Issues about Thinking Phenomenologically while Doing Phenomenology

Inger Berndtsson¹, Silwa Claesson², Febe Friberg³ & Joakim Öhlén⁴
¹ Göteborg University and University of Skövde; ² Göteborg University;
³ University of Stavanger and University College of Borås; ⁴ Göteborg University

Abstract
This methodological article explores issues related to having the ontological ground for phenomenological empirical research present throughout the research process. We discuss how ontology needs to be taken into consideration regarding the phenomena to be studied and how ontological aspects of phenomena need to be highlighted during various data collection and analysis procedures. Here, we discuss how philosophical works can be used in the context of specific research projects. In illustrating our statements, we present four empirical examples connected to the themes of life changes and learning processes with the purpose of exemplifying and discussing how general lifeworld ontology can be integrated as an active resource in empirical phenomenological research.

Keywords
methodology, lifeworld ontology, empirical phenomenological studies

But if we rediscover time beneath the subject, and if we relate to the paradox of time those of the body, the world, the thing, and others, we shall understand that beyond these there is nothing to understand. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 365)

Central in phenomenological empirical research is the manner in which ontology can be present throughout the research process. This question deals with how to think phenomenologically while doing phenomenology. As guidance for researchers to facilitate research processes in the interest of conducting phenomenological studies, a series of methodological procedures

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have been put forward by, among others, van Kaam (1966), Colaizzi (1978), Giorgi (1985, 1997) and Karlsson (1995). Others, in line with the Utrecht school have emphasized focusing on studying experiences as they are lived using open and sensitive methods (Bollnow, 1989; Kockelmans, 1987; Langeveld, 1984). In this article, we will elucidate and discuss the necessity of reflecting upon and integrating general ontology and philosophical works with empirical phenomenological studies when researching experiences as they are lived.

Recent methodological studies in the field of empirical phenomenology have spanned across problems concerning how to deal with pre-understanding in the research process (LeVasseur, 2003), appropriate application of empirical phenomenological methods (Giorgi, 2000), phases of the interpretive phenomenological process (Crist & Tanner, 2003), issues of validity (Giorgi, 2002), and accessibility of empirical phenomenological texts (Halling, 2002). Further, the utilization of lifeworld ontological concepts in the phenomenological research process has been developed (Ashworth, 2003a, 2003b; van Manen, 1990). Ashworth (2003a) delineated specific intertwined lifeworld constructs, labelled “fractions” (p. 147), such as embodiment, temporality and sociality, which are then applied as structures in the process of phenomenological analysis (Ashworth & Ashworth, 2003; Finlay, 2003). However, the applicability of general lifeworld phenomenological constructs is not further spelled out for relevance to the uniqueness of various phenomena in diverse fields under study and here we intend to contribute to this discussion.

Within empirical phenomenological research, general phenomenological ontology may tend to be too extensive in scope and perhaps too complicated to carry into one’s reflections throughout the research process. Accordingly, our goal is to reiterate an unquestioned phenomenological assertion; the significance of thinking phenomenologically while doing phenomenology. For the purpose of this article, we interpret this claim in order to elaborate upon the significance of reflexively applying phenomenological ontology throughout the research process to ontic or empirical phenomena; thus, general ontology would be placed in a particular empirical field of psychological study. Here in the Heideggerian tradition of existential phenomenology, we assume the distinction between the “ontological” as the dimension of Being, and the “ontic” as the dimension of entities present to us in our natural attitude toward the world. First, we
will give a brief description of our understanding of general phenomenological, lifeworld ontology. Second, we will discuss applications of phenomenological ontology in the research process. Third, we will present four examples from our own research in which we have applied phenomenological thinking while carrying out phenomenological studies.

Our efforts to explicate and reflect upon the applicability of general ontology in the research process have largely been fostered in the specific research community of which we are part. We—all four authors, are part of an interdisciplinary group, which has contributed to the development of a lifeworld phenomenological research approach in western Sweden (Bengtsson, 2005), building on continuity between phenomenology and hermeneutics, which is seen as part of the phenomenological movement. This endeavour has been carried out in a context where phenomenology has largely been regarded as part of the qualitative research tradition, rather than as a specific approach to research into lifeworld phenomena. In this context, we have been challenged to explicate the significance of “bothering” about such philosophical issues as ontology. With this in mind, we highlight the above stated claim with the intention of concurring with the phenomenological methodological discussion. Here, phenomenological methodology is regarded as a research processes where methodological patterns are characterized by openness and flexibility (Bengtsson, 2005; Benner, 1994; Dahlberg, Drew & Nyström, 2001; van Manen, 1990) and not restricted to following a strict step-by-step method.

**General Lifeworld Ontology**

Ontology addresses questions about existence. In everyday language, the name for everything that exists is *reality*. In this article, we will concentrate on ontological aspects relevant to a phenomenological lifeworld approach. The concept “lifeworld” is central in many of the “phenomenologies” developed over the years. Husserl (1970/1954) introduced central themes of the lifeworld to the European audience at the beginning of the 20th century. Heidegger (1993/1927) talked about “in-der-Welt-sein” (being-in-the-world) and Merleau-Ponty (1962/1945) used the expression “être au monde” (being-in-the-world), while Schütz (1972/1932) wrote about “the everyday lifeworld”. Building on Husserl’s works, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and others claimed that it is not possible for anyone to transcend the
lifeworld. In the following presentation, we articulate assumptions pertaining to general lifeworld ontology based primarily on Heidegger’s (1993), Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) and Schütz’ (1972) philosophy.

The lifeworld, as we understand it, is in its ontological sense the pre-reflective ground for our being in the world, which is given to us in the natural attitude and is taken for granted in everyday life. The natural attitude as, in this respect, related to ordinary life, is originally and most often taken for granted. However, the natural attitude can be reflected upon and made visible. One of the challenges, among others, for a lifeworld approach, is to reveal and reflect upon everyday life and the foundations on which it rests.

The lifeworld, regarded here as an integrative complexity where we live, act and have experiences, can neither be reduced to a single quality nor transcended. It includes a pluralistic complex reality consisting of a large number of different qualities (Bengtsson, 2005). Thus, the ontology of the lifeworld can neither be diminished to a monism (e.g. materialism or idealism), nor to dualism (with separation of material and mental qualities). It is an integration of life and world, object and subject, inner and outer, mind and body, individual and society, etc. At the core of lifeworld ontology is insight into the interdependence between life and world, a complex and ambiguous conscious-and-unconscious basis of our experiences and actions. Thus, life and world are mutually dependent on each other, and through this interdependency, the lifeworld is personal as well as shared. The world, as it is united with a human being, stands out as an open world, always tangible in special situations. Central lifeworld dimensions such as time and space are also related to human beings. Time, for example, cannot be said to be either objective or subjective; instead, it is experienced by human beings as lived time. Similar statements can be made about lived space. Further, in the lived space or a room, things are not just material—they are seen as “something” and call for action on our part. A pen is not just a piece of plastic containing some steel and ink. Normally, one regards it as a pen, which might be useful if one wants to write. It is not just material or a piece of handicraft—it is primarily a tool (Heidegger, 1993). Such a tool can be an extension of one’s embodied existence as is the white cane for a blind person (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In this way, tools also express something about the persons using them.
According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), the lived body, inhabiting time and space, is the starting-point for our experiences and actions. This implies a body-subject, which can be simultaneously both object and subject, such as when touching one of our hands with the other. If the body changes, the world changes too, or the opposite: worldly changes also have an impact on the body-subject. To give another example: When suffering loss of vision, one’s body changes, but the person’s world also changes due to the changed visual perception.

However, we do not live alone in the world—to a considerable degree, we share lifeworlds with people who are more or less close to us. Schütz (1972) speaks of different variations of anonymity, but also of contemporaries and predecessors. Living in the world, for Schütz, also comprises playing an active role in everyday life. Further, Merleau-Ponty (1962) uses the symbol of an arch to delineate human intentionality, since as body-subjects we are always directed towards the world in some particular way. We can simultaneously be directed towards certain aspects and phenomena, while other phenomena are experienced in a co-presented manner and taken for granted. Here, Husserl talks about appresentation. As human beings, we cannot escape from our being-in-the-world as we are thrown into and placed in time and space (Heidegger, 1993). The body-subject, or oneself, is both co-created and dependent on other body subjects (Ricoeur, 1992/1990); we even have each other in our hands (Løgstrup, 1992). Consequently, the lifeworld stands out as a social world to a great extent. Other people affect us, and we affect others. Our respective lifeworlds slip into each other (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), but they still constitute an open horizon (van Peursen, 1977).

Applying Phenomenological Ontology in the Research Process

One of the challenges for researchers in the phenomenological tradition is to have ontological assumptions “alive and kicking” during the various phases of empirical lifeworld research. How is it then possible to use lifeworld ontology as a basis of empirical studies? This question is and has been present to researchers in the field and has been elaborated in different ways. As we mentioned earlier, we regard applying the rather general lifeworld ontology to empirical phenomenological research as a challenge, since it is extensive and not developed for the purpose of the specific meth-
odological guidance required by particular empirical research projects. General lifeworld ontology concerns assumptions in an overall sense, but every lifeworld study has a certain focus. In building on knowledge of the pre-scientific character of the lifeworld and the specific phenomenon to be studied, we suggest reflexively inter-relating the general ontology throughout the research process in order to be able to guide the resulting methodological procedures and decisions. This means placing general ontology in the context of specific fields of interest. Accordingly, general ontology is related to the field of reality under study such as learning in classrooms in general, but not to any specific school organization per se. This can be compared with intertwining phenomenological philosophy and the general study context of the phenomena of interest, coming up with suggestions of how the phenomena to be studied stand out as they are lived; inter-related and experienced by body-subjects in the world. Actually, the term “context” means, in its etymological sense, “to weave together”, stemming from the Latin term “contextere”. With this meaning, the term context is used for “the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs” (Merriam Webster, 2004). Thus, we do not limit context to its textual meaning. This process, we believe, is an enabling path in order to facilitate the researcher’s ability to see phenomena in a ‘lifeworldly’ open, often complex and multifaceted perspective, where life and world are mutually dependent on each other.

How can we then as researchers study and develop knowledge about phenomena as they are lived? We argue that the way we gain access to various phenomena is through the interpretation of people’s lived experiences (Heidegger, 1993), where understanding and interpretation are regarded as constitutive parts of the human being (Gadamer, 1995/1960; Heidegger, 1993). How, then, is it possible to gain access to people’s lived experiences? First, we consider the lifeworld of the researcher; he or she also shares conditions similar to other human beings. From this it follows that research within a lifeworld approach means inter-relating with and, to some extent, sharing other people’s lifeworlds. By meeting people, talking to them, listening to their narratives, observing their use of tools and the environment, etc., we gain access to lifeworld phenomena.

Conducting lifeworld studies implies that openness and a flexible attitude towards the phenomena of interest guided by methodological principles that emphasize a reflective stance (Bengtsson, 2005; Dahlberg, Drew &
Nyström, 2001). Further, openness towards the complexity of the life-world means openness towards the phenomena as experienced, but also towards the world as it is perceived by a person. Considering human beings as body-subjects, living and acting intersubjectively in a world of culture and tradition, implies openness towards the hermeneutical aspects in the phenomenological movement. Here, it is important that the researcher elaborates on pre-understandings. According to Gadamer (1995) and Heidegger (1993), openness and a flexible approach to the phenomena relate to processes of understanding and interpretation. Further, Ricoeur (1981, 1991) inter-relates the apparently contradictory aspects of understanding and explanation in a process of interpretation. Finally, both human lives as well as life situations should be considered significant when studying and interpreting phenomena as lived (Heidegger, 1993).

As a consequence of the complexity of the life-world, methodical creativity is required throughout the research process (e.g. Bengtsson, 2005; van Manen, 1990; Sandelowski, 2002). However, even if a phenomenological researcher does not use methodical steps, there is an interest in presentation of the procedures chosen and used in specific studies. Accordingly, the methods we choose require us to be sensitive and through them we are able to capture other people’s experiences as they are lived. Here, a variety of methods can be chosen, e.g. observations, interviews, narratives, diaries, biographies and images. Inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s (1962, p. xx) statement about phenomenology as disclosure of the world, we illustrate the different approaches we have employed in our efforts to reflectively apply phenomenological lifeworld ontology in four empirical examples.

**Learning Processes in Relation to a Changed Life Situation: The Example of Visual Impairment**

Based on an earlier study (Berndtsson, 2001), an empirical study was planned and carried out with a focus on how persons handle everyday life after becoming visually impaired or blind. The research aimed to study and clarify pedagogical processes in rehabilitation, focusing on the learning of persons with impaired vision. Two main questions were formulated: One, in what way can their learning be related to the lifeworld of visually impaired persons? and two, what characterizes this learning as a phenomenon and as a process. The study paid particular attention to how visually...
impaired individuals experienced learning new skills and how this learning was manifested in their varying life situations.

Initially, central phenomena for the study were identified as *visual impairment and blindness, changes in life and learning*. Building on the idea of applying the studied phenomena to philosophical work at an early stage, these phenomena were elaborated in relation to basic ontology. In explicating *visual impairment and blindness*, Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) theory of the lived body was used, in which the functional limitation stands out as a dysfunctional body, a body which can no longer relate to and act in the world as before. Here, a body-subject emerges which perceives the surroundings in a changed way due to the changed life-situation. This is a standpoint very different from objective medicine. Regarding *changes in life*, the changed body thus implies a changed world. Since human beings are related to dimensions of time and space, a changed life situation also implies changes in how people perceive and relate to time and space. Often, a narrower space can be identified if a crisis occurs where the horizon of time is contracting. Taken together, a changed life situation, related here to visual impairment and blindness, can be compared to having restricted horizons in different respects (Berndtsson, 2001; van Peursen, 1977). *Learning* as a phenomenon can then be conceived as having the horizons widened again, in order to once more start performing activities in everyday life. Learning also takes as its starting-point the lived body, which at an initial stage is often experienced as unusable—*I cannot* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The person thus has to learn to act in a new way including both re-learning as well as learning new skills (Berndtsson, 2001). It should also be noted that objects are not detached objects within lifeworld ontology; instead, they are seen as something and call for action on our part. Here, the white cane is a good example—life and world are placed in relation to each other by means of an object. Further, the social dimensions of the long cane as a symbol of blindness are central as regards learning processes.

How, then, was the study performed based on these initial philosophical statements about phenomena? In trying to come as close as possible to lived experiences, natural situations have been participated in and studied, both in the participants’ homes and at a rehabilitation clinic during sessions for learning new skills, e.g. the long cane technique, learning to use optical devices and a group rehabilitation program. Many sessions where the participants learned to use the long cane were observed. Here, one
strategy was to observe and try to identify perceptual relations to the world. In what way did the training support the use of other senses? How did the user develop or learn to utilize various senses? The use of objects or tools was also observed, including how the participants reacted when using the white cane in public, in order to capture intersubjective and social dimensions of the lifeworld. Attention was also paid to bodily expressions when learning to use a long cane. For these observations, the researcher had to establish a relationship characterized by trust both of the research participants and of the orientation and mobility specialist. This was also necessary for the individual interviews. The aim here was to capture the lived experiences of how life had changed as a result of their visual impairment or blindness, but also to investigate how they had handled this situation, primarily in everyday life. Here, the researcher needs narratives as they are closer to lived experience than more formal accounts. Narratives are also relevant when studying dimensions of lived time. When focusing on how the participants’ lives had changed as a result of their visual impairment, life-stories interviews (Eastmond, 1996) were performed. The recurring interviews also captured reflections about the training sessions observed. Combining observations and interviews gave a more comprehensive picture of the participants' lived experiences of learning, and shared reflections of the lessons observed provided information on existential aspects related to the execution of special phases in the training processes. Existential aspects of learning were also present in a diary produced by one of the participants when learning to use the long cane.

Finally, when analysing the field-notes and transcripts of the interviews combined with the researcher's own reflections, a phenomenological hermeneutical attitude was adopted, in order to try to identify life-world relations and see the world through the eyes of the participants, based on his or her perspective and bodily prerequisites. This also includes trying to express the studied phenomenon from the participants’ perspective. Tentative interpretations were formulated and checked against the material. The ontological starting-points developed were used in order to deepen the interpretations. For example, the concept horizon of activity was utilized in order to address the important phase in learning when people start to do things independently. Also concepts based in life-world ontology were developed, such as various body concepts in order to describe changes; for example, the concept perceptual body is used to discuss perceptual changes.
and relations to the world, *existential body* expresses existential questions, e.g. one woman had experiences of being diminished as a person when she became visually impaired. The *social body* symbolizes how disability is interwoven with other people and society, as well as how it deals with identity in relation to learning processes. Finally, the concept *acting body*, points to the need of the person to be active when learning to once again relate to the world with the new body. The described body concepts should not be regarded as isolated, rather, they are intertwined with each other in everyday life when people learn to handle a changed body and life situation. These body concepts can be compared with the lifeworld concepts described by Ashworth (2003a). However, in the described empirical example the concepts are developed on the basis of a particular rigorous study.

**Teaching and Learning in Prison**

Another example is from a study called *Teaching in Prison: Subject Knowledge and Socialisation* (Claesson, 2002). The focus is on how teaching inside prison can utilise each person’s lived experiences in order to provide an adequate education. The main focus is on the teacher, but in order to capture the complexity, there is a focus on both teachers and persons being taught, in comparison to the study above where the focus was primarily on the persons being taught.

That teaching is a shared activity, shared between teachers and pupils, means that teaching is an intersubjective activity. From a life-world point of view, this means that we can understand each other because we are humans, we experience each other as partners (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). However, there is little equality in the classroom with respect to intersubjectivity. For example, teachers are normally supposed to know a lot more about the subject being taught than their pupils, but they do not necessarily know anything about their students’ experience of what should be learnt. This means that teachers do not necessarily take students’ conceptions into account when teaching.

Moreover, we share the classroom with each other, which means that it does not appear to us as a neutral room; instead, it appears in a certain way due to peoples’ pre-understandings. The classroom can appear as a room where you should learn as much as possible, or the opposite: The classroom may be regarded with apprehension. The way the room is experienced
is intimately intertwined with how people inside that room experience and are experienced. The men in this observation study had, of course, experienced classrooms before they experienced the classroom in the prison, which means that they had pre-understanding of environments linked to teachers and teaching. The way they enter the room and the way they glance towards their teachers may tell us something about the way they experience the situation.

A young man, wearing a peaked cap in a way that you couldn’t see his eyes, arrived into the classroom for the first time. He gave the teacher, an elderly man, a quick glance and sat down in the last row. The teacher went on helping other students for a while before approaching him. “You are welcome,” the teacher said and asked what kind of math course he wanted to follow as he reached for some books. Then he stood leaning beside the young man looking in a book and started a conversation about mathematical problems in a low and friendly voice. As the teacher went away from the young men, he added “by the way, we don’t usually wear a cap inside the classroom”. The young man leant over his books and slowly, with his left hand, took his cap off.

Intentionality is a central notion of phenomenology. In the prison study, the teachers’ directed awareness was of special interest. By focusing the teachers’ directed awareness it might be possible to understand how teachers can utilise each person’s lived experience of life outside prison. It was found that men related to that toward which the teacher directed their awareness. Taking the way teachers bodily express this directed awareness into account (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), the initial ontological expression was changed to what teachers direct themselves towards. “Awareness” in this study has a connotation indicating that the focus of the study is cognitive, that what participants verbalised indicated the most important aspect. On the contrary, bodily directedness was focused on in the study.

In this study, observations were used in order to understand what prison teachers were directing themselves towards. It became apparent that the researcher ought to stay in the classroom for a long time in order to understand the pattern of teaching where the teacher’s efforts to utilise each person’s lived experiences emerge. Discussions and interviews with both teachers and the men in the prison were interspersed with observations during which notes were taken. Because the use of video camera was not ethically justifiable inside prison, the notes were characterised by a mind
map construction where drawings and text were mixed. The drawings mostly had to do with the way the bodies were shaped in certain situations and the way one person glanced towards another.

**Pedagogical Encounters between Patients and Nurses in a Medical Ward**

The next study also focuses on teaching situations, but in a very different context. In a fieldwork study (Friberg, 2001), the phenomenon of teaching patients with a focus on nurses’ informal patient teaching in a general medical ward was studied. The phenomenological approach was directed towards the specific research questions and towards the place for data collection, which meant openness towards nurses’ and patients’ everyday activities, which were of pedagogical importance in the hospital ward setting. One week was spent at the ward before the field phase in an attempt to understand daily routines, spatiality and to become familiar and known to the health professionals. The contours of the ontological assumptions were slowly elucidated by observing the nurses’ everyday activities in the care of patients and the reading of relevant phenomenological texts. Thus, reflexivity revealed certain aspects of ontological significance for the specific research phenomenon. The hospital ward was seen as a *room for learning*, meetings between nurses and patients as *intersubjective encounters*, communication and activities of pedagogical importance as *speech and actions* and finally nurses and patients as not only individuals and physical beings but also *fields of bodily expressions*. These aspects concern the view of the human being (nurses and patients), the view of the world as experienced (the hospital ward) and characteristics concerning social relatedness (the encounter of pedagogical importance). The attempt to identify mainstay ontological aspects should not be seen as a theoretical screen, but something that made it possible to see the complexity in the field of study during the field phase.

Let us take the “hospital ward as a room for learning” as the first example. From a phenomenological perspective, the human being is condemned to meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xix). For the patient, this means making an attempt to understand the changes due to illness, treatment, consequences for the future, etc. In a spatial sense, the hospital ward is a long corridor with a lot of doors leading to the patient rooms. The ward is
also a workplace for the health professionals, among them nurses, and a place for examination and treatment of the patients’ medical problems and activities as patient information. By adopting a phenomenological attitude, the ward becomes a spatial place as it is experienced by nurses and patients, stretching out into the garden outside the hospital windows, indicating another flow of life. Other spatial horizons indicate closed doors of rooms inappropriate or forbidden for patients to enter, such as the nurses’ office or examination rooms. The ward as a room for learning also contains things or objects of different kinds such as blood pressure gauges, wheel chairs and electronic clinical thermometers. Objects in the ward setting form parts of the room for learning in that these objects mean something to the learning patient. The blood pressure gauge, for example, is understood by the patient as something. For instance, it could reveal abnormal blood pressure values indicating a physical problem. For the nurses, these things belong to the taken-for-granted ward equipment. From a lifeworld perspective, the physical rooms where patients and nurses meet are not objective rooms where the persons have specific and sharply defined places. In line with Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 139), nurses and patients “inhabit space and time”. The room is not only a physical place but also a place of possibilities. A room can have a supportive pedagogical atmosphere (see Bollnow, 1989), an atmosphere of pedagogical tact (van Manen, 1991), or the opposite—an oppressive atmosphere. The hospital ward constitutes spatiality: Beyond the physical room is a room of possibilities where patients’ learning takes place. This indicates the importance of adopting phenomenological openness towards the spatial complexity during the field study.

Informal and spontaneous teaching is to a large degree unreflected. Expressed in phenomenological terms, we could say that nurses adopt “the natural attitude”. These intersubjective everyday encounters are full of nuances. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) might put it, nurses’ and patients’ lifeworlds touch upon each other. They observe each other and communicate about aspects related to the patients’ health situation. The nurse can, for example, see the patient as a learning person with specific and individual learning needs or, on the contrary, the nurse can see the patient as a typical patient with medical problems that are the same as those of other patients with the same diagnosis. In this case, individual learning needs or personal ways of experiencing the changed and changing life situation are not
encountered. Thus, the nurse can direct the pedagogical intentionality in different ways. According to Schütz (1972), an observed behaviour is not necessarily identical with what the person means. Instead, *speech and actions* are socially and culturally dependent indications of what the other person means, which points to the importance of understanding from the perspective of the researcher in the field phase. The ontological assumption, that *the human body is an expression of a field of experience*, guided the field phase. Both nurses and patients are bodies and, as Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 198) states, “the body is not an object. For the same reason, my awareness of it is not a thought, that is to say, I cannot take it to pieces and reform it to make a clear idea. Its unity is always implicit and vague”. This insight guided the observations towards nuances in movements and conversations. In addition to observations of everyday patient-nurse encounters, conversation-like interviews with patients and nurses were conducted.

**Narratives of Alleviated Suffering within Palliative Care**

The last example is a study of the alleviation of the suffering of people with life-threatening cancer by Öhlén, Bengtsson, Skott & Segesten (2002). The context is health care, as in the previous example, but in a different kind of setting and circumstances. Here, the starting point for contextualizing the phenomenological ontology was insights gained from encounters with severely ill people during initial fieldwork at a hospice (Öhlén, 1999) and the view of the lived body laying the foundation for human suffering, as described by Ricoeur (1992). In this way, suffering is regarded as bodily and existential at the same time. In searching for a perspective that does not focus on bodily or existential suffering, but rather on how suffering is experienced through the body, we turned to Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) life-world phenomenology.

Taking the ambivalent and ambiguous whole of “being-to-the-world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), the ontological basis for the study of alleviation of suffering involved the focus on suffering as a complex, composite and embodied experience. Such experiences may be voiced by relating tangible situations from life. By viewing the human subject as embodied, and the body as a body-subject, a change in bodily functioning (which for people with life-threatening cancer often means a decaying body) can lead to a changed world for the suffering person. Thus, it is of interest to study
expressions of disruptions in the unity between body and subject, irrespec-
tive of whether the body is experienced as subject or object. It is important
for the empirical study that embodied experiences contributes to an under-
standing of experiences of meaningfulness and meaning, and that the pre-
viously usually unarticulated and taken for granted—I can—may turn
into salient experiences of its opposites—the I cannot. Furthermore, Mer-
leau-Ponty (1962) emphasizes that the circularity between body and sub-
ject means that the body also inhabits time and space. Thus, experiences
related to suffering from a decayed body will be experienced in inter-related
experiences of past, present and the anticipated future; including diverse
aspects of human finitude. From the lived body, it also follows that experi-
ences of suffering can be shaped by expansion and transformation of the
lifeworld followed by using different kinds of disability aids. Experiences
of suffering reach outwards and personal understanding may shift, anchored
in the embodied subject and framed by our horizons. From this, it follows
that there are both limitations and the ability to go beyond spontaneous
experiences of a situation. It is possible for the suffering person to tran-
scend his/her actual suffering, but not the lifeworld.

In the initial fieldwork (Öhlén, 1999), severely ill patients shared expe-
riences of suffering as well as alleviated suffering in a narrative format in
dialogues. For this reason, narratives were considered to be an appropriate
way of empirically arriving at meanings of suffering and alleviated suffering,
because narrations are creative “refigurations” of experiences encompassing
the past, the present and the future (Ricoeur, 1981). Thus, in congruence
with the ontological elaboration above, in this way, talking about suffering
is not about reproducing something from the past. Narrating is a recon-
struction created in the relationship between a narrater and listener, and
new meanings of what is experienced may surface. In line with this elabo-
ration, repeated conversations with people receiving palliative care were
chosen for the study and special attention was paid to reflexivity in order
to facilitate openness in dialoguing with the participants.

To varying degrees, all the participants started talking about severe,
troublesome and distressing experiences of being faced with life-threatening
illness: The suffering. After that, they continued to talk about relief, sup-
port and other forms of comforting help: The alleviation. The former
seemed to create space for the latter. When reflecting on the participants’
narratives (which was facilitated by means of writing a reflective diary and
counselling during the fieldwork), before the actual analysis was initiated, an essential feature was recognized and guided analytic decisions: The narratives about alleviation were easy to distinguish with clear beginnings and clear ends, often finishing with a final point. The first-mentioned narratives about the suffering, however, were indistinct with no clear beginning or end. These narrative segments were present more or less everywhere and were difficult to locate in the field-notes and transcripts. This finding provided input for the choice of approaches for the analysis in order to investigate the phenomenon described in a flexible manner. The narratives about alleviation already distinguished were “ready” for further condensation and analysis of their meanings. However, the other narratives about suffering that were difficult to locate, obviously needed to be further “unpacked”. Re-reading the data, it became clear that parts of these narratives were repeated and often composed of imagery and other rich descriptions close to poetic language. However, such descriptions were in many cases hidden in everyday expressions and language which seemed to overlay the richness of meanings and expressive language. It was thus difficult to locate the meanings to which the narratives referred. In the literature of narrative analysis, the approach to narrative transcription applied by Gee (1985) aimed to place the poetic content of oral narratives in the foreground, inspired the researcher to condense the previous line-by-line transcripts related to narratives of suffering based on their spoken intonations and pauses (see Öhlén, 2003). In this way, the participants’ narrative segments of suffering were combined into coherent stories, which facilitated further analysis. The most valuable use of the poetic condensation of the narratives was found in the researcher’s gaining a comprehensive view of each participant’s narrations of suffering and acquiring a reflective stance towards the memory of the encounter of each of the participants. In this way, poetic condensation facilitated a flexible approach to the phenomenon and the participants’ ways of expressing experiences of this phenomenon, and thus made possible an analytical focus on meanings in the participants’ narratives.

Discussion

In this article, we have tried to elucidate how we have worked to contextualize general phenomenological ontology in studied phenomena and illustrate
how this procedure has guided the research examples presented. We have argued for the significance of explicating ontological assumptions in empirical lifeworld studies, with a focus on the need to explicate ontology for phenomena studied in a lifeworld approach. The relation between general ontology and the phenomenon studied can be described as an interdependence between figure and background, as presented in Edgar Rubin’s face-vase (Bengtsson, 2003). The way the background (ontology) is formed influences what we see as a figure, and the figure (research focus, e.g. people’s lifeworlds in some special respect) emerges out of the background. Lifeworld ontology then allows people’s lived lives to emerge and be studied in a phenomenological way.

On the one hand, according to empirical phenomenological research literature, the researchers should focus on phenomenological literature and particularly the well-known phenomenological philosophers. On the other hand, phenomenology can be somewhat tacit and implicit in the research process, which then makes it imprecise as regards what way the research can be guided by phenomenology. Thus, the examples are presented in order to contribute to a discussion about how philosophical works can guide empirical phenomenological research when the researcher relates the philosophical insights to the specific topic under investigation.

Although we made use of the same general ontology in our four examples, they illustrate diverse ways ontology can be related to specific empirical realities. For instance, the lifeworld dimensions of the lived body, lived time and lived space were adopted in all the four studies exemplified. However, combining them with other lifeworld dimensions of particular relevance for each study, such as horizon (Berndtsson, 2001), directedness (Claesson, 2002) room for learning (Friberg, 2001) and circularity between body and subject (Öhlén et al., 2002), resulted in various methodological consequences. In the studies exemplified, we have made use of individual recurring interviews, narratives, focused life stories, diaries, various kind of observations, fieldwork, etc. Mostly, we have chosen to combine a variety of methods in our studies. For example, interviews in combination with observations offer a way of viewing the lived body acting in the world. Thus, empirical studies will proceed and be enriched not only by interviewing people. This approach is at the core of what Beekman (1984, p. 16) calls “teilnehmende Erfahrung” or participant experience, which means being present, trying to share and coming close to the participants’
experiences. We have either focused on individual persons or studied specific contexts, which is exemplified from the fields of education and medical care. Regarding the analyses in the studies, here too a variety of procedures have been combined. For instance, the last example shows how poetic condensation can be used in order to identify and grasp existential meaning in suffering, and the first example of learning related to a changed life situation gives insights into how philosophical works and phenomenological concepts can be used in interpretation processes.

In view of our experiences, we recommend starting the philosophical elaboration of phenomena at an early stage in empirical studies. However, our experience is also that it is possible to specify particular ontological assumptions gained in an initial or previous encounter with the field which can later be used as a practical and theoretical tool to guide the whole research process. The applicability of general lifeworld ontology mostly results in lifeworld ontological explications related to the reality studied. This can be compared to ontic, psychological or pedagogical characteristics of the subject matter that stand out and are important for the shape and procedures of empirical research. If the procedure ends up with explications regarding the phenomena studied, it should be noted that these explications do not exist in isolation, instead, they affect and interact with each other—they are intertwined with one another. This can be compared with how Husserl (1977) describes different experiences as a nexus: “Internal experiences give no mere mutual externality; it knows no separation of parts consisting of self-sufficient elements. It knows only internally interwoven states, interwoven in the unity of one all-inclusive nexus.” (p. 5). Accordingly, if the application of ontology to empirical topics ends up with various lifeworld ontological explications concerning different aspects of the studied phenomena, these should be seen as intertwined with one another and with the research procedures.

When carrying out empirical research, the process of contextualizing ontology to phenomena helps us to think phenomenologically about the phenomenon under investigation, and it also helps us to see the phenomenon from a lifeworld perspective. This is one way of approaching the phenomenon being studied; rather than taking the natural attitude for granted, one attempts to elucidate the taken for granted. This methodological tool is used as part of the researcher’s reflective stance throughout the whole research process (Ashworth, 1996; LeVasseur, 2003). Thus, the
initial phase of relating ontology to the phenomenon to be studied should never anticipate the results; instead, it should guide the project from its initial design, data collection and analysis to its completion. Choosing methods should always be executed in relation to the phenomenon studied, ontological awareness, methodological standpoints and methodical possibilities of studying people’s life situations. Approaching phenomena from a lifeworld perspective, means trying to see them in all their variation and complexity and, when writing up the study, also trying to be faithful to the lifeworlds studied. Finally, empirical phenomenological research also takes into consideration questions about ethics, in that people studied should always be interacted with in a way that embodies great responsibility and confidentiality as regards each person’s life situation.

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