'The Individual in the World - The World in the Individual':
Towards a Human Science Phenomenology that Includes the Social World

by **Karin Dahlberg**

Abstract

Human science researchers tend to be targeted for critique on the grounds that their approach is too individualistic to take due cognisance of societal and political influences. What is accordingly advocated is that the phenomenological and so-called romantic theories should be abandoned in favour of analytic or continental theories that have as their main focus the system, the group, the society, and the various influences of the social world on the existential reality of the individual.

Without trying to invalidate these social science strategies, this paper attempts to show that it is not necessary to surrender phenomenology in order to understand not only the individual, but also the social world in which individuals live. It is argued that the desired goal of a less individualistic human science's theoretical basis can still be founded in phenomenology, in that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, which has its origin in Husserlian phenomenology, provides us with an adequate ontology for understanding human existence more comprehensively. Merleau-Ponty's ontological philosophy elucidates the in-between world, that structure of existence where the individual cannot be separated from her/his world context. In his exploration of the reversibility of existence, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that there is no ontological gulf between the individual and the social world. Instead, the world is 'in' the individual as much as the individual is 'in' the world. With this phenomenological epistemology, it is argued, it is possible to generate research that is capable "of more than a frozen existence", as Merleau-Ponty puts it.

Introduction

As human science researchers, every now and then we become targets of critique centred on the charge that we are too individualistic to be duly cognizant of societal and political influences. We are advised to let go of the phenomenological and so-called romantic theories in favour of analytic - or, for that matter, continental - theories that have as their main focus the system, the group, the society, and the various influences of the social world on individual existence.

Without trying to invalidate these social science strategies, I want to show that the desired goal of a less individualistic human science's theoretical basis can still be founded in phenomenology. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, which originated in Husserlian phenomenology, provides us with an ontology that very adequately serves as the foundation for understanding human existence, and how we always *are to our world,* as Merleau-Ponty puts it. His writings make clear that his ontological philosophy, far from being anthropology, is what we need in order to understand the in-between world, that structure of existence where the individual cannot be separated from her/his world context. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty provides adequate evidence of how the world is *in* the individual as much as the

individual is *in* the world. He clearly shows that the very idea of separating 'absence' from 'presence' is false, and that, in order to understand these aspects of existence, we must relate them to each other, seeing them as aspects of the "flesh of the world". The epistemology that is needed when we want to consider human science as social science is to be found in Merleau-Ponty's exploration of the reversibility of existence.

When I embarked on this paper, my aim was to make explicit how human science researchers, based in phenomenology, can use "observation" as a means to find implicit and bodily-embedded knowledge, instead of practising only "chair interviewing". However, as this project progressed, I found that the answers went beyond the initial question, and consequently this paper addresses not only observational research, but epistemological questions in human science research in general. What is implied is that answering questions about observation at the same time means answering questions about how we as humans relate to our world. And answering questions about how we as humans relate to our world means answering questions about observation.

The Connectedness of Existence

Having worked with phenomenological philosophy for quite some years, I easily found preliminary answers to the question of how observation can be a means to access implicit knowledge, as well as to the question of individuals' relationship to the social world in phenomenological ontology, and more specifically in the connectedness of existence. Everything that is, is so because of everything else that exists. All of us, all our experiences, all my thoughts, your thoughts "and the thoughts of others are caught up in the fabric of one sole being", as Merleau-Ponty (1948/1968, p. 110) says. We all belong to being as "flesh of the world", connected with everything and everyone. When we live, talk or act, we do that with all that we are; "everyone speaks, all live and gesticulate within being" (ibid., p. 119). This being, the flesh of the world, which connects all and everything, is "thick" and very much present in what is and what happens, but at the same time it is "silent" and "invisible". And we have to try and learn to see the invisible, to listen to that which is silent; we have to disclose

> ... Being that is not posited because it has no need to be, because it is silently behind all our affirmations, negations, and even behind all formulated questions; not that it is a matter of imprisoning it in our chatter, but because philosophy is the reconversion

of silence and speech into one another: "It is the experience … still mute which we are concerned with leading to the pure expression of its own meaning." (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/1968, p. 129, citing Husserl, 1929)

Being, the invisible and mute fabric of meaning, is the background against which phenomena and their meanings have the possibility of standing out as figures. Consequently, the visible cannot be understood without its invisible side, in the same way as the invisible cannot be understood without the visible figure, now as background. This insight constitutes the basis of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, and it has the power to form our understanding of human science research.

In this paper I draw on the explicit ideas initially put forward by Merleau-Ponty. However, on reading Husserl, we find the notion of an existential connectedness that obviously inspired Merleau-Ponty. In the quotation above, Merleau-Ponty refers to Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*. Further, Husserl explores "being in the world" (Husserl, 1913/1998, p. 7), and he puts forward the idea that "No thing has its individuality in itself" (Husserl, 1928/2000, p. 313). He further argues that the lifeworld and intentionality are characterized by their open horizons (Husserl, 1936/1970, 1920-25/2001).

It thus seems that phenomenology offers an ambiguous, but nevertheless well founded and well explored, notion of "the flesh of the world", and that this is what we need to build upon when we move further into the realms of human science research and begin to explore the relationship between *the individual* and *the social*, and, at the same time, the idea of *observation*. However, in the light of the insight that everything is connected, we face new problems: how is it at all possible to see, understand and make explicit any part of this big web? How can we as researchers understand something that we also are part of?

To Be Distant and Come Closer

In order to see the world, its phenomena and its meanings, in order to let the world of meanings speak and to listen in, we can and we must take a step back (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/1968). By slackening "the threads of meaning", we create a distance from the world, in order not to be absorbed by it and take for granted that which seems so commonplace and well known (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1995). We know from everyday experience that sometimes we don't see clearly because we are too close to the phenomenon

in focus. Being in the midst of a big city we see some details of it, its streets, some buildings, and some people who are there, but we don't see the big lines of the city, its proportions or its size, or, for example, how far it is from the sea. To come to that understanding we need to find a distant outlook, a place from where we have a view that allows for the big lines. In the same way, we need a distance from a sheet with text, for being too close the sight is blurred and the text makes no sense. On the other hand, being too far away, we also can't see what we look for, whether the phenomenon is a city or a text.

The answer to the question as to whether we should be close or distant in relation to the phenomenon that we investigate is the typical one for phenomenology: it is not either-or, but both-and. To understand lifeworld phenomena we must be distant *and* close, sometimes at the same time. Phenomenologically inspired research implies that we never stand still, but keep on moving. We move with the phenomena and their meanings, and move between figures and backgrounds. We even have to interchange figures and backgrounds: as soon as there is something that becomes visible to us we must also try to see the invisible side; when seeing a figure against a particular background, we have to turn it around and view the background, or parts of it, as figure, against the earlier figure, now as background. We must dwell with the phenomenon in order to find the way that best supports the meanings to be made explicit.

We now begin to see that there is never one right distance or perspective. Merleau-Ponty (1948/1968, 1945/1995) showed us that meanings are infinite and contextual (Dahlberg, 2006). Consequently, our focus as researchers must be on *how* we choose our viewpoints, outlooks, distances and perspectives when we try to understand something, and *how* we make phenomena and their meanings explicit. We must adopt an awareness that encourages us to "step back" from the immediate involvement with the world, but in a way that at the same time brings us closer to its meanings (cf. Gadamer, 1960/1995).

To use observation as a means of accessing research data is one way to practise what we now know about the existential network. The method of observation seems to accord with the aim of investigating phenomena that are embedded and implicit, and therefore hard to access, as well as hard to verbalise.

When we as researchers observe, we participate in the phenomenal events when the phenomenon is alive and 'in action'.

Participation in Phenomenal Events

It can be seen from two projects in which the notion of observation was implemented how observation as direct participation in phenomenal events can contribute meanings that may not become apparent in, for example, the process of interviewing. In these two empirical examples, as well as in a third one, we can see that participation in phenomenal events provides a means by which we can illuminate both the individual and the social world. In the first two examples, we can see the need to be empirically open to embodied, embedded knowledge. The second and, in particular, the third examples also show how the social world presents itself.

In a research project (Dahlberg, 1997), I participated in a physiotherapeutic practice with the aim of understanding how patients with muscular-skeletal illnesses benefited from the care, which was founded in an approach focusing on self-training. The idea was that these patients' suffering is best reduced by their exercises in a "physiotherapy gym" on a regular basis. Besides the participation, I also conducted individual interviews with patients. While the interviewing elucidated important meanings of the care, it was in the observation of the patients in the physio-therapeutic setting that I could grasp the importance of the exercises for their sense of embodiedness and "bodily balance", meanings that were made explicit by their movements and other bodily, not least facial, expressions. In the dressing room, I could also listen to the female patients' immediate and spontaneous comments following the exercises, which gave me access to important experiences and insights about the meaning of this particular form of care.

In another project (Wireklint Sundström, 2005), this time focusing on emergency care, the researcher found in the participative part of her research that the smooth, often wordless, co-working between two ambulance carers was of extreme importance, something that was not mentioned at all in the interviews that she had conducted with them. Our understanding of this was that the meaning of their togetherness, the co-operation of the colleagues, is embedded and hidden in the ambulance care. The ambulance carers' dependence on each other is so crucial, but also so taken for granted, that they don't come to speak of it. They might not even have words for the depth of the meanings of their communion. The researcher, who could adopt a more distanced perspective than the carers, could see patterns that were invisible to those more directly involved.

In both the projects referred to above, the research included observation, and meanings, invisible in other

sources of data, were elicited. However, a similar outcome was evident in a project where we aimed at understanding the violent encounter in psychiatric care (Carlsson, 2004; Carlsson et al., 2006), and where we, due to ethical reasons, chose interviewing as the main means of eliciting data. Unlike earlier research, which has focused upon the aggressive patients, these findings show that "violent encounter" is not a phenomenon in itself, but something that exists in relation to the more general care; the violent encounter is very much *of* the care. We could very clearly see the patients' existential fragility that came into play when they wanted contact with carers in order to get relief from anxiety, which otherwise could result in an outburst of aggression. However, it happened instead that patients were met by carers that avoided them and their suffering. The patients in our study expressed how acutely they sensed that they were on a different level from the carers, who sometimes demonstrated their superiority, *that they are in charge*, for example by rattling the bunch of keys, or by not allowing patients to have the door unlocked, but forcing them to beg for it. The patients also expressed the view that carers prefer to spend time with each other rather than being with the patients. From the point of view of the patients, the focus of the carer is other carers, the care that the patients seek is given to other carers. The patients are left on the outside looking in, excluded from, and without being able to participate in, the community of carers. In our analysis we saw how the violent encounters are potentiated by care that is characterized by non-caring, escaping carers, and care that is not primarily aimed at the well-being of the patients and their lives. An especially forceful factor precipitating the occurrence of the violence is the relationship between the characteristics of the psychiatric care which structure its form.

In this latter project in particular, but also in the other two projects described, it is evident how well the particular meanings of the phenomena studied were found to stand out as figures against the contexts as backgrounds. The embodied experiences of the physiotherapeutic care, the co-operation of the ambulance carers, as well as the violent encounter in psychiatric care, are explicit examples of phenomena that must be understood in their contexts.

The above-mentioned experiences indicate that, for some research projects, "chair interviewing" is not enough. In order to illuminate phenomena of the lifeworld that are characterised by embodied and embedded meanings, researchers must be willing to participate directly in such phenomenal events that display the depth of the phenomenon and its contexts. Through research participation in phenomenal events,

we gain information that is difficult to discover in conventional interview situations: we can see interactions and communication taking place before us, we can see people's behaviour, their gestures and other embodied expressions, in a direct relationship with the phenomenon that we aim at understanding.

The meanings of the phenomenon "violent encounter" could, however, be illuminated by research that was based on interviews. Ethical considerations became obstacles for the research to include more direct participation in the phenomenal events. Exploring how that project was accomplished we can conclude, firstly, that the main researcher in this project is a very skilled interviewer. Secondly, an important reason for the multi-faceted findings that emerged, despite the lack of direct participation, was the use of re-enactment interviewing, where implementing a form of psycho-drama enabled us to get closer to the lived, embodied and contextual experience (Carlsson et al., 2002; Drew, 1993). Re-enactment interviewing can be understood as an in-between means of doing research, which bears characteristics of both interviewing and direct participation in phenomenal events. It seems to have the power of opening up embodied experiences and concretely supports the interview aim to intentionally move between different temporal and spatial dimensions.

However, we have learnt from life that, at the same time as we gain something, we also lose something; with the "pro" come the "cons". Let us get ready for one more methodological challenge: how to deal with "the more".

Taking Care of "The More"

Through what I describe above as direct participation in phenomenal events, we gain access to meanings embedded in the relationship between the phenomena and their contexts. At the same time, we encounter other problems, of a kind not encountered in the same way in, for example, interviewing. In particular, there are two kinds of problems which exist in all research, but that become especially obvious in the process of observation as direct participation in phenomenal events:

- there are many more intentional objects than the phenomenon;
- it is the researcher who words the experiences.

Finally, as a phenomenological approach to "the more", I suggest that it is of importance

- to "bridle" the evolving understanding in order not to get "too much".

Intentional Objects Exceed the Phenomenon
In all human science research, and especially in participative research, there is always "the more" to it, as Gendlin says (see Todres, 2004). Central to the phenomenological understanding of the lifeworld is the awareness that we always speak from somewhere, from where we are situated in the midst of life (Husserl, 1936/1970; Merleau-Ponty, 1948/1968). As mentioned earlier, being human means that we are always already involved in a world, and connected with everything else that exists, prior to starting to reflect on our existence. There is thus always a surplus of meaning in all analysis.

The surplus of meaning must first of all be understood as a rich contribution to the development of new understanding in research. It is through this that we see the variations and nuances of meanings, and, consequently, patterns of meaning (Dahlberg, 2006). However, the surplus of meaning is also a problematic and challenging aspect of research, in that we run the risk of getting not only "the more" but "too much". I remember well the interview of a former PhD student, in which the informant, who was supposed to talk about the phenomenon of "rest", instead extensively described his fantastic lawn-mower. The risk of getting too much obviously exists in interviews, but seems to be more serious in observation as phenomenal participation, where we cannot "delimit an area of interest" as we can in interviews by directing questions (cf. Gadamer, 1960/1995). In observation we get "the whole picture" - for better or for worse. And how, then, can we sort out what meanings there are, and distinguish what meanings belong to the focal phenomenon, the figure, and what meanings belong to the background?

Practising phenomenology, we have already given up the positivistic idea of pure, objectivistic observation, which is never the case, neither in human science nor in natural science. We learned from Husserl's early theory, present in all his philosophy, how we always experience something *as* something, something that has meaning for us. Merleau-Ponty (1969/1991b) presents a compelling example in his text about indirect language, drawing on Malraux, illustrating how we already in perception stylise our experience, and how "thick" with meaning it is:

> A woman passing by is not first and foremost a corporeal contour for me, a coloured mannequin, a spectacle in a given spot. She is "an individual, sentimental, sexual expression". She is flesh in its full presence, with its vigour and weakness there in her walk or the click of her heel on the ground. She is a unique way of varying

the accent of feminine being and thus of human being. (p. 59)

It is characteristic of the human gesture to signify beyond its simple factual existence and to inaugurate meaning. Furthermore, according to Merleau-Ponty (1969/1991b), all gestures "arise from a single syntax" (p. 80), and thus it follows, as Merleau-Ponty asserts, "that every gesture is *comparable* to all others" (p. 79). If I, for example, see a smile on another person's face, I assume first of all that it is not just a facial movement, but something that means that this person is happy in some way or another. Secondly, I can assume that this other person is happy in about the same way as I would be when having that smile on my face. On the one hand, the surplus of meaning in perception and its foundation in a single syntax thus implies that, as a bottom line, it is not a problem to understand another human. On the other hand, it also constitutes a problem for research, because we are not interested in *any* meaning.

Merleau-Ponty (1948/1968) says about a recorded conversation:

> The conversation reproduced exactly is no longer what it was while we were living it. It lacks the presence of those who were speaking, the whole surplus of meaning yielded by the gestures and faces that especially give the impression of something happening, of a discovery and continuous innovation. The conversation no longer exists. It does not ramify in all directions - it is flattened out in the single dimension of sound. Instead of summoning our whole being, it does no more than touch us lightly by ear. (p. 65)

Not least when researchers participate directly in phenomenal events, there is a great need to pay attention to all the nuances and the richness of meaning, which might vary with the perspectives and distances that the researchers adopt. Furthermore, researchers must be aware that meanings in a way belong to their context. We have to see particular phenomena in human science research together with their contexts. What this implies is that even the context, even "the more", must be seen as *of* the phenomenon.

The Researcher Words the Experiences
Following Merleau-Ponty (1948/1968), we can say that what we hope to see when we participate in phenomenal events is that which might be inaccessible, or at least hard to reach, by means of words, as mentioned above. However, running into

the need sooner or later of having to translate into words what we observe, what we grasp by means of indirect language, we face the second problem that needs to be illuminated here. We must take a closer look at what Heidegger (1927/1998, p. 204) refers to as "the wordly" side of existence.

Words help us understand existence and its meanings. One central aim of human science research is to verbalize the more or less silent and hidden parts of human existence. We put into words, explore and describe existential phenomena such as suffering, wellness, learning, alienation, anxiety and loneliness, along with their essences, their meanings and characteristics. In wording others' experiences, we may, as researchers, be in a position to highlight something meaningful about the phenomenon and the social world in which it is 'swimming'. However, "the more", the infiniteness that characterizes the lifeworld and its meaning, has also to do with the infiniteness of language. When we in our research describe a phenomenon through others' lived experience, we have to be aware that, while some words can lead us closer to a phenomenon and its meanings, other words can lead us away from it, even if in the dictionary they are presented as synonyms. (This is particularly evident when I as a Swede must communicate my research in English.)

The arrival at this point gives rise to a question about whose words should be in play in research. In, for example, interviews, the interviewees are the ones who give words to their experiences, especially in phenomenologically directed interviews, where we support the interviewees to reflect upon their experience, to give several lived examples, and to deepen the perspective. The interviewees can be given the opportunity to carefully and sincerely choose the words with which to describe the phenomenon in question and their lived experience of it. In contrast, when we are participating directly in phenomenal events, our primary grasp of the lived phenomenon is gained not by means of words, but through watching people in, for example, their everyday living. Their bodily gestures and activities convey meaning that we can understand linguistically. However, it is then *we*, the researchers, that give words to the experiences, lived by the others but only displayed in front of us (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1995). This is good, but not good enough. As researchers, aware of the meanings of the lived world, we need also to talk to the people we are observing. We need *their* narratives, *their* ways of wording their experiences, of living the phenomenon. While thus needing the words of those whose lived reality we aim to explicate, as researchers we still require highly developed language skills, in the sense that we must

have words for, and be sensitive enough to nuances to describe, the full spectrum of meaning.

If we as researchers are the ones that give words to the presumed lived experience, we must be aware that the concern is not only about the words with which we convey the lived world to readers of human science research reports, but also about how we word the meanings *within* the research. Merleau-Ponty (1964/1991a) argues that words bring out thoughts as much as thoughts lead to words. Some words will lead us closer to the phenomenon in question and its meanings, while other words will make us more remote. Consequently, we must pay attention to how we linguistically deal with data, which words we use and what meanings we allow them to illuminate. We must be alert to the risk that we might be too influenced by our own understanding of the phenomenon and use the words that are closest to us, and which, for example, we find comfortable enough to use.

The Need to "Bridle" the Evolving Understanding
The emphasis on the surplus of meanings and the linguistic aspects of participative research points to the necessity of "bridling" the evolving understanding, so that meanings do not come too carelessly or glibly, so that we do not make definite what is indefinite (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003). We noted earlier how the approach to this closeness-distance dilemma was best understood phenomenologically as a "movement with" the phenomenon, where we at the same time recognize the involvement with the investigated phenomenon and its meaning(s). This is what "bridling" of the evolving understanding basically means; it means to critically reflect upon the whole phenomenal event when meanings come into being.

Summing up

The social world and being is the invisible and mute fabric of meaning that is the background against which individuals and particular phenomena have the possibility of standing out as figures. It is our involvement in the world that constitutes the possibility for researchers to see and explicate the invisible, or to put into words that which is mute. On the other hand, it is the very same involvement that brings "the more" that also can bring "too much" to the research.

Our direct access to the world makes us think that what we see is what it seems to be. Consequently, researchers need to "bridle" the evolving understanding so that their research captures "the more" without including "too much".

In this paper I have attempted to show that we do not have to surrender phenomenology in order to understand not only the individual, but also the social world in which individuals live. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of "the flesh of the world" teaches us that there is no ontological gulf between the individual and the social world. Instead, he argues that the world is in the individual as much as the individual is in the world. The lifeworld, the world as we live it, includes the visible and the invisible, as much as it includes the social world. However, the same philosophy teaches us that going to the things themselves and participating in the phenomenal events is not as easy as it perhaps sounds. We must learn how to come close enough to the phenomenon while at the same time being distant and reflective. We must be aware of the foundational need to "word" the lived experiences, at the same time as being aware of how easy it is to get lost in the infiniteness. We must want "the more" but beware of getting "too much". Finally, as indicated by Merleau-Ponty, but indeed also by Husserl, we must learn how to bridle the evolving understanding so that we do not make definite what is indefinite.

The urge to choose 'the right' perspective, both close enough and distant enough, does not mean, as it may sound, to stand still. On the contrary, it means to keep on moving, sensitively following the phenomenon. In part, Merleau-Ponty's appreciation of Husserl arises from the fact that Husserl was the master of starting all over again, time after time. This is something we can learn from: when we see something, when we have reached an understanding, we must begin again, travel the road of trying to understand again and again. But mind, this is not a beginning all over again that brings us back to the same starting point, it is not about travelling the same road over and over again: it is a beginning that is a continuation.

Summing up this analysis, we can conclude that the challenge for all researchers is to not let the conversation die - and, in particular, not to kill it. Applying Merleau-Ponty's (1948/1968) argument about art, we can say that research "must have the capacity for more than a frozen existence. It must have the capacity for a sublimated existence, one more true than truth itself" (p. 66). As researchers, we must thus be sensitive to the phenomenon in all its subtly nuanced revelation of itself and learn how to preserve and make visible the rich and thick meanings that are embedded in the flesh, that are the invisible flesh.

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About the Author

Karin Dahlberg has been Professor of Caring Science in the School of Health Sciences and Social Work at Växjö University in Sweden since 2000. She has degrees in nursing (psychiatric care) and education, with her doctoral degree in pedagogy (educational theory/research). Växjö University's PhD programme in caring science, of which she is in charge, is an interdisciplinary programme, which developed from within the nursing profession, with its central focus on the patient's/client's perspective on his/her suffering and well-being, and the care and treatments received, as well as on patients'/clients' participation in their health and care. Professor Dahlberg also serves as the Scientific Leader of the Centre for Lifeworld Research. Her research is mostly in the area of continental epistemology, which serves as a source for the development of suitable research approaches to support analysis in the caring science field.

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