

# Preface by Anders Lindseth

Results of scientific investigations may explain how the world we live in is structured, how it functions, or what it means to us to be a part of it. Sometimes the distance between explanations and reality makes it difficult to apply the results of scientific research in a fruitful way. That is why the quest for practice-near research has come up. It is a wish that practitioners who know what they need to understand become able to carry out research. The aim of such practice near-research is to make our world more understandable, to make practice more satisfying, and to make it easier for us to find orientation in life.

## Historical background of reflective practice research

Before modernity, philosophy and science were about understanding the meaning of being related to the phenomena of life. Such understanding was regarded as necessary to get along on the path of life in a satisfying manner. In the beginning of modernity, the view of the researcher was more directed toward the outer, factual and objective world. This change has led to immense technological development. However, our ability to find orientation in life seems not to have improved to the same extent; we might say that we know more and understand less. As a reaction to a science that gives us knowledge more than understanding, philosophical hermeneutics came about in the middle of the 19th century, and phenomenology started as a movement at the beginning of the 20th century. Like philosophical hermeneutics, phenomenology emphasized the necessity of understanding life on the basis of our acquaintance with lifeworld phenomena, our pre-understanding. Reflective practice-near research, short: reflective practice research, is situated in this hermeneutical and phenomenological reaction to objectifying science.

With his phenomenology, Edmund Husserl wanted to enable a science that could be an alternative to the widespread naturalistic and reductionistic sciences of his time. They were naturalistic because they wanted to explain all human achievements, including spiritual achievements, from natural processes. The sciences were reductionistic because they traced their research objects to features of the outer world that could be easily identified and measured. Husserl emphasized that we need to investigate our lifeworld, which we know from lived experience but often understand too poorly. It is necessary to reflect on the meaning of lifeworld phenomena, of our experiences in all kinds of activities.

In everyday life, we know phenomena because we are naturally directed towards them in our activities. We have access to the world. But we form perceptions and opinions about our world too quickly. We must put these opinions in brackets, i.e., we must refrain from already knowing what phenomena and activities mean until we can have a closer look at them. Husserl called this *époché* (pause, restraint) and emphasized that by holding back our opinions, we can leave the natural attitude and enter a phenomenological attitude. He used the Greek term *noema* for a phenomenon's meaning that must be assumed in order for the phenomenon to appear at all, and he used the term *noesis* for the mode of access we have to this decisive and essential meaning through our mental acts. Husserl (1950, §§87-96) meant that we should be able to determine the *noema* exactly by variation of *noeses*. Although he undertook a series of phenomenological studies that have been inspiring to many researchers, Husserl did not state exactly how this was to be done. So, we have a number of different phenomenological approaches. Furthermore, it has become clear that phenomenological description and analysis must necessarily include an important element of interpretation. Although philosophical hermeneutics and phenomenology can be seen as two different developmental lines of thought, in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1975), these two lines converge. We may talk about hermeneutical phenomenology, or phenomenological hermeneutics. Reflective practice research is a further development of this tradition – a tradition from which many of the so-called qualitative research methods derive.

## **Ontology, epistemology and methodology**

Reflective practice research is a way of elucidating lifeworld phenomena developing in time – in everyday life, in practices, in work, in professions, in cooperation with others, in research, in all kinds of activities. Speaking is *discourse* developing in time. We may also engage in comprehensive discourses like health care, teaching, social work and so on. In all human activities, we participate in discourse meaning, sometimes with enthusiasm, or we may suffer under our participation in discourses and try to step out of them. As we participate when discourses change, reflection on discourse meaning is important. Without such reflection, it is difficult to become aware of unfortunate practices and participate in discourse improvements. So, the ontology, the doctrine of being presupposed in reflective practice research, is about the discourse meaning of the lifeworld.

The knowledge we want to develop is about our way of relating to the phenomena with which we must in life activities. This kind of knowledge

we call *understanding*. When our activities are functioning well, then we may concentrate on them and not on understanding their meaning. When action is needed, too much reflection may be inappropriate. But our participation in lived experience is not always satisfying. To be able to understand and, if necessary, improve our practice, we have to express our lived experience and investigate its meaning. If we miss the opportunity to reflect on our experiences, we will hardly find a way to improve our practice. The results of reflective practice research are good (valid and reliable) when people who know the field of research from the inside can recognize and understand something new and interesting. A kaleidoscopic variety of perspectives may shed light on the possibilities of practice approaches, as suggested by Helskø and Weiss (2023)

The method of reflective practice research should not be regarded as a recipe for doing research but as a possible and reasonable way of moving from a research perspective to a research result. We start from lived experience, which shows us that we need a closer understanding of the meaningful contexts we live in to better orient ourselves. We often start with an experience of discrepancy between our expectations of a practice and its experienced outcome. And we show how it is possible to proceed thoroughly and conscientiously to arrive at a research result that can cast an illuminating light on our situation. The first step on the way of investigation is concrete reflection through telling, followed by critical and theoretical reflection, ending with a reflection on method (cf. chapter 1 of this book)

The fact that this method shows a way to go in research corresponds to the original meaning of the Greek word *methodos*. In Greek philosophy and poetry, it was an issue that life is a dangerous way, Greek: *hodos*, on which we get into crises. Plato recommended a meta-*hodos*, i.e. a *methodos*, a dialogical way to better distinguish between good and bad alternatives in life. He recommended a *dialectical method* (Ritter, 1980, p. 1304f).

In the tradition of hermeneutical phenomenology, the shift from a natural to a phenomenological attitude is not difficult to understand. The natural attitude is an attitude in which we judge, we know already, we conclude, we state the facts and take for granted what is meant. To shift to a phenomenological attitude, we must refrain from making judgements about the factual and accomplish *epoché* or *bracketing*. The natural way of doing this is to narrate from lived experience. When narrating, we naturally refrain from judging and concluding. We are interested in relating what we have experienced. Then the listener may also not judge but participate in the story: “So this you have experienced, so that is what you thought.” In the telling, both the teller and the listener participate in the narrated meaning. Then they may consider: What are the important themes

here? When bracketing is accomplished, we of course have not put our preunderstanding within brackets because then the meaning would also disappear. We have put within brackets our judgements about the factual in order to become open to our own lived experience and to the understandable meaning implicit in this experience.

When we narrate out of lived experience and write down the narration, we produce an autonomous text, a text that expresses its own meaning. It tells about being-in-the-world. This is not a factual world outside the text, but rather a world revealed by the text. Through lived discourses, we participate in this world – and through narratives, we become aware of the meaning of this participation. Narratives touch us when they shed light on our lived experience of discourse participation. Being touched by discourse meaning leads us to lived truth as opposed to correctness, connects us to the ontological level of the lifeworld and is fulfilled in understanding. We have been formed by discourse and tradition (prefiguration), and by telling what touches us, our preunderstanding may be transferred into a liberating expression (configuration), an expression that opens up new possibilities in life (refiguration) (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 54-77). A process of improvement in understanding may begin.

## References

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