EDITORIAL

The scientific interest in health and well-being demands well-founded research strategies in order for the complexities, the depth, and the many nuances of health-related phenomena to be thoroughly explored. Often, but not always, the scientific/philosophical inspiration is made clear. In many qualitative research approaches, phenomenology and/or hermeneutics serve as the ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundation. Some authors employ phenomenological approaches, philosophically referring to Husserl or Merleau-Ponty and methodologically to, for example, Giorgi. Others describe their approaches as hermeneutical, referring philosophically to Heidegger, Ricoeur, or Gadamer and methodologically to, for example, van Manen. The essential distinction is description versus interpretation. Phenomenological supporters usually emphasise description while the hermeneutical supporters emphasise interpretation.

We have looked into this, trying to find motives for the one or the other choice. It seems that interpretive approaches are more attractive to many journals due to its explicit acceptance of pre-understanding and because contextual meaning or theory is included in the analyses. There thus seems to be an attractive methodological flexibility that allows for the researcher to use her/his pre-understanding, which cannot be “bracketed,” and to move beyond her/his data. Here exists also some suspicion of the idea of essences.

On the other hand, it seems that phenomenological approaches demand more rigour from the researcher and allow for less freedom. There seems to exist a requirement to control ones pre-understanding in order for the phenomena’s essences to be illuminated and theories are understood as unwelcome within the description of findings.

Questions that arose while looking at this were: Are the differences between phenomenology and hermeneutics over emphasised? Do the differences belong to philosophy or to methodological practise?

From a philosophy of science perspective, all phenomenological and hermeneutical research relates both to the particular meanings and to the more abstract, general, or essential meanings. There is an interest in lived experience—in all variations, nuances, and contexts—at the same time as there is a scientific demand to transfer the research findings to other areas and other people than those who were involved in the research. This is true both for phenomenology and for hermeneutics.

Again following the perspective of the philosophy of science, authors duly acknowledge the ever present pre-understanding, but Husserl as well as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, and Ricoeur further emphasise the importance of epistemological openness. Practising such a philosophical ideal means to sensitively open up for the focal phenomenon of the research, which is a stance that demands from the researcher not to let one’s pre-understanding loose, but keep a check on it and “bridle” it. Reaching out to grasp lived experiences and essential meanings of phenomena imply that one should not only put one’s own pre-understanding at stake: researchers must open up the full process of understanding to the cultivation of critical reflection and a dwelling attitude, as well as letting oneself be touched in a deeper sense. To study health phenomena through others’ lived experience is a serious challenge. Researchers who don’t challenge their own (pre-)understanding run the risk of ending up with findings that describe nothing but their own lifeworld. Both phenomenological and hermeneutical practitioners must seek this openness, but neither the one nor the other can completely free themselves from pre-understandings. Further, neither the phenomenological nor hermeneutical practitioner wants to free her/himself from pre-understandings, since this realm of experience is essential to intentionality and the ability to understand anything at all of our world and its phenomena.

The same reasoning can be used to understand the input of theories. There is no general rule against the use of theories, neither in phenomenological nor in hermeneutical research. The reason for including theories in the research is that the understanding of a phenomenon demands this input. If a theory of some kind is included, whether in connection with a phenomenological or hermeneutical approach, the proper place for the input of theory must be discussed (e.g., not letting a theory affect the findings until a pattern of empirical meanings is established). Further, the choice of theory must be sensitive and every researcher must be aware not letting strong theories silence the soft voice of the lifeworld.

Researchers who wanted to understand the meanings of the phenomena that they were interested in, who were interested in the lived world of people in
health care, had to find their own ways and had to fight for new and different approaches to research. We can very well see that in such a situation one easily falls in the trap of categorising and even "packaging" the philosophy, making a dichotomy between phenomenological and hermeneutical methodologies, stressing the differences, and neglecting the common ontological and epistemological ground. However, we now see that it is time for a different approach.

The animosity between phenomenologically and hermeneutically oriented researchers has not been fruitful. Instead of illuminating the field it has become blurred and young researchers have had problems in finding their way in the field. Not least have they been confused by advisors who force them to choose the one approach before the other, without deeply founded arguments.

The significance of academic debates cannot be overvalued and we hope for many more debates within the area of phenomenology and hermeneutics. But we want the debates to concentrate upon how to practise openness, how to figure out the role of pre-understanding and, in general, how intentionality and the processes of understanding works. We also want debates on the tension between particularities and generalities and not least the intertwining of them. Last, but not least, we want debates on what happens in-between philosophy and the research praxis.

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Note
1. Some approaches (e.g., content analysis) suffer from serious methodological problems due to their ontological, epistemological, and/or methodological indistinctness and uncertainty.