How do we approach the essence of what matters to human beings in vulnerable situations?

Suffering is a well-described phenomenon in the field of caring science. Suffering often infiltrates people's existence randomly and unjustly and can be understood as a lived experience arising from an unpleasantness defined by each unique human being. Even though suffering causes disruptions and agony, it is an inevitable component of growth and development in life. A suffering human being is at risk of becoming vulnerable, for instance, when facing rejection, distrust, or lack of affirmation in interactions with caregivers [1, 2]. According to Heidegger [3], man is thrown into existence, meaning that human beings need to relate to circumstances in life that cannot fully be controlled, rather they have to be lived and confronted. Suffering, the realisation of our mortality and our struggles to live authentic lives are all part of a shared vulnerability inherent in being human beings.

Caring science, grounded in a lifeworld perspective, contributes to an understanding that human beings are an integrated entity in which all 'parts' affect each other [4]. Merleau-Ponty's [5] description of the body as lived, that is a body that is perceiving and experiencing, not merely physical, contributes to an understanding of what it is like to live a life with suffering. From our own research, we have emphasised the importance of elucidating the vulnerability that human beings face in various life situations. For example, growing old and needing care [6], experiencing difficulties with breastfeeding, which causes embodied feelings at a deep existential level [7] or the suffering that arises when someone has committed a crime and is being cared for against their will in a high-security institutional environment within forensic psychiatric care [8]. Despite the different contexts of caring in our various fields of research, our research shares how human beings are thrown into the world and must cope with the situation at hand.

For care to truly be caring, scientific knowledge based on research that considers the vulnerability of being human is essential. Disruptions in bodily or cognitive functions or existential demanding situations, for instance, can limit the possibility of living an authentic life, thereby altering the opportunity to live life as intended. Life is at the risk of being affected far beyond what might initially be defined as a cause of suffering. For example, a disruption in bodily or cognitive functions also affects existential aspects of life. This 'beyoneness' (meaning that there is often more than one single aspect involved in the situation) is an important aspect of why we need methodological principles that can contribute to depth when researching complex phenomena in caring science.

To ensure trustworthy research, we need methodological principles that go beyond simple statements such as something 'is' or 'is not'. Instead, we require methodological principles that enhance our understanding of how it is to face a certain situation or how it is to live a life that, in many senses, is defined by an illness, ill-health or existential demanding situations permeated with suffering. Phenomenology offers guidance to researchers interested in exploring phenomena in caring science. Grounded in ontology, phenomenology provides a solid foundation for perceiving human beings as an integrated entity, more than the sum of their parts. It encompasses not only the entity of body, soul and mind, but also how this human being is situated in the world and how they live their life. Going back to Merleau-Ponty, it is about the lived body. This perception of the body as lived and human beings as wholeness presents an ontology and epistemology that require researchers to move from narrow descriptions of the 'what' to broader understandings of the 'how'.

Phenomenology is not a method, instead, we argue that it is about standing firm in and being guided by ontological and epistemological assumptions. Our aforementioned research is derived from a reflective lifeworld research approach [9]. The studies are presented as an essence (descriptive) [9] or as lifeworld hermeneutics interpretation [10]. However, we adhere to the notion expressed, for example, by Finlay, in which description and interpretation are perceived not as opposing methods, but as a continuum, with the result presented in a more or less interpretative manner [11]. However, we are well
aware that phenomenology offers a wide range of methodological principles [12], where, for instance, Lindseth and Norberg's phenomenological hermeneutic [13, 14] is commonly used in caring science research.

Researching phenomena related to human beings demand methodological principles that can guide the process beyond narrow, subjective descriptions. The process of conducting a phenomenological study, whether descriptive or interpretative, requires creativity to illuminate the phenomena. This implies that there can be no linear processes in which the researcher strictly follows a manual from point A to point B. Instead, the process is a winding road, in which researchers move back and forth between the parts and the whole. There might also be dead ends and crossroads where the researchers need to take a step back or venture into an unknown direction. All of this takes courage, and the researcher needs to have the courage to develop understanding beyond narrow descriptions. Although there is no strict guide to follow when conducting phenomenological research (and this applies to both descriptive and interpretative approaches), the researcher is not left without any guidance. To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of phenomenological research, reflection and bridling of the researcher’s pre-understandings are important. Trustworthiness in phenomenological research is also attributed to its orientation towards a phenomenon. This means that the result is presented at a meaning-oriented level, preferably focussing on how the phenomenon is lived, as opposed to simply presenting what is said by a single informant.

The ability to describe the 'beyondness' in human beings' experiences of suffering has implications for clinical practice. For human beings who are suffering, it is crucial to be taken seriously and have their voices heard, and for healthcare personnel to possess the competence to acknowledge and confirm the suffering person. However, this knowledge is not given; rather, it requires evident knowledge preferably grounded in a caring science perspective, focussing on the how of lived experiences. To attain this knowledge, researchers need to be able to understand and use methodological principles that can support depth and meaning. There is also a need to articulate the research findings in words that can engage and touch the hearts and souls of the readers.

We have highlighted phenomenology and hermeneutics with a lifeworld perspective as possible approaches to achieve depth and meaning in caring science research. However, to describe the lived experiences of human beings, a vigorous and ongoing discussion is needed. We welcome and encourage those interested to share their experiences and developments in relation to methodological considerations that can shed light on human vulnerability and suffering, ultimately contributing to the development of a care that is true to the foundation of caring science.

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