In the midst of the unthinkable. A phenomenological lifeworld approach to the experiences of suffering and relieved suffering during the tsunami catastrophe, 2004

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Abstract
The aim of this study was to highlight the instantaneous experience of suffering and relieved suffering that was presented on the Swedish Television (SVT) by those who experienced the tsunami wave in Thailand, 26 December 2004. The selected TV-interviews were watched, transcribed and conducted with an empirical phenomenological analysis. A phenomenological lifeworld approach, inspired by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, was chosen for the theoretical framework. The findings showed three main features: the motion, the stillness and the shift in perspective. The motion comprised both the motion of the wave and the motion it caused the victims in terms of external as well as internal disorder. When the tsunami waves withdrew, it was followed by stillness. The feeling of being unreal was prominent, triggered by lack of information and endless waiting. Another prominent feature was the victims' incapacity to answer “how long” they had suffered before being rescued. The tsunami catastrophe seemed to be a timeless event. Caring for other victims meant a shift in perspective in one’s own devastated world to that of another person. The shift between focus and comprehension, contributed to the making of life-saving decisions, for the victims themselves and for other victims. The findings were mainly reflected on from the perspective of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for example the experience of time as an embedded and lived now. It was also reflected on from the perspective of the German philosopher Karl Jaspers as a limit-experience and as a fulfilment of love. A suggestion for further research is to investigate how suffering and relieved suffering is experienced and encountered when further time has passed.

Key words: Tsunami, catastrophe, suffering, relieved suffering, care, phenomenology, lifeworld

Introduction
When tsunami waves hit the beach with the speed of a jet plane and turned into walls of water, 10–15 m high (Danschutter, 2005), how was the human suffering experienced and what alleviated that suffering? The question is if it is possible to access the instantaneous experience of suffering and relieved suffering after a period of time has passed.

A catastrophe strikes suddenly, is unpredictable and out of our control and its effects transcend the time of its exposure. A catastrophe is also known by the massive amount of human suffering it causes as well as the vast amount of material damage and its threat to human identity, dignity and security (Dyregrov, 2002). Three paradigms that define a catastrophe can be discerned: it erupts from an outer event, the vulnerability of the society and the insecurity (Gilbert, 1998). According to APA (2000) a trauma is defined as: “An extreme stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threats to one’s physical integrity” (p. 463). Dyregrov (2002) described some acute and normal reactions to disaster, e.g. dissociation where the individual creates a mental distance to the situation. Time was experienced as passing by in slow motion thus allowing time for a more or less conscious discerning of life-saving alternatives to the threat.
Prominent experiences of flooding and its effects on the health of survivors of a flood in North Dakota were shock and disbelief, uncertainty, grief and loss but also hope and meaning (Proos-Keene, 1998). Three cognitive findings of a trauma are described when a person picks up the pieces of a broken vase and glues them together. The vase looks like it did before (assimilation) but is more fragile than before it was broken. Alternatively, the pieces may be thrown away (negative accommodation) or be used to build something new (positive accommodation) (Joseph & Williams, 2005). Revisiting the disaster area (Thailand) contributed to the recovery of traumatized children and adults (Heir & Weisaeth, 2006).

However, research focusing directly on patients' suffering and alleviated suffering in relation to care, is lacking (Rehnsfeldt & Erikkson, 2004). A synopsis review by Isovaara, Arman and Rehnsfeldt (2006) showed that suffering in general and Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms in particular were viewed from a medical, psychiatric or psychologically behaviouristic perspective and described in terms of symptoms and pathology. Pérez-Sales, Cervellón, Vázques, Vidales and Gaborit (2005) maintained that it was important when planning for catastrophe relief to consider cultural aspects and Batjini, Van Ommeren and Saraceno (2005) also emphasized the importance of the context. The findings of Pérez-Sales et al. (2005) showed that the survivors who were culturally conscious were feeling better, had more positive memories, less feelings of being suppressed and on the whole was less emotionally influenced than in a camp that was not conscious of the victims’ cultural background. Religion must also be viewed as a basic cultural aspect of catastrophe relief (Chester, 2005). The impact of a belief in a just world was a personal buffer, which could contribute to maintain the mental health of German victims of the tsunami catastrophe in Thailand (Otto, Boos, Dalbert, Schöps & Hoyer, 2005).

Dyregrov and Straume (2003) emphasize the importance of a collective approach (group settings) towards helping disaster-bereaved families. An immediate focus on the catastrophic loss also worked to direct attention towards issues related to coping with the future. The spontaneous support of neighbours and friends is very important in the initial phase after a catastrophe. However, the advantage of professional support is that when the spontaneous support has vanished the professional support is still there (Nieminen-Kristofersson, 2002). Consolation alleviates suffering by a change of focus, from the suffering to something in between that is described as communion (Rasmussen 1999; Rasmussen, Jansson & Norberg, 2000; Talseth, Gilje & Norberg, 2001). The in-between might also be understood as an experience of time and space in order to be able to suffer and to get a consoling interval in or from the suffering (Roxberg, 2005; Roxberg, Eriksson, Rehnsfeldt & Fridlund, 2008; Öhleñ & Holm, 2006). The struggle with suffering can become a struggle for consolation (Roxberg, 2005).

How is it possible to research suffering (Arman & Rehnsfeldt, 2006)? The question seems relevant for the present study since it is assumed that the experience of being in the midst of the unthinkable is a very complex and overwhelming experience. Is it then possible to carry out any research when the rhythm of life is ruptured and life itself can no longer be taken for granted? To research this experience might mean going beyond the taken for granted, seeking the rupture which could contain the profound experience of the tsunami disaster. Hence, the aim of the study was to highlight the instantaneous experience suffering and relieved suffering by those who experienced the tsunami wave in Thailand and other affected areas, 26 December 2004 that was presented on Swedish Television (SVT). The research question was; What is the meaning of the experience of suffering and relieved suffering for the victims of the tsunami catastrophe when experiencing the wave?

Methodology

Design and setting

An explorative study design, inspired by the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nyström (2008), was chosen. A distinction was made between the “fundamental description” of a phenomenon based upon qualitative data, and the “fundamental structure” as influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and the notion of structure (Colaizzi, 1973, 1978). Interviews made by SVT at the time of the tsunami catastrophe were performed both in the disaster area and in Sweden. The time interval was 26 December 2004–1 January 2005.

Data collection and selection procedure

The main motive for the choice of data was that media reports were the only available source of the first experiences of the catastrophe. Both television and the radio programmes were possible data sources and both were studied. Television, however, was chosen as the media source since it had the benefit of providing a visual encounter with the interviewee and because of the frequent reporting of the tsunami catastrophe as it took place. Other data
sources could have been chosen, such as biographies and newspapers. Biographies were excluded because they would have provided a retrospective view of the experience of the catastrophe. Newspaper articles might have provided some immediate responses to the catastrophe, but instead would have not contained “encounters” with the victims. The problem of not being able to communicate with the interviewee, e.g. asking for clarifications, was a disadvantage in the study. The television interviews were in that sense mute. The problem of not being able to ask the interviewee for clarifications was counteracted by the potential of video data to provide greater access to the lived experience (Sayre & Halling, 2007). Another disadvantage was that the television interviews were edited. However, this ‘condensation’ could also be seen as an advantage as it facilitated the inclusion of a larger number of interviews compared with a traditional interview study. A total number of 68 shorter and longer interviews were included in the study. Another implication that had to be considered was the journalists own views of the event could have been imposed on the material. However, according to McQuail (2005) the strength of the news genre across the media of print, radio and television, is the form of recurrence, neutrality and facticity ‘facticity’. For this study, the last two qualities reduced the likelihood of too much data being biased. The database for SVT programmes is the National Archive of Recorded Sound and Moving Images (SESAM) and thus the news programmes made by SVT at the time of the catastrophe and available from the database SESAM were included. The criteria of inclusion were:

1. The programme should pertain to the phenomenon suffering and relieved suffering during the tsunami wave.
2. The interview should contain personal experiences of the catastrophe where it took place.
3. Fairly rich but not necessarily long descriptions of the phenomenon.

Data collection started with a search for TV-programmes in the SESAM database. The search was carried out using key words, i.e. suffering, relieved suffering and words related to the meaning of these key words, e.g. comfort/consolation, compassion, grief. These key words were then combined with tsunami or flood wave in the next stage of the search procedure. It proved difficult to find combinations that both limited the search result and corresponded to the inclusion criteria. One method was to set time intervals, for example the first week, the first month. Another difficulty was that search words could only be found in the programme announcements because a free text search was not available in this database. The results of the search were thus TV-programmes that might contain interviews that corresponded to the aim of the study. The next step was to “scan” the videotapes, searching for interviews of good quality and interviews that corresponded to the aim and criteria of the study. A first “pilot review” of these programmes showed that one type of news programme: “Good morning Sweden” (Gomorron Sverige) contained longer interviews with victims of the tsunami catastrophe. The ordinary length of these programmes is from 0600 to 0915 . “Good morning Sweden” is sent on weekdays and content varies from short to longer reports. During the first week of the catastrophe, these programmes were prolonged. All interviews in the programme, which were in line with the aim of the study, were included. Interviews occurring repeatedly and interviews about the tsunami, mostly with professionals, were excluded. However, during this first week of the catastrophe other news from the SVT national production corresponding to the aim and the criteria of the study, were included. Although short in length, many of these programmes contained valuable data. Video recordings also allow for repeated viewings and interviews were watched multiple times, either in whole or in part. Thus, a type of dialogue emerged in response to the interviews in an ongoing process. The complexity of the video data made this part of the research process particularly rich (Sayre & Halling, 2007).

The third step was to transcribe the selected video recordings verbatim, including pauses, intonation and emotional as well as physical expressions. According to Sayre and Halling (2007), video recordings capture a remarkable amount of embodied expressions. The richness of videotaped material could be profoundly evocative. The face, in its openness and vulnerability, expresses who the person is (Levinas, 1969). When reading the transcribed data it was possible to recall the memory of the actual interview. Just as in a traditional interview, the meeting with the interviewee in the TV-media entailed moving to the world of the interviewee and to the world of the disaster. Looking at a painting or a drama means a transformation that does not only put us in another world, since the world of the painting or drama has found its own measurement. The world in which we live as it was a world of our own, does no longer exist (Gadamer, 1960). The TV “drama” entailed moving to a world that was neither another world nor a world outside the own world. The world of the tsunami disaster was part of our own world. Inviting the other in the TV-situation entailed opening up and sharing the world of the
Ethical considerations

Performing research where suffering is concerned always includes a risk of exploiting the vulnerability of one’s fellow man. This risk was reduced throughout the research process by considering the risk of transgressing the integrity of the informant. The informants had agreed to be interviewed for a televised news programme, where their names and hometowns were presented. An objection can be raised that the interviewees had not agreed on participating in a research study. The authors discussed this ethical dilemma and reasoned that in

Data analysis

The analysis was inspired by phenomenology in accordance with the ideas of Dahlberg et al. (cf. 2008). The reason for this choice was that the research data contained the victims’ lived experiences of the tsunami wave, which was suitable for an understanding of their lifeworld. Merleau-Ponty’s (1962, 1968) notion of embodiment as foundational to man’s personal and social existence and the body as the vehicle for the human understanding of the world and of other people, were of special significance to the study. Colaizzi (1973) describes two layers of “phenomenological” understanding. The human subject has more or less immediate and conscious access to the proximal layer while the primordial level is only accessible through explication. The methodological aim was to explicate the latent and primordial level in order to reflect on and reach a deeper level of understanding of the research phenomenon. The analysis started with several readings of the transcribed data in order to get acquainted with it and to get a sense of the whole of the text. This proved not to be a simple task as there were many interviews of varied types. It appeared during these readings that the data relating to the first week of the tsunami disaster was better divided into more than one study. The data formed a logical structure beginning with experiences of the wave and experiences after the wave.

The essence is what makes the phenomenon what it is and the way it is (cf. Husserl, 1999; Dahlberg, 2006b). It entails recognizing but not determining the possibilities of the phenomenon. The researcher’s approach to the phenomenon were on the one hand open and on the other hand bridled, thus allowing the phenomenon to be what it is and not what it is supposed to be (cf. Husserl, 1999; Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2004). The next phase of the analysis was to divide the text into smaller units where each unit was described with a preliminary meaning. A process of critical reflection was started at the same time as the patterns in the inductive analysis emerged. This critical reflecting attitude was held as long as possible in order to retain an open mind to the meaning of the text, i.e. not to make definite the indefinite (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2004). The emerging patterns or clusters were now analyzed in order to describe the essential structure of the phenomenon. The essential structure was then critically reflected on against the text, the meaning units and the clusters. One of the authors had previous experience of disaster care but none of us had any personal experiences of disaster. The first author had a special interest in exploring the research phenomenon because this study is the first of a number aiming at exploring the meaning of suffering and relieved suffering connected to the tsunami catastrophe. Hence, throughout the data collection and text analysis the influence of the researchers’ pre-understanding was tempered by maintaining a conscious and open-minded attitude as possible towards the phenomenon. The researchers had few expectations about exactly what they would find but great expectations in terms of what the phenomenon might contain, i.e. there was a high level of curiosity towards the phenomenon. Thus it was easier to let the indefinite be indefinite (cf. Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2004) until a reflected view of the phenomenon emerged.

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qualitative studies, the presumptive informants are often contacted by somebody they already know, and that being contacted by a stranger might be experienced as a threat, which could provoke difficult memories. Research ethics in accordance with the Helsinki declaration (1964) were thus followed. The interviewee’s integrity was respected by a guarantee of confidentiality. This was performed by not presenting the name of the interviewee or the TV-programme in which he/she participated. Research ethics was also maintained by leaving out content considered sensitive for the interviewee, for example situations when the interviewee seemed to be exposed and out of control. The Regional Research Ethics Committee at the University of Linköping has approved the study (Reg.nr Ö 158-07).

Findings

The description of the findings begins with a short summary of the situation, i.e. suffering and relieved suffering of the tsunami catastrophe. It starts with an explication of the immediate experiences before the catastrophe followed by the three prominent features: The motion; the stillness; and the shifting of perspective.

The situation and the phenomenon

The meaning of the experiences of suffering and relieved suffering during the tsunami emerges as a drama and a tragedy. The first and shortest act of the drama lasts for a few hours up to a few days. This limited period was described by the tourists as a carefree experience, like living in paradise. However, the sense of wholeness and fullness is soon disturbed. Some people notice that something is not as it should be. However, most people this early in the morning of Boxing Day, 2004, focus on the moment at hand and that moment is described as a glimpse of paradise.

Something has happened and it is exciting or frightening. In this act of the drama, the seawater disappears and the bottom of the sea lies open. Just in that very moment, like a prehistoric monster with long arms that sucked up people, a tremendous wave throws itself over the innocent people. No time to seek protection, no time to say good-bye. The situation is like a lottery, drawing a blank or drawing a winning lot, being destroyed or being rescued. The previous experience of wholeness rapidly changes into chaos and disorder. No one or anything seems to be where it should be. Cars are in the sea, boats as well as indoor furniture are in the streets. People are not where they should be. Children are not with their parents; spouses are not together and loved ones search and call for each other. The motion of the wave is followed by a deep silence, like a frozen moment. In this act the feeling of not having been there experiencing the catastrophe is prominent. Even time is frozen; none of the victims seem to know how long time the tsunami lasted and how long time it took before they were rescued. Time seems to be a non-existing phenomenon and the catastrophe a timeless event.

This act is followed by a strong drive to restore order in order to alleviate the disorder following the wave. The victims try to grasp the ungraspable by putting themselves together, i.e. trying to interweave their own world with the world of the disaster. The lost ones are searched for and no efforts seem too demanding in the hope of finding them, alive or dead. The searches take place at the beach, at the mortuary and among the piles of corpses. The desire to know what has happened is strong because the survivors want their loved ones to end their lives in a dignified manner. The victims seem to find some relief by continuously changing perspective. This means for example staying focused while rescuing others but also keeping a distance in order to comprehend the situation. By changing perspective, the victims seem to absorb the experience of suffering and the attempts to relieve suffering by creating a more complete picture of the tsunami experience. The essence of the phenomenon is explicated by the following constituents: The motion, the stillness and a shift in perspective.

The motion

The motion includes the motion of the wave and the motion it causes among people. Early in the morning of December 26 2004, the tsunami wave was announcing its arrival by showing some signs of motion, signs that woke up some of the holiday-makers. These slight earthquake tremors were noticed when beds, porcelain, picture frames and radio masts started to shake. Hence, this morning was mostly perceived as any other morning in “paradise”; “It was as usual, we were eating breakfast”, “I woke up at eight with the bed shuddering a lot”. These early signs either were recognized as interesting, thrilling and unusual or were not noticed at all. Some interpreted the warnings as alarming or terrifying, while others felt an increased curiosity for the unusual signs of nature; “then we saw a white line, a foaming line on the horizon it seemed very exciting, saw a little fishing boat that just disappeared in the foaming wave”, “I was on the beach when I suddenly noticed that people around me became very worried”. Many of the holiday-makers misinterpreted these signs. The meaning of the word
tsunami was completely unknown to most of the people this early morning on 26 December 2004. When the huge tsunami wave drew closer to the beach it exhibited some unusual signs; “first the water disappeared further out about 30–40 m, leaving a space free of water and then it rushed in and an enormous wave came and washed away everything in its path”. The wave was described as a wall; “we could see the beach and the sea is just a wall that moves towards us and sucking up and crushing everything in its way. The scenes that took place were frightening; “There have been disastrous scenes, children that have disappeared, people who have been washed up onto rooftops 25–30 m up and falling headlong down and I have seen lots and lots of injured people”. The wave came, took and left people and their surroundings in great disarray. The tsunami wave was described as a monster that swallowed everything in its path, leaving nothing behind to save; “it was done in a moment, this wave just swept in and it only took seconds until it had passed on further in, there was nothing at all left to save”. The victims were bewildered, and experiences of inner and outer disorder were prominent. People and things were not where they should be, boats were in the streets, cars in the sea and parents were not with their children; “then we lost him [the son] and found him half an hour later”, ”Yes, it washed away apartments everywhere, the water just flowed in and people disappeared, it was a catastrophe”, “we saw houses bobbling on the water, saw people, saw children, saw buses, saw cars, everything was just a mess”.

The victims suffered physically as well as mentally, crying and screaming out of despair when not being able to find their next of kin. They were trapped in chaos, their paradise was gone and replaced by the tsunami nightmare, “everyone was just screaming and screaming and they were screaming that we are going to die because the water was coming from all directions”.

The victims looked for possibilities to escape. The fact that there was no time to consider what to do or not to do made them act spontaneously: “I had no time to think”, “I took my shoes in my hand and I shouted to [name of her son], come we must run and I ran and had the sea wave behind me”. Another victim was interviewed as early as the same day the catastrophe took place. The wave caught him and his wife in the hotel room and their struggle to survive began;

and I got hold of my wife who then slipped and got a lot of rubbish over her and we were floating with the water into the room, the water was filling up the room and my wife was left in the bathroom, the lamp went out and the door closed and I was stuck against the outer door, which opened inwards with all the rubbish including furniture and reclining chairs, everything that entered through the window and I tried to get out but was stuck there and the water was filling up towards the roof.

The stillness

When the tsunami wave withdrew a deep stillness fell over the devastated area; “it was a very shocked, silent and terrifying situation”. The feeling of being unreal was prominent. It was as if the victims had never been there and had never experienced the catastrophe; “then this gigantic wave came and it was like watching a movie”. Together with the feeling of being unreal, the victims had difficulties in really understanding what happened to them. They tried to come to terms with the situation in different ways. Words as “abnormal” were used to describe a life-event impossible to understand. The catastrophe also left the victims with a memory loss of the traumatic event; “and then everything has happened so quickly from us seeing the wave until we were on the roof, one does not remember that part very well”. The sense of abnormality situation was also increased by a lack of information about the catastrophe, which was soon replaced by rumours that were mostly not true and lacking hope. Altogether the rumours and lack of information enhanced the feelings of being trapped in a hopeless situation and of only having little information and no comprehension of the whole situation; ”there were a lot of rumours going around that the wave had been 75 m”, ” then rumours spread like wildfire that a new wave was coming”.

The victims were able to give rather detailed descriptions of what happened to them during the tsunami. There was, however, one detail that none of them was able to relate and that was how long they had suffered before being rescued. The experience of the tsunami seemed to be a timeless event;

“I don’t know, I lost my perspective of time … how long we were sitting up there but it was a few hours or two to three hours I think it was but I don’t know for sure”.

The experience of the wave showed some other features of the stillness, i.e. (1) irrevocability; (2) insufficiency; and (3) waiting. The irrevocability of the situation revealed a picture of facing a battle without any chances of winning. Facing death, realizing that time and life had come to an end, was a definite experience. This experience was
without any identifiable emergency exits; “we were sure that we were going to die”, “I had begun to swallow water and had nearly given up”, “so we didn’t feel safe up there, we were scared of dying”. A young girl described the experience of facing death as a fearless moment; “but not [was not afraid] under the water, then the only thought was that I was going to die”. The victims also expressed feelings of insufficiency and guilt in connection with efforts to rescue other victims; “but I think one always feels in a situation like this: ‘I could have done more’.”

For many of the victims the suffering after the tsunami wave swept in meant an endless wait to be rescued. This wait also entailed hiding from being caught by another wave. The victims were waiting (hiding) in the mountains, on rooftops, in the temple and in tall trees. There is stillness in this waiting. The victims did not know how long the waiting might last, if and how they were to be rescued and if their fragile haven was stable enough to carry them through the catastrophe. The endlessness of this waiting could aggregate feelings of despair; “we did not know how long time we would be sitting up there, if the house would stay put”, “we were sitting six hours up in the mountains waiting for a giant, a gigantic wave”.

A shift in perspective

In the devastating situation, some of the victims managed to stay focused and relieve suffering by making life-saving decisions, concerning themselves and others. It seemed, however, that the situation also generated problems in comprehending what was happening. One way of comprehending the situation was to seek information; “as all the others we tried to stay at the hotel and follow the information we got”. The ability to overview the situation seemed to make it possible to focus on what, when and how to cope with the situation at hand. Through these decisions, which often seemed to be taken on the spur of the moment, the lives of the victims and the lives of others were saved. The situation at hand was a trigger for creative solutions that could alleviate suffering. One example was a victim who followed an intuitive impulse when packing at home in Sweden by including a headlamp in the luggage. This headlamp was of great help when saving the lives of other victims’:

... then we took some wardrobe doors and used them as stretchers ... the headlamp was very good because later at night it became dark ... we carried them [the wounded] away, the most seriously injured on stretchers we had made and then of course it was good to have a headlamp to light up and keep your hands free.

The shift in perspective was one way of coming to terms with the devastating situation. This was done by mentally rejecting the situation, by caring for other victims and by overviewing the situation at hand. First, one way of coping with the suffering was to ”switch off”; “in a way I decided to switch off completely, of course I was scared but I put it aside and just tried to act as logically as possible”. The expression “to steel oneself” was used, and the metaphor seemed to capture a vital aspect of how the suffering of the tsunami was coped with. Steel is hard and cold in order to stay sharp and perform what has to be performed. “Steeling oneself” occurs without reflection, because the situation at hand requires quick decisions. Time is a now; “the only thing we did was what we felt we had to do, minute by minute”.

Second, during the escape the victims focused on the care for their loved ones; “I saw that he [the son] was in front of me and my partner was behind me, I heard his voice all the time”. The victims were also able to shift perspective in order to care for the needs of others, especially the needs of children who had lost their parents; “we met a family from [name of country], the children were the only ones who survived, sitting on our balcony totally devastated and my wife consoled them”, “then in the morning it appeared that there were more children on the floor above ours, who had not got any parents, there were four of them, there were two pairs of siblings from [name of place], we took care of them”. A youngster cared for his mother in Sweden;

“I was actually very smart, I’m proud of myself ... as soon as I recognized that something was wrong I sent a text message to my mother and told her that I did not know what was happening but I that was okay”.

Soon after the text message was sent, the telephone network collapsed. Many of the victims were also cared for by the Thai people. The victims expressed their gratitude and admiration for the Thai people who sacrificed themselves in order to save the lives of the tourists. An Indonesian girl saw the suffering of a tourist who had lost her shoes. The young girl did not hesitate to give her own shoes to the tourist “... she goes home, it took her twenty minutes, in order to fetch a pair of shoes for this [Swedish girl].

Third, in the act of interweaving the tsunami experience the suffering was relieved by over viewing the situation at hand. The victims were seeking protection that could alleviate their suffering by
To climb higher up, aiming for the mountains, the rooftops or the tall trees. When trying to reach a higher and safer place the victims also gained a better comprehension of what was actually happening. The comprehension of the situation saved their own lives as well as the life of others; “we sat there [on the house top] looking for signs of more sea waves and if we saw something we tried to work out if there might be more of it and then how to act”, “my daughter...we suspended her in a tree and she kept hold of the branches and the rest of us stood in a row behind the tree”.

Methodological implications

The methodological approach was useful in highlighting the meaning of human suffering and relieved suffering right in the midst of the Tsunami catastrophe in Thailand, 2004. There are however several methodological considerations to reflect upon for this study. The first concerns the choice of data source. The only possible way to encounter and to get access to the victims’ instantaneous experiences was adjudged to be via TV-media. However, according to Merleau-Ponty (1962), memories are embedded in the body and as such are memories of the then present. However, though embodied, the tsunami experience will probably change along with the victims’ reflections on a life-event that ruptured the invisible threads to their taken for granted world. The access to this world goes through reflection, because the experience of the tsunami wave has to be encapsulated in the victims’ being in the world (Heidegger, 1996). Thus, the two alternatives, collecting the instantaneous experiences through the TV-interviews or performing an interview study more than two years after the tsunami, would probably generate different results. It is most likely that the first alternative reveals more of an unreflected (an immediate) experience of the tsunami wave while the second alternative highlights “more” of the embedded experience of incorporating an altered lifeworld into the ordinary lifeworld.

Second, the issue of using edited and “mute” data has to be considered. Not being able to communicate with the interviewee, e.g. to ask for clarification, was sometimes very frustrating. The lack of communication was “a mute companion” throughout the whole research process. Variations in the TV-interviews were searched for in order to counteract this problem. The varied data and the amount of data also contributed to the reliability of the study. However, the very richness of video data raises practical and theoretical problems (cf. Sayre & Halling, 2007). Such an issue was how to deal with the complexity of data. We approached this complexity by aiming to be as careful and accurate throughout the whole research process, not the least on our prejudices and their relationship to the data and to the data analysis. Third, the TV-interviews that were included contributed to the validity of the study, since these interviews mostly were of good quality and the focus of the journalists surprisingly often agreed with the focus of research. Fourth, during the research process it became clear that we had to change our opinion as to what constitutes good data. The edited interviews were sometimes very short but still contained significant information about the research phenomenon. These descriptions had to be assessed differently when compared with a traditional interview study. The brevity of the interviews made them “abrupt” and consequently made the analysis abrupt. We had to try to adapt to these short descriptions and in a way assess them differently compared with the large amount we usually have.

A fifth aspect concerns the question of transferability, i.e. to what extent the findings can be transferred to other contexts (Polit & Beck, 2006). The level of transferability seems to be high since the results, although dealing with an abstract phenomenon, can be applicable to similar situations, i.e. to an environment of a disaster and disaster care. Sixth, and finally, the question of how the authors dealt with their pre-understanding is an important issue, not the least in phenomenological research. The first researcher was responsible for the data collection and analysis. Her approach was to keep an open mind, asking the text if her expectations about the phenomenon were dominating the analysis. When the researchers critically reflected upon the analysis and their pre-understanding they did it in terms of questioning their previous experiences from their present ones (cf. Gadamer, 1960). The pre-understanding was thus made conscious, on the one hand both by directing the understanding and on the other hand by not having any pre-understanding thus not gaining any understanding at all. By letting these two aspects of pre-understanding confront each other we could avoid making definite what is indefinite (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2004).

Philosophical reflections on the findings

The experiences of suffering and relieved suffering during the tsunami wave displayed three main features: motion, stillness and a shift in perspective. The essence of the suffering of the tsunami wave is the motion of the running, screaming and disorder as well as the stillness of the endless waiting, the feeling of insufficiency and irrevocability. The features indicate the ambiguity of the phenomenon,
both motion and stillness as well as a shift in perspective. It is, according to Merleau-Ponty (1962), between these converging experiences of the world that meaning is established. This in-between encapsulates a profound quality of meaning. Thus the shift in perspective is neither the perspective of being close or of being distant, but both (cf. Dahlberg, 2006b).

One aspect of relieved suffering during the tsunami wave took place between the two perspectives. One example entailed “steeling oneself” in order to stay sharp and to comprehend the situation. Dahlberg (2006b) illustrates the shift in perspective in terms of background and figure. To steel oneself in order to stay sharp when experiencing the tsunami wave can be seen as a figure that stands out. The background is the context of the whole situation, i.e. the context of the tsunami disaster. Another example is when victims rescued other victims. The figure in this example is thus the person in acute need of being rescued and the background is the specific situation in the context of the catastrophe. By this shift between figure and background, between focus and comprehension, the in-between was formed, thus providing meaning (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1962), i.e. how to act in order to save the life of another.

Another example is caring for other victims. The caring entailed a shift in perspective from one’s own devastated world to that of the other. The alleviation of suffering took place in this in-between world that was formed between the individual lifeworld and the world of the other. Many of the Thai victims were poor compared with the tourists. The tsunami experience transformed the individual world into a shared world where being deprived of property and of loved ones was a common experience. According to Løgstrup (1992), we are as humans interconnected with each other to the extent that we are each others’ lives. Merleau-Ponty (1962) maintains that there is no gulf between the world in the individual and the individual in the world (cf. Dahlberg, 2006a). The world of the individual and the individual in the world of the tsunami wave is a world of overwhelming motion, of stillness and of interweaving. The interweaving is derived from the shift in perspective, i.e. to come closer to the other, to take a step back and then by reflecting interweave the experiences that are forming the in-between that provides added meaning. In the devastated world of the tsunami and in the devastated world of the victims this in-between can be seen as a haven. Like the Old Testament Job (Holy Bible, 2004) the victims of the tsunami are experiencing an unexpected threat to their whole existence, i.e. to identity, dignity and security (cf. Dyregrov, 2002). Job, as is the case for the victims of the tsunami, is in a state of an inner as well as outer disorder. The victims’ immediate response to the threat is to find a safe place. The sheltered place they are looking for can be seen as a kind of haven, which according to Roxberg (2005), Roxberg et al. (2008) characterizes a caring consolation, which alleviates suffering.

The world of the tsunami seems to encapsulate something that might be termed as God’s game referring to an act of God. Job in the Old Testament (Holy Bible, 2004) felt that God was playing an unjust game with him. The victims of the tsunami suffered from what might be experienced as an unjust act of God. The game seems to be predetermined. In this game the victims’ chances of winning are close to zero, they are trying to reshape the fragmented pieces of themselves, their loved ones and material things. Nothing is as it has been before the wave and in this new landscape; the victims are trying to alleviate their suffering by establishing some kind of order. It seems that in the victims’ world of both external and internal disorder they are forced to reconstruct their lifeworlds. By creating some kind of order among the fragmented pieces of their world, each individual attempts to reshape his/her life. The pieces of their external and internal worlds to some extent can be re-constructed and their suffering alleviated. Job (Holy Bible, 2004) might also be seen as working on his suffering by shifting between figure and background. The shift in perspective is especially prominent at the end of the book (ch. 38–41), when God talks to him out of the whirlwind. Job shifts from be on the offensive to being quiet and passive (Job 42:1–6). The interpretations of his quietness diverges (Keel, 1978; Mettinger, 1992; Fox, 1981; Roxberg, 2005) but in light of the present study, Job reconstructs his lifeworld. This shift in perspective makes him “see” the whole in the fragmented pieces of his life situation and vice versa, just as for the victims of the tsunami in Thailand 2004.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) maintains that the body is a lived body that encapsulates time and place. Time is now. In every moment of a movement, a person is conscious of what happened the moment before. This before is, however, encapsulated in the now. In the light of Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) philosophy the tsunami experience is only forgotten in its chronological but not in its phenomenological sense. This might explain why the victims are able to answer the question “what happened” but not “for how long” the experience of the tsunami lasted. It might also be assumed that since time is a lived time the future experience of the tsunami will remain as it was experienced. Guilt was a common experience among the victims and guilt is described as a common reaction to disaster (cf. Michel et al., 2002; Dyregrov,
2002). In a lifeworld perspective, the feeling of guilt will stay alive as at present, with links to the future and to the past. Time as a lived now is also described in the field of religious psychology. One of the characteristics of an intense religious vision is that it is chronologically timeless and is restoring order in chaos (Ellwood, 1980; Geels, 1991). What the tsunami experience and religious vision have in common is that they are intensely lived, at the edge of our very existence.

For Jaspers (1963) life is to live the “limit-experiences” (cf. Ricoeur, 1975). The limitations are experienced as unsolvable situations, seen as being at the boundary of our very existence. This boundary experience is an external situation that presents the contradiction of life itself. A person’s suffering from the tsunami can be understood as such an experience. Jaspers (1963) means that a limit-experience also includes forces that creates possibilities, such as meaning and growth. One example of the powerful forces of a limit-experience is when the victims are searching for their loved ones, at the mortuary or among piles of corpses hoping to find them alive or dead. The efforts, though strenuous, are not thought of as such. Jaspers (1963, 1997) maintains that the individual is fulfilled in the authentic struggle for love. The individual for Jaspers (op cit.) is essentially invisible for those that do not love him/her. In that sense, the individual is the one among the many of a crowd.

The tsunami disaster might be seen as impersonal but in the victims’ struggle to find their loved ones a glimpse of the struggle for and fulfilment of love is revealed. This struggle is also the lived personalisation of the tsunami catastrophe being as anonymous corpses are loved persons, who are loved and cared for. The consolation in this struggle is the presence of human love (cf. Roxberg, 2005; Roxberg et al., 2008). This is especially prominent in situations when victims are struggling to preserve the dignity of the deceased person in the catastrophe. The ambiguity of the experience of suffering and relieved suffering during the tsunami seems to encapsulate their love for the others. This love seems to bring humanity to a dehumanized world, to the individual in the tsunami world and to the world in the individual as experienced during the tsunami catastrophe.

Conclusions and implications

The findings of the study show that the essence of suffering and relieved suffering during the tsunami catastrophe in Thailand 2004 is a complex of converging experiences, between motion and stillness and between shifts in perspective. The chosen theoretical framework and methodology made it possible to some extent reveal the invisible threads between the world of the victims and the world of the tsunami catastrophe. The context of the victims’ tsunami experience is in its phenomenological sense a break in the threads that link to the ordinary life and to the world that is taken for granted. By establishing some kind of order among the pieces of the world of the disaster the world of the individual is also to some extent brought together. Based on the findings of the study the implications for care are first to acknowledge the victims’ sense of time as now. This means that the experience of the tsunami will be a faithful follower of the victims as an embedded and lived experience that can be recalled and relived throughout their lives. Second, in the midst of the dehumanization of the catastrophe “a wave” of humanity and fulfilment of love sweeps in. This aspect is part of the very complex experience of the catastrophe that is most important for healthcare professionals to recognize and reflect upon when encountering the victims of a catastrophe. Third, by coming closer, taking a step back and reflecting, meaning can be created, which can generate an alleviation of human suffering. It is assumed that this shift in perspective for the victims, can, also be a way of alleviating their suffering when they in the future work on the memories of the catastrophe. This may also provide an indication for further research, i.e. investigating how suffering and relieved suffering is experienced and encountered when further time has passed.

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