the refusal or inability to embrace the empirical might have been a knee-jerk reaction - ‘a humanist response which seeks refuge in an ‘ineffable’ human moment which somehow lies outside this purview of representational methods’ (Law, 2011, p.4). It is plausible that elements of this thinking shaped the current debate but, as this article has argued, the draining of the subjective content out of the accounts of cultural value had to do more with the ideological limitations of structuralism.

Indeed, from the point of view of the future inquiry, staying outside this purview of representational methods and renouncing science is not an option. Phenomenological sociology is bridging the gap between natural sciences and the humanities. Empirical phenomenology states that a scientific explanation must be grounded in the meaning structure of those studied. If we are to find out about the subjective experiences of real people we need empirical methods.

We cannot stop however at the description. Description of subjective experiences alone, no matter how nuanced, is not sufficient to explain the mechanism of cultural value production and transmission. In order to produce explanations, rather than just descriptions, researchers will be expected to make connections between the existing body of knowledge, of evidence, of hypotheses and to interpret the first-order constructs. This essentially means incorporating theoretical insights from other frameworks.

To sum up, phenomenologically-informed projects need both: scientific techniques and theoretical analysis. It is about striking a balance between the first- and second-order constructs, description and analysis, and recognising that empirically-harvested experiences are not secondary to structural considerations. This also means allowing for the scientists’ working hypotheses to be guided by the first-order constructs rather than for them to be theoretically fixed.

The considerations presented here may have implications for how research is conducted. Redressing the balance between the first- and second-order constructs may leave the researchers vulnerable by asking them to abandon their theoretical armour. That is to say, the opening up of the inquiry through a genuine embrace of first-person accounts and by putting the studied individuals in the proverbial driving seat - may unsettle the existing theoretical frameworks. The CVP projects described above exemplify well how the phenomenological approach may require researchers to revise existing theories in light of new experiential data. They are not exceptional in that respect among the CVP projects – other awardholders, e.g., Susan Ashley, Michael Eades, Miriam Bernard demonstrate that working with first-person constructs and subjective data calls for radical forms of participatory and action research; moreover, this way of working forces researchers to open up to the possibility that the smooth surfaces of the existing academic theories might show some cracks and will need to be readjusted.

It also could be that this article is tapping into the developments concerning the future of sociological methodology. This is plausible insofar as the tension between first- and second-order constructs and furthermore, description and analysis, is constitutive of sociological inquiry itself. Sociologists have been thinking of the relationship between first-order empirical material and theoretical second-order constructs for some time (see e.g., Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) but only recently have Savage et al added a new impetus to the debate by alerting us to the pressures of the Big Data ‘revolution’(Savage and Burrows, 2007). They openly ask whether we should embrace ‘John Levi Martin’s (2011) recent recasting of modes of social explanation, away from conventional counter-factual models which seek to delineate causal ‘variables’’ in favour of first-order forms of knowledge and the ordinary devices and understandings (Savage 2013, p.15). This is not a brand new consideration - a number of writers (e.g. Latour 2005; Abbott 2000) have been pondering whether the relationship between causal analysis and descriptive assessment should be rethought. However, that sociology is going to go down the route of description and assemblages is far from a foregone conclusion (Frade, 2013). Looking at how this battle might be resolved in the context of cultural value might be instructive.

**Concluding Thoughts**

In this article I have argued that producing an adequate understanding of cultural value will require a better account of the actual experiences on the basis of which judgments of cultural worth are made. More specifically, I have claimed that theories of cultural value ought to be grounded in and shaped by first-order experiential data; and I have suggested that this could be achieved through adopting elements of the methodological framework of phenomenological sociology.

While this article is not directly concerned with the matters of policy, it may have implications for cultural policy - the most straightforward one being that, insofar as public policy aspires to be evidence-based, changing the character of evidence drawn upon may affect the ways in which culture is delivered and funded. Perhaps more fundamentally, given what we know about the role of evidence, methods and methodologies in defining the very terms of inquiry (Law, 2011; Savage, 2013), the proposed phenomenological enrichment of the field of inquiry may change what we take cultural value to be in the first place, and hence, influence policy through changing the terms of debate. It may also be that - just like embracing the phenomenological methodology may open up academic research to radical co-production of knowledge, as I suggested in the previous section - one of the policy implications of the current proposal may be making the policy discourse of cultural value more ‘participatory’ and hence, more difficult to control from the centre.

The outcome however most hoped for by the author of the current article is the promise of producing an approach which might take us ‘outside the permanent oscillations between abstraction/anti-abstraction and the false dichotomies of Theoreticism vs. Empiricism which have both marked and disfigured the structuralism/culturalism encounter to date’(Hall, 1980, p.68). In any case, phenomenological methodology is the best bet we have if we want to get closer to Goethe’s art of ‘delicate empiricism’ where theories fit the object of inquiry more like the proverbial glove than the straight jacket.

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1. In what follows I showcase some imaginative approaches which use visual, linguistic and somatic-register techniques. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is for different but not unrelated reasons that cultural experiences have not been properly accounted for in the mainstream academic discussion and in cultural policy debates. In this article I will concern myself with the former, i.e., the academic discourse of cultural value, but I’ll sketch some possible implications for policy discourse at the end. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The notions of subject and experience are discursively complicated in Hall’s account but this claim is accurate even when it comes to the theorists who, according to Hall, defend the role of experience in cultural studies, e.g., Williams and Thompson. The way these theorists define experience brings their accounts perilously close to structuralism (See Hall, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In order to achieve this traditional phenomenology employs the procedure of bracketing, whose aim it to remove the natural presuppositions about the existence of the external world. In practice this may mean examining phenomena as ‘uncanny’ in everyday situations.

See <http://sociology.about.com/od/Research/a/Ethnomethodology.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For instance, first-person, experiential data have been used in the evaluation of cultural initiatives in the criminal justice system but some evaluations have been critiqued for lacking rigour. See <http://www.artsevidence.org.uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Retrieved from <http://culturalvalueinitiative.org/2014/01/15/sociology-art-estranged-bedfellows-patrycja-kaszynska/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09548963.2014.897453> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Retrieved from <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/Funded-Research/Funded-themes-and-programmes/Cultural-Value-Project/Current-and-Past-Research-Activities/Pages/default.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Retrieved from <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/Funded-Research/Funded-themes-and-programmes/Cultural-Value-Project/Documents/Cultural_Value_Project.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Retrieved from <http://www.sunderland.ac.uk/research/areasofresearch/creativeandculturalpracticesbeacon/projects/asomaticethnographyofgrandgestures/> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Retrieved from <http://clok.uclan.ac.uk/10961/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Retrieved from <https://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/instituteofpsychology/deptpsychologicalsciences/AHRC_Cultural_Value_Report.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)