

Phenomenon as “Other” in Phenomenological Research

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The discussions that address the implications of Emmanuel Levinas’ work for research have typically, and rightly, focused on the ethical dimensions of the relationship between the researcher and the research participants. Researchers have been urged, for example, not to objectify or otherwise totalize the participants and their experience. However, phenomenological research is not just about the particular experiences of specific people or groups of people—it is the study of phenomena as they appear to us, it is about (as David Steindle-Rast would say) what is common to all. Although bringing Levinas’ notions of the Other as infinitely other into dialogue with phenomena as they appear to researchers may seem at odds with his emphasis on the face-to-face relationship, this is precisely what I want to do in this presentation. Over a number of years, studying multiple topics, my fellow researchers and I have found that the phenomena that we set out to study appeared among us in ways that surprised us and often left us speechless and yet they also became our guides. In another context, I have referred to this appearance of phenomena among researchers as a having the quality of a “friendly invasion.” In this presentation I will describe, drawing upon several examples, what this friendly invasion looks like. Second, I will say something about the context that enables such an invasion, including an attitude of receptivity among the researchers. In conclusion, I will speak about what I see as the fruitfulness as well as the problems in considering a phenomenon as “other.”