

‘Unspecialization’ as Way-Finder for the ‘Togetherness of Things’: A Dialogue Eighteen Years Later

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Abstract

This article offers a retrospective, dialogic reflection on [The Creativity of ‘Unspecialization’](#) (Galvin & Todres, 2007), originally published in the inaugural volume of *Phenomenology & Practice*. Revisiting this work eighteen years later, Les Todres and Kathleen Galvin, in dialogue with Claire LeBeau, explore how the notion of ‘unspecialization’ has continued to unfold as a way of being, knowing, and scholarly practice far beyond its initial articulation. Through a tripartite, phenomenologically informed dialogue grounded in recorded and transcribed conversations, the authors retrace the life of the original paper across three interrelated trajectories: a distinctive collaborative writing practice, a series of methodological innovations, and an evolving body of health-related phenomenological research. Drawing on Heideggerian contemplative thinking, Gendlin’s experiential phenomenology, and dialogical traditions, the paper portrays ‘unspecialization’ as a receptive, way-finding sensibility that resists premature closure and instrumentalization. Rather than a fixed concept, ‘unspecialization’ emerges as an ongoing, embodied openness that allows phenomena to speak in their own time and form. The dialogue culminates in the insight that ‘unspecialization’ functions as a way-finder for the “togetherness of things,” offering a post-specialist holism capable of integrating care, creativity, and scholarly rigor. The paper contributes to contemporary phenomenological practice by demonstrating how reflective dialogue itself can reenact the very conditions that give rise to meaningful, integrative knowledge.

Keywords: unspecialization, phenomenology, way-finding, embodied reflection, health

Introduction

One day Ch'ang Sha went wandering in the mountains. Upon returning, when he got to the gate, the head monk asked, "Where are you coming from, Master?"

Sha said, "From wandering in the mountains."

The head monk asked, "Where did you go?" Sha said, "First I went pursuing the fragrant grasses; then I returned following the falling flowers."

(Case 36 of the Blue Cliff Record in Cleary & Cleary, 2005, p. 226)

This paper reflects on a journey that was somewhat like that of Ch'ang Sha's: how, in our language, the *Creativity of 'Unspecialization'* was not just the title of a paper published in one of the 2007 inaugural editions of *Phenomenology & Practice (P&P)* but was a water-course way that unfolded further, far beyond the original paper. Over the subsequent years, the presence of 'unspecialization' functioned according to its own unpredictable callings between us as two writing partners, Les Todres and Kathleen Galvin. These callings manifested in at least three ways: a) as a subsequent style of working together, b) as a particular series of phenomenological methodologies, and c) as a series of health-related topics that unfolded from our unspecialized sensibilities. In this process, the original authors of *The Creativity of 'Unspecialization': A Contemplative Direction for Integrative Scholarly Practice*, Les and Kathleen, met with Claire LeBeau as the discussant. Over the course of a series of meetings, we explored the journey and process from writing their original article, where they are now in their research, and their scholarship. We worked on this writing by taking turns reflecting on both the recordings and transcriptions of our Zoom meetings. This tripartite dialogue served as a reenactment of the very process that led to their original creative work; a process of allowing the phenomenon to speak which was a journey of "way-finding" that surprised and delighted the three of us entirely.

The reflective article that we present here has been a joyous rediscovery, as well as a reinvestment for the three of us in allowing us to see the way these ideas have infused and inspired our subsequent work. This paper, for *P&P's Special Issue*, will include reflections on what motivated Les and Kathleen to write the original paper, how the themes and topics of the paper continued to inform their subsequent writing partnership, and now, aided by Claire, since the 2007 publication of *Creativity of 'Unspecialization'*, where we have landed 18 years later. The discussion proceeds in three parts:

1. The whole and parts of the original paper in a nutshell.
2. The life of the original paper as it lived in our subsequent writing partnership.
3. To today with the three of us—a dialogue that 'crossed and dipped' to produce new insights.

Part 1: The whole and parts of the original paper in a nutshell

The term 'unspecialization' (see Galvin & Todres, 2007) was originally inspired by the Duquesne University, Phenomenologist, Father Ed Murray, in a book, *Imaginative Thinking and Human Existence* (Murray, 1986). Murray unfolds Heidegger's, *Discourse*

on *Thinking* (Heidegger, 1959/1966) about the difference between ‘contemplative thinking’ and ‘calculative thinking.’ To quote Murray (1986):

In this meditative experience, we pause to contemplate the meaning inherent in things, to dwell on the interrelatedness of Being in all its forms, to behold the unity that the manifold of Being presents to the caring seer. At such moments calculations are set aside, logical thought bares its wealth, imaginative thought allows for the possibilities of Being, and the beholder stands in wonder before the ‘is’ of everything. (p. 36)

Heidegger (1977) understands this more contemplative way of being to be intimately connected to the essence of being human, in which an unspecialized openness is more foundational than more specialized forms of attention. In this openness, a tree reveals itself in many ways before it comes to be of more specialized technological interest, such as a source of fruit. So, ‘unspecialization’ is a receptivity that is central to Heidegger’s understanding of the phenomenology that he inherited from Husserl (1936/1970). It is this unspecialized sensibility that shaped ‘a sense of the whole’ when Kate and Les wrote their original paper. They then applied this sensibility to a meditation on the nature of scholarship, particularly for caring practices in a post-modern world where knowledge was becoming highly specialized and in need of integration. In retrospect, the motivating contexts for this original paper arose out of the lifeworld of Kate and Les in 2006 and were two-fold: their scholarly experiences as academics and researchers, and their professional experiences surrounding the culture of care, as well as their professional experiences surrounding the culture of healthcare within the United Kingdom’s National Health Service at that time.

Firstly, they noticed a fragmentation of scholarly life and experienced the pressure to produce research products in technical ways that were unthoughtful. The research world was becoming increasingly about technique and commodity, as if method presented truth (Gadamer, 1975/1997). Heidegger (1977) already expressed this well when he mourned that the scholar was disappearing and was being replaced by the ‘research worker’ who was essentially technological in spirit and practice. We wanted to examine the nature of scholarship, its philosophy, history, fragmentation, and the need for a more holistic and thoughtful approach to knowledge. The second motivating factor was grounded in some nursing care failures and scandals in the United Kingdom at the time, in which it became clear that an emphasis on targets and outcomes had resulted in dehumanized care (see the Darzi Report, 2008). Our phenomenological roots opened up the possibility that we could contribute to the need for a more empathic and actionable knowledge that is centered within patient experience and grounded in a complex knowledge that integrates the ‘head, heart, and hand.’

‘Unspecialization’ for us as a unifying theme was not just about stepping back from the specialized contents of disciplines in the Arts and Sciences (an argument for interdisciplinarity) or the rising technological approach to caring. Rather, it was part of a more encompassing concern to ‘step back’ phenomenologically, in an epistemological and ontological way, to more unspecialized ways of knowing and being. Such a sensibility was also inspired by Max van Manen’s (1991) important book, *The Tact of Teaching*. We refer readers to our original paper for an exposition of the details of our

argument, which includes a historical critique of the specialization of knowing and being, the need for a ‘postmodern holism,’ a more integrated approach that incorporates phronesis, empathic imagination and embodied hermeneutics. We finally considered the question: Can ‘unspecialization’ be practiced?

Part 2: The life of the original paper as it lived in our subsequent writing partnership

When Kate and Les re-read the original paper 18 years later, in response to an invitation to contribute to this *Special Edition*, we were struck by how much of our subsequent concerns and writing partnership had seeds in this earlier paper. In this section, we would like to reflect upon how some of our subsequent work together has been ‘shot through’ with ‘unspecialization’ and this unfolded in three ways: a) the style of our working together; b) several methodological contributions, and c) the way we chose specific health-related topics that we wrote about.

A. The style of our working together: Phenomenological way-finding was ‘through’ us rather than ‘about’ us

As scholars working together for over 16 years, we were both drawn to a dialogical way of practicing phenomenology (Halling & Leifer, 1991) that seemed to arise naturally from our understanding of the spirit of phenomenology. We would now say that the understanding of ‘unspecialization’ achieved in the original paper set the tone for the way we proceeded in our writing partnership, the products of which we do not believe we would have achieved as sole authors or enquirers. In retrospect, we find ourselves thinking about Levinas’s (1969/1987) ‘infinity of otherness.’ What resonates here is the value of the ‘other’ to call one out beyond oneself into a kind of openness and dialogue in which we were both listening to the phenomenon that we were interested in. Here, the phenomenon is primary, and its ‘presencing’ is invited to come from beyond where we thought we were. We are also reminded here of Heidegger’s reference to ‘gelassenheit’ or ‘letting-be-ness’ (Heidegger, 1959/1966), ‘harkening’ to the phenomenon in the way “it” wants to show itself. Halling (2014) captures this spirit very well in *The Phenomenon as Muse: On Being Open to ‘Friendly Invasion’*.

So, we are underlining that unspecialized receptivity is core to the spirit of phenomenology and that such receptivity can be enhanced in dialogue with an ‘other’ where the qualities of the dialogue hold something of its mystery. This requires a phase of a willingness ‘not to know’ and to work towards a ‘fusion of horizons’ as in Gadamer’s (1975/1997) understanding of true conversation. What Claire experienced first as a new witness in this process was Les and Kate’s seeming easy style of questioning, correcting, and reaching for “the more” of the meanings than mere words can say (Gendlin, 1993, p. 30). Kate and Les demonstrated the process of ‘unspecializing’ in real time in the winding and graceful rhythm of their recollections or re-membrances (literally bodying again) in dialogue. Les observed at one point that it was like “walking on a country road” and that comment resonated deeply for Claire, almost like an invitation to be with them both along this lovely, unhurried adventure that knew no definitive destination but celebrated the process of being ‘in between’ together.

According to Kate and Les, they also need to explain how they hold similar standards concerning what it feels like to bring the ‘fusion of horizons’ into a coherent language that can invite readers in. Perhaps we can be ‘bridge-makers,’ where a kind of epistemic justice can be achieved that cares for both the phenomenon that we are describing, as well as the reader for whom we are writing.

But there is something else. In the original paper, we wrote about the importance of Eugene Gendlin’s (1978; 1985; 1992) experiential phenomenology, in which phenomenology can be practiced by attending to a holistic felt sense of the presence of a phenomenon that is ‘more than words can say,’ and which essentially comes from attending to one’s own epistemic body. We wrote that this was one way that ‘unspecialization’ could be practiced, by going back and forth between our body’s unclear felt sense of a phenomenon and finding language that does some justice to this felt sense. This is a kind of ‘moving way of being’ that draws on a rhythm of experiencing and finding language that fits—a body-based hermeneutics that circles around, trying to understand the edges of a phenomenon after sometimes getting lost in its depths—a rhythm of closeness and distance. And we also provided an ‘otherness’ for one another, as we engaged in phenomenological practice. We could call our process ‘embodied-relational enquiry.’ In all these ways, our style of working together can be seen to have its origins in the contemplative ways of being that we explored in the original paper, *Creativity of ‘Unspecialization.’* Looking ahead, we would hope that more human science researchers would ‘unspecialise together,’ working in partnerships in more dialogical and embodied ways that the spirit of collaboration requires.

B. Methodological papers

We increasingly engaged in a range of phenomenological methodologies that emphasized more aesthetic, experiential, and dialogical form of phenomenology. This can be seen to have been influenced by the original paper’s consideration of the need to produce complex knowledge for the ‘head, heart, and hand’—a form of knowledge that can be understood in a possible experiential felt way that provides actionable directions in personally owned ways.

For illustration, we would like to briefly touch on a few methodological contributions motivated by consideration of ‘complex forms of knowledge’ seeded by the original paper. In *Embodied Interpretation* (Todres & Galvin, 2008), we exercised a methodological approach that was a more evocative and poetic form of writing. Building on this idea further (Galvin & Todres, 2012), we offered a participative poetry process (renga) as engagement with an audience to practice a more aesthetically felt phenomenology together. The methodological emphases of both these innovations are traced back to the original concern (Galvin & Todres, 2007) to facilitate the empathic imagination, as well as actionable possibilities that arise from engaging in this exercise and this ongoing phenomenological practice. This way-finding allows for the “phenomenon as muse” (Halling, 2014, p. 1) to emerge in the journey of discovery together.

C. A series of health-related topics that unfolded from our unspecialized sensibilities

As a nurse and psychologist, we are both well socialized in the medical model, but our unspecialized sensibilities made us step back from prematurely specialized foci of health and illness. We became more interested in what emerged ‘more originally’ as topics from the lifeworld experiences of patients and citizens. Here we are indebted to Karin Dahlberg and her colleagues in Sweden for engaging with us in articulating ‘Lifeworld-led Care’ (Dahlberg et al., 2009). We were called to study phenomena such as the experiences of well-being and its absence, suffering, the humanization and dehumanization of care, the rupture and restoration of dignity, nursing practice as openheartedness (Galvin & Todres, 2013). We need to say that we did not have a top-down plan for these topics. Rather, the directions emerged in a similar way as Ch’ang Sha, in Case 36 of the Blue Cliff Record (Cleary & Cleary, 2005), as quoted above. One way that we characterized ‘unspecialization’ in our original paper was in reference to Keats’s (1817) notion of ‘negative capability’ and it seems that topics presented themselves to us rather than us intentionally seeking them out. Here, we would like to briefly indicate a few of our topic papers, and how each of them brought out a slightly different nuance when we engaged with them from the stance of our unspecialized sensibilities.

Nursing Openheartedness (Galvin & Todres, 2009) elucidated how receptivity arising from a phenomenological perspective is not just a cognitive openness but also requires an emotional openness. On existential well-being and suffering (Todres & Galvin, 2010; Galvin & Todres, 2011), we delineated 18 kinds of well-being showing how an ‘unspecialized openness’ to the ‘togetherness of things’ reveals these variations as always intertwined with one another and never alone. In developing the *experience of dignity as ‘honour-wound’* (Galvin & Todres, 2014), we learned how valuing vulnerability was central to human dignity. The resonance of this, with our original paper, can be seen to refer to a route from ‘unspecialization’ to open-heartedness and to the immense value of vulnerability.

Finally, in our original paper, we asked the question: “can ‘unspecialization’ be practiced?” (Galvin & Todres, 2007, p. 38). Kate Galvin (2019) is still asking this question in *Wellbeing through the Poets speaking*. In the mood of ‘unspecialization,’ she considered how poetry also requires receptivity, a harkening. Another way of saying this is that the ‘negative capability’ discussed in our original paper landed her in poetry 12 years later. She was listening to how poetry could be one way to guard a space for a receptive way of being; the way that poetic understanding ‘happens’ is that ‘it comes.’ She also wrote of how the unity and stretching apart of Heidegger’s fourfold of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities (Heidegger, 1951/1971) speaks of the ‘togetherness of things,’ when one is open and receptive. And this took her back into well-being and dignity intertwined, sensitized by heritage, mystery, embodiment, otherness, which leads us to the next section where our present-day dialogue with Claire comes full circle.

Part 3: To today with the three of us—a dialogue that ‘crossed and dipped’ to achieve new insights

Claire, Kate and Les engaged in a series of substantial recorded and transcribed dialogues (total of five hours and fifteen minutes duration over Zoom). We could characterize the nature of this dialogue as being ‘focusing-oriented’ in the spirit of Gendlin’s (1981) practice of Focusing. This involved not only being receptive to one another but also taking time to consult one’s own embodied felt sense as to the meanings emerging (Todres, 2004; 2007). However, we did this naturally and spontaneously, without any explicit agreement that we would proceed in this way. All three of us had some experience in focusing and this seemed to naturally occur. The only hint was that Kate at some point said: “I’m trying to keep my belly space open.” Another possible difference, rather than therapeutically, from focusing as a formal practice was that each of us took full responsibility for our own sensing into our embodied felt-senses, our language, and the engaged relationality with one another.

In our final tripartite dialogue, we came to link the meandering 18-year journey that began in the original paper, with where Kate had finally landed, 12 years later (see Galvin, 2019). We expressed the central insight as follows: ‘Unspecialization’ is the way-finder for the togetherness of things. For the three of us, this insight had been a latency that linked all the themes of our dialogue together. With this, the writing journey between the original paper, and then our three-way dialogue, felt like something of a home-coming with a particular kind of grounding in the spirit of temporal integration of our historical creations and future inspirations.

As for us personally, the unspecialized way of ‘looking ahead’ is not to project into the future with ‘content’ or prescriptions. Rather, ‘looking ahead’ for us is to settle as much as possible into dwelling with the ‘open,’ trusting that this way of being, with less knowing, without too much technological grasping, will bring from its side a way of us meeting a future that, in the case of phenomenological research, will have methodological practices and topic areas that are organically productive. Like our phenomenological path in the past, we do not know what the content of this will be for sure, but it has a feel that speaks back to us when we meet it. Perhaps, following the fragrant grasses and “the phenomenon as muse” (Halling, 2014, p. 1), our next paper may be called the ‘Feel of Unspecialization.’ So, perhaps now we can make some concluding remarks.

Part 4: Conclusion—Where we are now

Looking back, we have become increasingly interested in ‘unspecialization’ as a way of being (not just as a way of knowing), both individually and with collective reference to culture. On an individual level, there appears to be a psycho-spiritual aspect to ‘unspecialization’ that connects us to the essence of experiential well-being. Consistent with Heidegger, Todres (1993) on *Psychological and Spiritual Freedoms*, explored how the essence of being human may reside in our original ‘unspecialized openness.’ When this openness is not covered over by the objectification of self and other, and when one’s attention maintains some transparency to its unspecialized nature, there may be a sense of

well-being (as a dwelling-mobility) entwined with creativity that is nurtured from this groundless ground.

Here, ontology meets epistemology. Through the openness of ‘unspecialization,’ enquiry is then not a moving away from us. Somehow it takes us with it and faces us with the paradox of a mysterious calling always there, beyond us, while also grounding us, even bodily in the phenomenological textures and structures that emerge into an intimacy with our world. This is what we may need to collectively remember, as a world human community, now more than ever. And in our collective lives culturally, there is a groundswell of interest for returning to some more original way of being. There is a renewed interest in the arts, poetry, music, meditation, wilderness, and spiritual wisdom traditions. The challenge is how to unspecialize in a way that integrates the benefits of modernism and post-modernism and mediates fragmentation. We cannot pretend that these phases have not happened. In our original paper, we thus spoke of the challenge of finding a holism that can integrate specialized and technological developments.

And for us, Heidegger’s (1977) question remains: Are we being taken over by the technological spirit to such a degree that we are becoming objects of it? Dominant forces in our culture push for everlasting beauty, everlasting life, everlasting progress (Romanyshyn, 1989): ...as if to say “Let’s go off to Mars.” Natural recession or decline is seen as abject failure. And so, we lurch to the spirit of technology, its specialized ways of knowing and turn away from the vulnerabilities of ‘unspecialization’ and its resonances in the rhythms and cycles of nature. We do not have the remedies but, as always, our voices become unspecialized, disappearing into something fertile, before revealing a new excess and natality.

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