Lifeworld hermeneutics: An approach and a method for research on existential issues in caring science

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Abstract

**Background and aim:** The aim of the present article was to elaborate on a research approach and method called ‘lifeworld hermeneutics’. Significant to lifeworld hermeneutics is that interpretation is the main methodological instrument for explaining and understanding existential research questions and lived experiences. From a caring science perspective, this often refers to research that aims to gain a deeper understanding of existential phenomena and issues, such as existential meaning of health, well-being, homelessness, lostness, suffering and ageing, as well as what it means to experience unhealthiness and illness, the need for care, and caring that responds to such needs.

**Design:** Theoretical paper.

**Result:** The article briefly covers ontology and epistemology that clarifies the meaning and importance of a lifeworld hermeneutic attitude. This is followed by suggestions for how to perform a lifeworld hermeneutic study, expressed in relation to methodological principles for the interpretation, validation and structuring of interpretations. Thereafter, follow reflections on how to use theoretical or philosophical support to develop and deepen existential interpretations. The findings of lifeworld hermeneutic research consist of existential interpretations where the researcher, with an open and pliable attitude towards the phenomenon and the aim of the study, clarifies, explains and suggests new ways of understanding participants' lived experiences; the researcher should maintain such an attitude towards their understanding of the phenomenon as well.

**Conclusion:** The lifeworld hermeneutical approach and method described in this article makes it possible to further deepen the understanding and knowledge about existential issues that is relevant for caring and caring science.

**KEYWORDS**
caring science, existential issues, interpretation, lifeworld hermeneutics, lived experiences, meaning
RESEARCH ON EXISTENTIAL ISSUES AND LIVED EXPERIENCES WITHIN THE CARING SCIENCE

To live means to relate both to oneself and to other people in everyday life and to experience significant moments in life. In life, existential questions are constantly present, but moments such as leaving school, starting work, becoming a parent and becoming old foreground such questions. Existential questions concern life and life events and can be questions about Who am I? How do I want to live my life? What is the meaning of my life? How can I live my life in a meaningful way? Even if existential questions characterise everyday life, there are times when such issues become especially significant and even more prominent. Suffering from unhealthiness and illness can evoke existential questions such as those concerning one’s state of health, insights into limitations due to illness, worries about the finality of life and thoughts about death that must be considered in a caring situation and/or in caring science research in order to develop caring practices that strengthen patient health and well-being.

The aim of the present article is to elaborate on a research approach and method called ‘lifeworld hermeneutics’. We provide suggestions for how existential caring issues can be studied, with interpretation serving as the main analytical tool. Existential philosophy, hermeneutics, phenomenology and lifeworld theory comprise ontology and epistemology in the development of a lifeworld hermeneutic attitude and act as sources of inspiration for analysis and discussion.

Qualitative research methods are particularly suitable for caring science research because they can contribute to the existential knowledge necessary to understand the patient suffering from unhealthiness and illness, as well as address existential phenomena, such as health, well-being, homelessness, lostness in life, suffering and ageing in order to develop caring practices that promote health and well-being [1, 2].

ONTONLOGICAL AND EPSEMÓELOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR LIFEWORLD HERMENEUTICS

Understanding the existential issues and lived experiences of a human being in a specific life situation requires ontological and epistemological foundations and reflections for comprehending what it means to be human and how human understanding is possible. The lifeworld hermeneutical approach and method described in this article, therefore, take its ontological and epistemological point of departure from existential philosophy, hermeneutics, phenomenology and lifeworld theory, in which phenomena, meanings, lived experiences and the lifeworld are important.

Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological ‘lifeworld theory’ provides an important ontological and epistemological foundation [3, 4] for lifeworld hermeneutics. Lifeworld theory describes the world that means something to us as humans in an original and individual way, identifying the deeper levels of lived experiences as preceding any abstractions or theories. One’s lifeworld may be perceived as a shared world, but that is only part of the truth. It also seems fair to assume a deeper level, which is unique and depends on exclusive individual lived experiences. In these terms, it is possible to understand another human being to some extent—but never quite completely. Husserl [3, 4] means that when we are intentional and understand the meaning of something as something, a phenomenon in the phenomenological sense reveals itself to us. A phenomenon can be understood as ‘something as it is experienced or lived by a human being’. A phenomenon is something outside oneself: an object, a matter or any other thing as it presents itself for human consciousness [3, 4]. According to Husserl, this way of understanding is a characteristic of our ‘natural attitude’, which is a pre-reflected and taken-for-granted attitude towards understanding, in which human beings are immersed. Intentionality and the natural attitude are prerequisites to understanding anything in human life. Consequently, in everyday life, we often draw on our own lifeworld when we try to understand others. In lifeworld hermeneutics in which the aim is to deeply understand the existential world of another person, this requires a scientific understanding. Thus, there is a need to be aware of and reflect on how intentionality and natural attitude influence the understanding of other human beings’ experiences.

Another important ontological and epistemological foundation for lifeworld hermeneutics is Martin Heidegger’s [5] ideas about human understanding as an existential issue. Despite their initial close cooperation, Heidegger [5] considered that Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy, including lifeworld theory, neglected the ontology of human existence. According to Heidegger, our unique ability to interpret meaning is fundamental to humanity. He went so far as to emphasise interpretation as an ontological part of humankind’s Being, claiming that interpretation and understanding are what make humans human.

Hans-Georg Gadamer’s [6] hermeneutical ideas about human understanding provide another epistemological foundation for lifeworld hermeneutics. Gadamer took as his starting point both Husserl’s theory of the lifeworld and Heidegger’s philosophy of Being when he analysed how human understanding emerges. He addressed the
conditions of how we understand meanings and why we understand them as we do. For the latter, he emphasized that our prejudices (hereinafter referred to as pre-understanding) have a decisive influence on how we perceive and understand. Our pre-understanding is based on the traditions in which we live, which form our ‘horizons of understanding’ [6, p. 302]. Calling for reflection about this, Gadamer advised empirical researchers to endeavor to the utmost to become aware of their personal *wirkungsgeschichte* (often translated as ‘history of effect’ [i.e., our own life story]; 6, p. 300) and thereby diminish the risk of pre-understanding influencing research in an uncontrolled way. Therefore, research based on interpretations poses a challenge in the struggle to see something new or something other than the researcher’s own pre-understanding [7] and others the researcher already knows [8–12]. Although Gadamer never spoke of interpretation as a research method, he has inspired many hermeneutically-minded caring science researchers in their attempts to apply a hermeneutic approach in empirical research on existential issues in health care [2, 13–15].

Another source of epistemological foundation for lifeworld hermeneutics is a philosopher from the French hermeneutic tradition, Paul Ricoeur [16, 17]. Like Heidegger [5] and Gadamer [6] before him, Ricoeur concluded that modern hermeneutics is an extension of phenomenology, with a focus on what something means to someone. In turn, he was interested in the lived experiences of signs, symbols, metaphors, and ethics [17]. For Ricoeur, the interpretative process is based on dialectic and cumulative reading in which both explanation and understanding are included in existential interpretations [16]. However, explanations in a lifeworld hermeneutical study, according to Ricoeur, are not about cause and effect but intentional explanations, which illuminate how and why we understand and experience as we do [17].

### A LIFEWORLD HERMENEUTIC ATTITUDE

A lifeworld hermeneutical study takes its ontological and epistemological point of departure from the above-mentioned ideas: from Husserl’s lifeworld perspective [3], Heidegger’s ideas of interpretation [5], and Gadamer’s immersion in human understanding [6]. The concrete way of working that we propose is also influenced by Ricoeur [16, 17]. In the following, we will elaborate and deepen the attitude that represents the central methodological principle during the whole research process in a lifeworld hermeneutical study.

According to Gadamer [6], a hermeneutic attitude is based on openness towards the phenomenon and aim of a study together with striving to unveil the ‘otherness’ (i.e., something other than the researcher’s pre-understanding) (p. 269). Another way to describe this is emphasizing the necessity of reaching beyond one’s natural attitude [3] in favour of a reflective and problematizing stance. The natural attitude is our pre-reflective, everyday understanding of the world. There is a need to reflect on and problematize how pre-understanding, in terms of the natural attitude, may influence one’s understanding of research throughout the whole research process. Yet, as it is seldom possible to be totally aware of one’s entire pre-understanding concerning a given phenomenon or aim of a study, we believe that text about a researcher’s pre-understanding usually does not add relevant information to a reported study. Instead, the researcher should reflect on how to be aware of and handle pre-understanding when interpreting the meanings of a phenomenon in a research study [7]. This is a challenge since this pre-understanding is part of the lifeworld and cannot be put aside. Pre-understanding is more or less conscious for the researcher and therefore not always available to reflect over. Pre-understanding is a prerequisite to understanding anything at all but is also a threat to validity in qualitative research. The researcher needs to reflect on and problematize how a researched phenomenon reveals itself in one’s own lifeworld (natural attitude) in order to have a scientific stance [7].

In terms of being open, Gadamer also seems to imply that the researcher should not blindly follow an exact method or analytical steps formulated beforehand, instead being pliable towards the phenomenon. It is important to follow the phenomenon and aim of the study by staying open and responsive to the data. For example, the creative imagination described by Gadamer [18] is one way to reach beyond given meanings. Imagination during analysis requires openness to new meanings and interpretations that are not obvious or self-evident. Sometimes, such an attitude requires the courage to step outside well-known paths, daring to explain a phenomenon in research data that is in contrast to one’s pre-understanding or values that are currently generally accepted. Creative imaginative aspects of an interpretative analysis involve repeated efforts in an ongoing process that opens up the previously unknown.

In a hermeneutic attitude, according to Ricoeur [16], interpretation and explanation are mutually dependent. During the interpretative process, explanations can support the researcher in moving beyond the directly given conditions and meanings in order to access meanings that are hidden beyond the text. As already indicated, it is important to avoid causal explanations. Conversely, intentional explanations, which highlight the meanings of connections, motives, underlying events, etc., are highly appropriate.
From the above-mentioned epistemological ideas, methodological principles for maintaining a lifeworld hermeneutical attitude in terms of openness, pliability and having a reflective and problematising stance have been developed.

**METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES FOR LIFEWORLD HERMENEUTICS**

Existential philosophy, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and lifeworld theory comprise the ontology and epistemology that guide a lifeworld hermeneutical study. A lifeworld hermeneutical study builds on various methodological principles that have been partly articulated by Thanhell [19] and Ödman [20] for human science and developed for caring science by Dahlberg et al. [21, 22] and Nyström [23, 24]. Nevertheless, it seems contradictory to suggest a single, concrete method for an empirical study. In this article, the aim is to elaborate on a research approach and method, namely, lifeworld hermeneutics. After years of supervising and teaching lifeworld hermeneutics, the authors have found that students and researchers, at least at the beginning of their research careers, appreciate concrete methodological principles to support their efforts to perform a lifeworld hermeneutic study.

In the following, we, therefore, suggest methodological principles for how to perform interpretative lifeworld research on existential issues and lived experiences in the field of caring science. However, our proposals do not comprise a solid method with fixed steps. Rather, this can be considered an illumination of how to implement a lifeworld hermeneutical attitude with openness, pliability and having a reflective and problematising stance in the interpretative research processes of developing, validating and structuring interpretations. Furthermore, interpretations developed in a lifeworld hermeneutical study can clarify, explain and suggest how to understand meaning in data based on lived experiences.

Lifeworld hermeneutical research within the caring sciences requires a phenomenon that relates to developing knowledge from a patient perspective in relation to existential questions about illness, health, well-being, suffering, and so on. A phenomenon orientation is a necessary condition when researching meanings in a lifeworld hermeneutical study. A phenomenon, with a foundation in phenomenological epistemology, can be understood as ‘something as it is experienced (or lived) by a human being’ [22], i.e., the meaning of something as a lived experience. In lifeworld hermeneutical research, the focus is to clarify, explain and interpret meanings of a phenomenon—often in addition to the conditions necessary for a meaning to arise, what happens when this meaning is missing, and why precisely these conditions are important for understanding. An example of a research aim is explaining and understanding [16] the meaning of, or conditions for, a phenomenon to be experienced in a certain way. Additionally, researchers should ensure that the perspective of the study is clear, including the choice of context and participants that have a lived experience of the phenomenon in focus.

Lifeworld hermeneutic research requires lifeworld data that has a phenomenon orientation in the form of texts about the given phenomenon, e.g., lived experiences and meanings—for example, transcribed lifeworld interviews, written lifeworld texts or lifeworld dairies of a participant’s own lived experiences and field notes from participant observations that have been supplemented with follow-up lifeworld interviews [22]. It is worth noting that leading questions from the interviewer or field notes based on the researcher’s own unreflected pre-understanding do not provide meaningful data.

**Methodological principles for existential interpretations**

The methodological principles of analysis of empirical data in a lifeworld hermeneutical study are connected to developing existential interpretations in accordance with the hermeneutical principle of a circle [6]. This circle is sometimes called a spiral, especially when the emerging understanding both begins and ends openly [25]. Whether a circle or spiral is used to identify the concept, the meaning is that the parts and the whole are connected in a logical and meaningful way. In practice, this is implemented as a movement from being acquainted with the first whole (a data set) to understanding the meaning of the data parts (partial interpretations) and finally suggesting a meaning as a new whole (main interpretation).

**The first whole—Reading and reflecting**

The analytical work begins when all the data, from for example a lifeworld interview, have been transcribed word by word. Initially, it is important to become deeply familiar with all the data through repeated readings until an initial tentative meaning emerges. The overview of the data also presents an opportunity for active reflection on the possible influences of pre-understanding, as well as whether data activate a pre-understanding the researcher was previously not fully aware of [6]. It is not possible to be fully aware of one’s own pre-understanding, but trying to have a lifeworld
hermeneutical attitude—being open, pliable and having a reflective and problematising stance—in interpretative research processes is one way to be more conscious of it. The researcher can pose questions to the text such as: Do I see something new in the data? Am I surprised by the data? Is there something that contradicts what I already know? and so on. If the answer is yes, there is a change that the research has had in a lifeworld hermeneutical attitude.

Understanding parts of meaning—Reflecting and interpreting

When all the data corresponding to the phenomenon and aim of the study are identified as the first whole, it is time to begin the hermeneutic analysis involving partial interpretations. In lifeworld hermeneutics, interpretation is a delicate and important matter. It is a multifaceted endeavour that can be described as an attempt to uncover meanings that deepen the understanding of existential issues. It is important to remember that existential interpretations are intended to be meaningful interpretations rather than intersubjectively ‘true’ interpretations. Consequently, existential interpretations should never be about verifying or falsifying something—instead, they should be intended to explain and understand a phenomenon in a more meaningful way than before.

The analytical work of interpretation can begin differently according to what seems to be the optimal way for the phenomenon under study. Interpreting parts of the data can start with qualified guessing, followed by testing whether an interpretative idea is reasonable and meaningful. An interpretative idea must be developed from data, but a lack of attention to meanings that may lie below the surface makes it difficult to detect hidden meanings [22–24]. It can be a good idea to first identify meaning units in the data and compare them according to their similarities and differences in order to identify patterns of meaning. Such patterns of meaning can be starting points for preliminary interpretative ideas that are checked against the data. Since a first glimpse of meaning does not always match the data, this is just the beginning of an interpretative process, making it necessary to think beyond. However, an idea that seems to be wrong during such a validity check is not always incorrect. It could, perhaps, contain something that is looked upon from different angles. When a common denominator is discovered in two things that at first looked completely different, it is often possible to reach a deeper interpretation.

Another way to interpret is to draw attention to an interesting instance of meaning in part of the data—for example, in an interview or field notes—and then to look for similar meanings in other parts of the data. Sometimes, the same underlying meaning can be discovered in several places, despite first impressions.

It is also possible to move forward by looking at an interpretative idea as a preliminary explanation [16]. Several different forms of explanation may be possible. Meaningful interpretations can build on clarifications of how different phenomena are connected.

Yet another example of interpretation that can deepen the existential meaning of data is the ‘good-reason assay’ [26]. This act of interpretation is based on the idea that there are always motives for what people say or do, even if they initially seem completely unreasonable. If the interpretative ideas focus on motives and their underlying causes, the ‘good reason’ can be brought to the surface. Clarifications of the conditions for statements and actions increase possibilities for understanding the rationale in seemingly irrational statements. Such interpretations also apply to Ricoeur’s [16] ideas of interpretation as a compound act of explaining and understanding.

Sometimes, it can also be fruitful to draw inspiration from theories or research—for example, caring science theory/ies—when a preliminary interpretation emerges. The use of theories should be guided by the understanding that emerges in interpretations of data and that these theories can inspire deepening interpretations. It is important to choose only theories that favour the opportunity to deepen existential interpretations. It is still the meaning of the data, not the theoretical constructions, that forms the basis of the study’s findings. This is further elaborated under the heading ‘Interpretative support in a lifeworld hermeneutical study’.

Examination of validity

As indicated above, working with interpretations takes place in parallel with the review of validity in the emerging proposals for new understanding. This important part of lifeworld hermeneutics revolves around the following main questions:

- Is the interpretative idea based on an open approach and not only the researcher’s pre-understanding?
- Is the interpretative idea supported by data?
- Can the interpretative idea contribute to a meaningful understanding in accordance with the phenomenon and the aim of the study?
- Is an interpretative idea based only on the researcher’s own values, platitudes and moralism?

For the study to be valid, these questions should be answered yes, yes, yes and no. The validity of a study is
connected to the researcher’s ability to have an open, pliable, reflective and problematising stance in terms of a self-critical attitude during the research process.

The question of validity in hermeneutics was initially addressed by Trankell [19]. According to him, an interpretation should first and foremost explain meaning in its context. The researcher should be clear about where the data were collected and all circumstances giving rise to an interpretation. A valid interpretation should be the only one found to explain meaning at an optimal level. In many cases, more data are required to sort between different interpretative options. Gustavsson [27] suggests that the researcher should also investigate whether there is anything in the data that directly contradicts an interpretation. The researcher can do this by returning to the actual data behind a preliminary interpretation and making sure that nothing is directly contradicted. According to Ödman [20], a preliminary interpretation can also be examined by other people who are given the task of identifying the possible effects of the researcher’s pre-understanding. Researchers can also look for counter-arguments and try to discover gaps in their own argumentation of an interpretive idea. In such cases, it is often beneficial to study what other researchers have found.

An additional validity criterion that has not yet been addressed is the idea of openness towards the recipients of research. An empirical lifeworld hermeneutic study should include sufficient information to make it possible for a reader to assess whether the interpretations are reasonable, credible and valid. Transparency towards the reader requires clear descriptions of how interpretations are connected to data, followed by suitable extracts from the texts that constitute the data (quotes).

Creating a structure of interpretations

Typically, a number of partial interpretations, for example, five to six, are required to cover all the data relevant to the aim of a study. The interpretations of parts that have passed the validity check are presented in a meaningful structure. Many different structures are possible. The process of structuring interpretations is a creative process that cannot be determined beforehand. Most important when deciding how to structure interpretations in a meaningful way is being open and pliable to what the phenomenon, the aim of the study and the data require and let this lead the way forward. Below, we provide examples of how to structure such interpretations. The references included in the examples are articles wherein researchers apply different interpretive structures. For more details, please read the articles.

- In an open structure, partial interpretations are presented as themes and illuminated with quotes from the data. All partial interpretations are compared to examine how they belong together or affect each other, with the goal of arriving at a main interpretation (see below under the heading Arriving at a main interpretation—the new whole) [11, 12, 28, 29].
- In a dialectical structure, partial interpretations are presented as theses and antitheses. Such a structure may be suitable when the aim of a study is to understand the conditions necessary for a desirable development. The partial interpretations may then be about what facilitates the phenomenon (thesis) or does not facilitate the phenomenon (antithesis). The thesis and antithesis are interpreted as a synthesis. A study could contain several interpretations developed as thesis-antithesis-synthesis. After validity testing, interpretations are altogether synthesised into a main interpretation, which, for example, may be about how a desired development can be achieved by handling a problem in a certain way [10, 30].
- In a single case study, data from a single informant are interpreted as different aspects of a lived experience. This may be a particularly interesting case report with several complicating aspects that require in-depth interpretations to be meaningful. The various aspects that form the partial interpretations are compared, explained, and deepened through a main interpretation [9].
- In a structure with several case descriptions, various transcribed cases are interpreted separately in a similar way as in a single case study. Interpretations of individual meanings are treated as partial interpretations that are compared and explained in an overarching interpretation, presented as a main interpretation [31].
- Yet another example includes following a timeline. Partial interpretations can be related to successive events. Lived experiences in the past that still affect life can be developed into a main interpretation that clarifies gradual change [24].

Arriving at a main interpretation—The new whole

A lifeworld hermeneutic study ends with a main interpretation, which is an overall explanation and understanding of a given phenomenon in relation to the aim of the study. Partial interpretations relate to each other and form a new whole.

The concrete interpretative work with a main interpretation begins with a comparative analysis that examines how
the partial interpretations are connected and fit with each other. Sometimes, it turns out that one of the partial interpretations contains and covers a deeper meaning and thus already provides a deeper and more abstract level of understanding. In such a case, perhaps, this particular interpretation of parts can be developed into a main interpretation that logically explains the emerging sight of a new whole.

However, in most cases, continued interpretation of the parts is required for comparative analysis, in which an overall understanding of the partial interpretations is performed. The overall understanding should not contrast with or contradict any data if it is to be developed into a main interpretation. Only then can it be valid for the whole data set and all the partial interpretations at an abstract level of understanding. Since the main interpretation exists at a more abstract level than the partial interpretations, it should not be presented together with quotations.

If successful, the whole hermeneutic process can be compared to putting together a puzzle that emerges into an overall picture, offering a new image of a whole via different puzzle pieces. A main interpretation logically clarifies how the puzzle pieces are connected in a picture that provides a significant response to the phenomenon and aim of the study.

For a creative main interpretation (a meaningful and new way to understand a phenomenon), it is quite often fruitful to take yet another turn and examine whether a theoretical idea or philosophy can further develop the emerging understanding in a creative way. Using external sources of inspiration in the interpretative analysis sometimes elevates the concrete understanding of parts to a more abstract level, making it more applicable in other contexts. Thus, such support can be a creative way to understand existential meanings that are not visible via simply an open approach. (We return to this below.)

The work of creating a main interpretation is also where the last validity check takes place. In the same way, as for the partial interpretations, the new whole may be contradicted neither by any part of the data nor by any of the interpretations at a lower level. Hence, the main interpretation should be tested against the criteria of the hermeneutic circle (or spiral). Parts and wholeness in the puzzle of interpretations should be connected and confirm one another [6, 20].

**INTERPRETATIVE SUPPORT IN A LIFEWORLD HERMENEUTICAL STUDY**

As indicated above, an open attitude does not mean avoiding outside inspiration. New ideas and insights into new understandings can be highly constructive in interpretative work, but this requires careful reflection. When is it suitable to use theoretical or philosophical support to develop and deepen an interpretative idea? How do we choose amongst theories or philosophies? How can theoretical ideas or philosophy be used to further develop an interpretation? Can they, for example, make it difficult to maintain openness?

We suggest that theoretical or philosophical guidance can be applied in a lifeworld hermeneutical study to develop both partial and main interpretations, even if a theory or philosophy is usually most useful for the main interpretation. Choosing any interpretative support is a creative process in itself, with the advantage that it prevents one from making pre-understanding a dominating interpretative guide. Theoretical or philosophical support is perhaps most useful when it is difficult to understand meanings in data that appear to be hidden or implied, i.e., not directly pronounced and therefore not easy to discover with a completely open approach [11, 32].

When choosing amongst possible external sources of inspiration, very few researchers are acquainted with all the ideas that could further illuminate the meaning of certain lived experiences. Thus, letting oneself be inspired by sources other than one’s own pre-understanding is about choosing and filtering several theoretical or philosophical possibilities, which in turn requires that the researcher have fairly good knowledge of several options. For existential interpretations, it is often useful to use caring science theories and/or parts of existential philosophy. Both have huge potential in explaining and understanding individual meanings that are not explicit but still highly important for both caring practice and existential caring science research [2].

Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to also think about whether a researcher can be too creative [33] when using outside inspiration. This calls for further reflection because even if theories or philosophies are frequently used in hermeneutical research, it is wise to keep in mind that far from all interpretations need theoretical support. It is only when an interpretation needs to be developed further that theoretical support is needed.

It is also important to consider that a lifeworld hermeneutical study usually opens up several possible interpretations, which makes it necessary not only to validate but also to choose between several interpretative options. When succeeding in illuminating and clarifying meanings, many theories and philosophies may be useful to gain a deeper understanding. Hence, interpretative support seems to carry both opportunities and risks, and researchers must make convincing arguments for all their choices. In doing so, we conclude that external sources of inspiration may increase the opportunity to reveal ‘otherness’ as something new and unexpected [6].
It is also productive to compare interpretations with existing theories to reveal blind spots, narrow perspectives, or a lack of realism. To complicate this further, Ödman [20] believes it appropriate to warn against interpretations that are too much in line with a given theoretical or philosophical idea. In some cases, an extra check is required to ensure that it is the data, not the chosen theory, forming the basis for an interpretation. To minimise the risk that any theory, philosophy, religious belief, political value, etc., will dominate an interpretation, outside inspiration is most useful in later parts of an analysis, especially when the open approach has reached its end.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

For professional care to be caring, in the sense that it supports and strengthens a patient’s health and well-being in demanding existential situations, an in-depth understanding of existential issues matters. In existential caring science, existential issues refer to a deeper understanding of the world of the patient, from the patient’s perspective, founded on the significance of the lifeworld as a guide to perform and enable caring and caring didactics [2]. In this article, we have elaborated on lifeworld hermeneutics as an approach and method for seeking answers to existential issues and lived experiences. Lifeworld hermeneutics emphasises existential interpretation as an analytical tool for understanding existential issues and can therefore be valuable for caring science research. This is in line with Galvin [1], who elaborates on the need to return to existential issues in care, emphasising the need to develop existential knowledge to guide caring practice. As existential knowledge is knowledge about the meaning of living, Galvin notes that qualitative research can contribute to the existential knowledge needed to understand the world of the patient to further understand how to promote well-being. Worth noting is that existential interpretations focus on the meanings of a specific phenomenon. In contrast to the interpretations used in almost all empirical research, existential interpretation is specified as the main analytical tool in lifeworld hermeneutical research.

We suggest that a lifeworld hermeneutical study can be placed on a continuum from description to interpretation, where more or less complex interpretations are developed and qualitative research focusing on meanings can be placed. As long as the research is based on articulated epistemological assumptions sensitive to meanings, the researcher can go back and forth along this continuum, depending on the phenomenon and aim of focus of a given study. In the same spirit, we believe that lifeworld hermeneutics is also applicable in several research areas other than those of the caring sciences. All that is required is a focus on understanding lived experiences and the search for meaning in human science. However, since human beings are naturally interpretive [5], it seems reasonable to look at different hermeneutic methods for empirical research as fluid and changing, developing in step with emerging ideas for empirical approaches.

Our proposal for a lifeworld hermeneutic method for the caring sciences can be considered a movement back and forth in a hermeneutic spiral, moving from an initial whole to the parts and finally into a new whole. The concept of hermeneutics appeared long ago when Friedrich Schleiermacher [34] and Wilhelm Dilthey [35], amongst others, attempted to develop ‘secure’ methods for interpreting texts during the 19th century. They were inspired by the successes of the natural sciences and the influence of positivism on social sciences, as well as the ongoing technical/industrial revolution in Europe, which appeared to promise an increase in living standards for large sections of the population [36].

In this article, we have highlighted the most important turn of hermeneutics, which took place during the first part of the 20th century [4]. Then, Husserl’s [3] phenomenological lifeworld theory brought hermeneutics away from fixed and objective methodological principles, which had dominated hermeneutics during the 19th century. For Heidegger [5], it was obvious that hermeneutics was indeed not simply a method of interpretation. Therefore, he turned hermeneutics into an existential philosophy. In his succession, influenced by Heidegger’s ideas, Gadamer [6] became an important contributor to the German hermeneutic tradition, which today is well known in the humanities and social sciences.

The French philosopher Ricoeur [16] placed hermeneutics in a more concrete tradition, but, like Heidegger and Gadamer before him, he concluded that hermeneutics is an extension of phenomenology. Englund [37] believes that by being more concrete than Gadamer, Ricoeur became an even more common reference amongst empirically oriented hermeneutics in human science. Hence, the history of hermeneutics is filled with interpretations and reinterpretations that both distance themselves from and allow themselves to be influenced by humankind’s unique ability to interpret. From a caring science perspective, different interpretative methods have been developed [13–15]. The lifeworld hermeneutical approach and method described in this article make it possible to further deepen the understanding and knowledge about existential issues relevant to caring and caring science.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the financial support provided by the University of Borås.
AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS
The study was designed by all authors. Lina Palmér was the main author. All authors have contributed to the text in equal ways.

FUNDING INFORMATION
The study was funded by the Faculty of Caring Science, Work and Welfare, University of Borås, Sweden.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ETHICAL STATEMENT
Not applicable.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The manuscript is a theoretical paper with is not based on empirical data.

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How to cite this article: Palmér L, Nyström M, Karlsson K. Lifeworld hermeneutics: An approach and a method for research on existential issues in caring science. Scand J Caring Sci. 2023;00:1–10. https://doi.org/10.1111/scs.13201