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A Phenomenology of Interpersonal Understanding in Social Work

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Elusive Relations

A Phenomenology of Interpersonal
Understanding in Social Work

Karl Eriksson

LUND DISSERTATIONS IN SOCIAL WORK

Elusive Relations

A Phenomenology of Interpersonal Understanding in Social Work

There seems to be a growing concern among social workers and other human care professionals over the current state of professional knowledge, as if knowledge is no longer enacted through the actions of the professional but manifested mainly elsewhere, including in documents, routines, manuals, and data. Yet, when considering the phenomenological philosophical movement, around since the early 20th century, one realizes that the objectification of human experience and knowledge in the field by no means constitutes a new issue. The elusiveness of our shared human practices, that we seem to have trouble reconciling their *how* with their *what*, makes such practices particularly obscure to initiatives of standardization and technicalization. Perhaps, then, it is precisely the elusiveness of *doing* that we need to clarify in order to better understand the conditions of the professional role of today.

In four original papers covering the subjects of empathy, stigmatization and peer-support, this doctoral thesis explores how phenomenological philosophy may contribute to the conceptualization of interpersonal understanding in social work practice. Among other things, the thesis argues that the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding may articulate and value a dimension of uncertainty inherent in professional judgment in face-to-face encounters.

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Elusive Relations

Elusive Relations

A Phenomenology of Interpersonal Understanding in Social Work

Karl Eriksson



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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Abstract:

This thesis aims to explore how phenomenological philosophy may contribute to the conception of interpersonal understanding in the context of social work practice. The thesis consists of an extended introduction and four original papers, investigating modalities of interpersonal understanding in relation to three different subjects, namely empathy, stigmatization, and peer-support. The thesis sets out from the position that the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding sets up an ambiguity problematizing the notion that interpersonal understanding can be approached objectively, and as a tool or goal for the professional social worker. According to phenomenological thought, interpersonal understanding is disclosed as already being there in our relationships to other people when we turn to reflect on and describe these relationships. Whereas this insight presents a challenge to the course of applying phenomenology in social work research, there is also evidence in the phenomenological literature for the view that the phenomenological insight about the pre-reflective character of social life is implied in everyday experiences; thus, it is an insight not reserved for philosophy alone. One of the central findings of the thesis is that the phenomenological distinction between act and object clarifies how interpersonal understanding is enacted in interpersonal relationships in the context of social work practice. Such an enactment affords a critical vantage point for revealing objectivist approaches to interpersonal understanding in social work research. With a wider outlook towards human care work, I make the suggestion that the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding may articulate and value a dimension of uncertainty inherent in professional judgment in face-to-face encounters, as well as elucidate some of the impacts of technicalization of human care work.

Key words: interpersonal understanding; phenomenology; empathy; self-stigma; peer-support

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Elusive Relations

A Phenomenology of Interpersonal Understanding in
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Karl Eriksson



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For Lisa and Bill

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Dalby, January 2023

Karl Eriksson

Abstract

This thesis aims to explore how phenomenological philosophy may contribute to the conception of interpersonal understanding in the context of social work practice. The thesis consists of an extended introduction and four original papers, investigating modalities of interpersonal understanding in relation to three different subjects, namely empathy, stigmatization, and peer-support. The thesis sets out from the position that the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding sets up an ambiguity problematizing the notion that interpersonal understanding can be approached objectively, and as a tool or goal for the professional social worker. According to phenomenological thought, interpersonal understanding is disclosed as already being there in our relationships to other people when we turn to reflect on and describe these relationships. Whereas this insight presents a challenge to the course of applying phenomenology in social work research, there is also evidence in the phenomenological literature for the view that the phenomenological insight about the pre-reflective character of social life is implied in everyday experiences; thus, it is an insight not reserved for philosophy alone. One of the central findings of the thesis is that the phenomenological distinction between act and object clarifies how interpersonal understanding is enacted in interpersonal relationships in the context of social work practice. Such an enactment affords a critical vantage point for revealing objectivist approaches to interpersonal understanding in social work research. With a wider outlook towards human care work, I make the suggestion that the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding may articulate and value a dimension of uncertainty inherent in professional judgment in face-to-face encounters, as well as elucidate some of the impacts of technicalization of human care work.

Keywords: interpersonal understanding; phenomenology; empathy; self-stigma; peer-support

Populärvetenskaplig sammanfattning

Mitt avhandlingsarbete är ett teoretiskt utforskande av den mellanmännsliga förståelsens tvetydiga roll i praktiskt socialt arbete. Avhandlingen är en sammanläggningsavhandling vilket betyder att den är uppbyggd av flera delstudier och en introducerande tillika sammanfattande kapp. I mina fyra delstudier om ämnena empati, stigmatisering och kamratstöd undersöker jag olika aspekter av mellanmännslig förståelse i det sociala arbetets kontext. Övergripande söker jag med utgångspunkt i den fenomenologiska filosofins inneboende motsägelser problematisera föreställningen om att förståelse kan närmas objektivt, som ett slags verktyg eller mål i socialarbetarens ansikte-mot-ansikte-relation med klienter.

Fenomenologi är ett centralt tema för avhandlingen och kan betraktas som en filosofisk rörelse och praktik med utgångspunkt i den tyske filosofen Edmund Husserls idéer om erfarendets struktur sett utifrån ett första-person-perspektiv. Samtidigt är fenomenologi svårgripbart, inte minst på grund av att fenomenologiska tänkare efter Husserl, t.ex. Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, och Jean-Paul Sartre, tog såväl inspiration som avstånd från delar av Husserls författarskap. Som praktik strävar fenomenologi efter självinsikt om erfandet som en genomlevd aktivitet, dvs. hur eller på vilket sätt något erfars. Enligt ett fenomenologiskt tankesätt kan erfande som aktivitet sägas utgöra först och främst en förgivettagen men ständigt närvarande praktisk dimension i vår vardag. Från ett fenomenologiskt perspektiv är mellanmännslig förståelse således något som redan finns där i vår relation till andra människor och något som, när vi når insikt om det, visar sig undfly sitt totala klagörande i fenomenologisk filosofisk beskrivning. Denna tvetydighet och insikt följs upp och utvecklas i relation till avhandlingens fyra delstudier.

Avhandlingen utgör ett exempel på tillämpad fenomenologi men själva tillämpningsförfarandet i avhandlingen utgör mer än endast ett applicerande av fenomenologiska idéer. I fenomenologiska filosofiska texter om interpersonell förståelse, vilka varit centrala för avhandlingens delstudier, framträder den fenomenologiska praktiken som ett slags artikulerande av det fenomenologiska tänkandets början i vardagslivet med andra. På ett liknande sätt kan avhandlingens delstudier förstås som försök att avtäckas hur fenomenologiska insikter framträder i vardagliga erfarenheter av mellanmännslig förståelse – av empati, själv-stigma, och själv-hjälp. Detta får konsekvenser för hur dessa fenomen tenderar att betraktas i det sociala arbetets litteratur. Ett av avhandlingens centrala fynd är att en fenomenologisk distinktionen mellan akt och objekt är nödvändig för att tydliggöra att mellanmännslig förståelse utspelar sig först och främst i vardagen, d.v.s. på ett konkret och spontant sätt, snarare än i det teoretiska tänkandets begripliggörande av den.

Idag förs diskussioner om hur synen på kunskap är under förändring i våra människobehandlande organisationer. Det finns en oro för en utveckling av ett för

ensidigt fokus på rationalitet och mätbarhet, vilket riskerar täcka över det professionella omdömet karaktär och roll i professionellt människobehandlande arbete. Avhandlingen visar hur den interpersonella förståelsens fenomenologi erbjuder ett möjligt sätt att artikulera det professionella omdömet värde. Detta på ett sätt som snarare lyfter fram än försöker lösa den spänning mellan det konkreta och det abstrakta som en fenomenologisk reflektion över mellanmännisklig förståelse bär med sig. Genom att balansera förväntningar på den professionelles möjliga inflytande och kontroll över sitt sociala samspel med andra människor kan den mellanmänniskliga förståelsens fenomenologi kritiskt belysa den rådande teknikaliserings av människobehandlande arbete.

List of original papers

Paper I

Eriksson, K., & Englander, M. (2017). "Empathy in social work". *Journal of Social Work Education*, 53(4), 607–621. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2017.1284629>

Paper II

Eriksson, K. (2019). "Self-stigma, bad faith and the experiential self". *Human Studies*, 42(3), 391–405. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-019-09504-8>

Paper III

Eriksson, K., & Storgaard, A. (2022). "Talking, listening and emancipation: A Heideggerian take on the peer-relation in self-help". *Outlines: Critical Practice Studies*, 23(1), 74–104. <https://doi.org/10.7146/ocps.v23i1.126354>

Paper IV

Eriksson, K. (2023). *Empathy, will and responsibility: Clarifying the contested role of interpersonal understanding in social work ethics*. Manuscript in preparation.

1. Introduction

Merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people (Husserl, 1970, p. 6).

In recent years, social work research and neighboring professional research disciplines have seen a reinvigorated interest in the notion of practical knowledge. This is perhaps not strange, considering that this interest may be interpreted as a form of counterreaction to a narrow and one-dimensional view of knowledge that continues to be promoted in how welfare and health care services are developed and organized. In both Sweden and abroad, many practitioners and researchers involved with human care work, including social work, experience a proliferation of different initiatives, programs, and methods that have pervasively changed the way that they do and think about their work. For example, in the context of social work, Jönsson (2019) shares first-person accounts from social workers who feel that the majority of their time is now spent with computers, doing documentation and other administrative tasks, rather than meeting with clients, and being allowed to practice what they have learned through their formal education (see also Hjärpe, 2021; Higgins, 2017; Carey, 2009). When reading these first-person accounts, it feels as if there is a widespread fear that knowledge is no longer enacted through the actions of the professional but manifested mainly elsewhere: in documents, routines, manuals, and data.

These developments in public welfare and healthcare services can be linked to certain trends in organization management. One such trend is called *New public management* (NPM), signifying a turn towards and implementation of ideas stemming from the private sector. *Neoliberal discourse* is another term often used to describe these changes, emphasizing more clearly the influence of certain political ideas and beliefs. One way to look at these structural changes is to see it as a shift of values. Traditional professional values, such as care, democracy, and equality have become replaced by corporate values, such as productivity, efficiency, and profitability (Brown, 2006, 2015, as cited in Lauri, 2016, pp. 9, 24). Some of the hallmarks of the critique described above apply also to so-called *Evidence-based practice* (EBP). Whereas EBP was originally conceived of as an ideal that would combine the best available research with professional expertise, as well as with service-user input, EBP has today more often come to mean to place trust in scientific findings over professional and client experience (Drisko and Grady, 2015). Moreover, discussions on EBP tends to adopt a quite narrow understanding of the word evidence, that is, evidence according to research principles stemming from an

orthodox natural scientific framework of thought. The EBP and NPM movements should not be conflated with each other due to their disparate historical and cultural backgrounds. However, there is a clear overlap between them in need of consideration, especially in how EBP and NPM in human care work share common aims: that through means of technicalization, achieve increased predictability, transparency, and accountability in the development and management of services.

These are not bad things to strive for. It is not wrong to pursue clarity and certainty about what tax money is used for, and how it can be spent better. Yet, there are other values to consider here, and the risk that a myopic focus on reviewing and perfecting service delivery may smother what we actually want these services to be about, what role we want teachers, doctors, lawyers, and social workers to fill in society. Swedish philosopher Jonna Bornemark (2020) has sought to strengthen the case for professional judgment and practical knowledge, within the context of Swedish human care work. The main problem, in her view, is that while NPM and EBP advertise the improvement and quality of human care, they are usually a “bad” fit for the context of human care work. EBP and NPM frameworks often depart from a *one-fits-all* kind of approach, grounded in the very assumption that methods and solutions can be transferred between contexts with little disregard for the unique conditions and circumstances in play in different lines of work, organizations, cultures, and individual workplaces, and – perhaps most importantly – the particular situations that the professional is confronted with every day in their work (pp. 40-2).

Bornemark emphasizes that providing care for someone is always done in a concrete situation, and knowing what to do or how to act in such a situation calls for the use of good judgment¹. Bornemark (2020, p. 64) writes that judgment brings together, several distinctly human abilities and resources. There is the capacity for perceptual sensitivity and openness towards sense impressions, and also the ability to value what sense impressions are important for the task at hand. When making a life-saving decision, a nurse pays notice to some of the patient’s bodily expressions and symptoms, and not others (see Thulin, 2014, as cited in Bornemark, 2020, p. 52). Additionally, lived experience of prior similar situations sharpens the professional’s perceptual sensitivity. Yet, despite professionals’ acquired expertise over time, they must be open to, and even welcome, the unforeseen and unique circumstances of the concrete situations they find themselves in (see also Bornemark, 2020, p. 85).

Professional judgment is practical; it is imbued with the actions following from it, which makes it difficult to verbalize, and even nonsensical to try to formalize, for example, in a manual. Bornemark (2020; 2018) discusses whether this has led to certain core values (one of her recurring examples is empathy) in human care work

¹ Central to Bornemark’s argument is the Swedish word *omdöme*, which has no direct translation in English. *Omdöme* roughly translates into “good judgment”, signifying the meaning of judgment as an attribute and ability, and not judgment in the sense of action, as in making a decision (swe: *bedömning*). However, it should be noted that Bornemark also take these two meanings (i.e., judgment as attribute and judgment as action) to be closely interrelated in various ways (e.g., p. 65).

being missed or pushed aside in a time of increased means and incentives for measurement and evaluation of service delivery. Some values are not easily measurable, thus, leading to overbalancing those values that are. By, as it were, reinvigorating the notion of practical knowledge in professional work, attention may be redirected back to such hard-to-capture values in order to articulate their importance. What is needed is precisely not accounts of professional judgment that simply prioritizes practical knowledge over and above technical, logical, and propositional knowledge, Bornemark stresses (p. 65). What is needed, in her view, is instead accounts that dare to shed a light on, rather than try to solve various tensions and dilemmas related to different knowledge forms, as well as to the phenomenon of judgment itself (see ch. 5). Only then can we resist the allure of “easy fixes” and reveal the false sense of security that they commit us to (p. 42).

Phenomenological philosophy can play an important part in this debate, which it to some extent already has. To varying extents, Pascoe (2021), Houston (2014), and Lorenz (2016) do all call attention to how phenomenology may offer a sort of a theoretical “reconnection” with the interpersonal dimension of social work practice against the background of its increasing technicalization. However, and as I will argue in detail later on (see ch. 2), limited attention has thus far been given to how phenomenological insights and concepts are to be applied in social work practice, thereby, also ignoring some of the more radical aspects of phenomenological philosophy. Beside revealing ambiguities intrinsic to phenomenological philosophy itself, these aspects contribute to a fundamental critique of the project of science. In his last book, published posthumously, German philosopher Edmund Husserl’s (1970) raised attention to what he perceived as a crisis in the modern project of science; a scientific community that had lost touch with its social, historical, and cultural genesis in the surrounding *life-world*, or the world of everyday life. According to Husserl, the sciences – not only the natural sciences but the humanistic sciences as well – had through a purification of their empirical methods to establish only facts *about* the world, forsaken perennial philosophical themes, and at once also forsaken an interest in *human questions*, what it means to be human *in* the world (p. 6). To Husserl, what was called for was a radical reconsideration of human experience, yet not in a romantic or idealist sense, but experience in the sense of disclosing an active relationship to the world. We will there find, in Husserl’s view, that such an experience always is co-constituted by a community of subjects, that is, intersubjectively (Husserl, 1970).

Husserl’s conviction that the sciences of his day operated with a truncated and impoverished notion of knowledge in some way anticipates the professional’s situation in overly NPM and EBP driven organizations. At the same time, and in concert with Bornemark’s analysis of professional judgment, a phenomenological take on the crisis of the professional role shows that we are confronted not merely with the need to reinvigorate the notion of practical knowledge by articulating values that previously have been sedimented and continuously taken for granted. Rather, it means to seriously reconsider the social foundation of the worker-client relationship,

where the enactive dimension of interpersonal relationships *in its very taken-for-grantedness* needs to be seriously reflected upon. Phenomenology may provide a thematization of as well as a contrast to an objective approach to interpersonal relationships in social work practice, as a contribution to a critical approach to current developments.

Phenomenology and interpersonal understanding

In short, phenomenology can be understood as a loosely held together philosophical and intellectual movement, initiated in the beginning of the 20th century, and based around Husserl's philosophical ideas as well as the critical reception of these ideas by his many students and followers. With the risk of oversimplifying things, one could say that there is a recurring tendency in phenomenological thought to emphasize and explore human experience through human activity (i.e., thinking), and especially, in regard to how this activity finds itself embedded in a social, historical, cultural, and political context. Put differently, philosophy takes place somewhere, a somewhere that is already there when philosophical thought turns to elucidate it. Coming to terms with this insight, as well as stressing its profound importance for intellectual thought, is often made crucial in philosophy according to the phenomenological style.

Viewed in this way, the interdisciplinary field of phenomenology and social work research seems to hold the promise of clarifying the social situation of both professional and client from a first-person perspective, and perhaps especially, their face-to-face encounter. Yet, there are reasons for problematizing such a claim. One phenomenon that this thesis centers on is empathy. Several phenomenological accounts of interpersonal understanding, provided by Husserl, Edith Stein, Max Scheler and Alfred Schutz, can be summarized as proposing that empathy is a direct or basic form of understanding (Zahavi, 2010), or a direct social perception (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2012, see also Krueger, 2018). Simply put, we find that when we stop to reflect on our experience of concrete relationships with other people, that is, in considering these relations phenomenologically, we *already* stand in relation to other people, and indeed understand their actions by taking the meanings of these actions for granted in our everyday lives (Schutz, 1967). If one takes an objective approach to interpersonal relationships, the phenomenological insight of the-already-there-of-others would arguably be of little value in professional social work. It is not an empirical fact on which manuals and techniques can supposedly be based, as per the tenet of *best-available-research/practice* in EBP. Instead, this is an experiential fact that claims a constitutive role of interpersonal relationships. When brought to comment on the context of social work, such a notion of interpersonal relationships *grounds* the worker-client relationship. According to this view, empathy cannot be rendered a technique for social worker to use, or a goal to be

achieved. Yet, this is often how empathy is discussed in social work literature (Englander & Eriksson, 2017; Eriksson, 2023; see also chapter 4), that is, according to an objective approach to interpersonal understanding. Oppositely, in an application of the phenomenology of empathy to education and training of social work students, Englander (2014, 2018, 2019, 2022) has recognized some of the problems of interpersonal understanding in a professional setting, and emphasized the importance of teaching students to reflect on their empathy that is already at work in the presence of another minded creature. The problem of empathy in educational settings can be exemplified in how students often struggle with their ambition to empathize, for example, how their stoic attempts at conveying an empathic interest in the other results in them focusing on themselves rather than living through pre-reflectively what the other person is expressing right in front of them.

The students' sense of struggle with their own preconceptions of empathy is a powerful reminder about what is at stake in contemporary critical discussions on the impact of manual-based or standardized (e.g., Martinell Barfoed, 2014), as well as technologically induced forms of communication (e.g., Pascoe, 2021) in social work practice. There is a spontaneous dimension of social interaction that does not lend itself to being scripted or planned out. The insight of this spontaneity arguably discloses limits to professional action, and contrasts some of the widely held assumptions in society about individual self-determination and *the power of will*. Conversely, to feel a lack of control, as a professional is not necessarily a bad thing, nor may it simply be reduced to being a sign of inexperience on behalf of the beginner. Such experiences, no matter how well-versed one is in professional communication, point to an ever-present degree of uncertainty at the foundation of social interaction and perhaps *all* human activities and projects. As a human experience, reflecting on the spontaneous and pre-reflective character of interpersonal understanding may actually provide social workers with a critical outlook on a reality they often find themselves in: an increasingly technicalized welfare system that obscures human involvement.

Social work and interpersonal relationships

The proposal that a phenomenological clarification of the phenomenon of empathy may challenge an objective approach to interpersonal relationships, finds support in social work literature, and even the discipline at large. In textbooks, it is often emphasized that social workers find themselves acting in a complex social reality where they as individual actors are lodged in a specific social context imbued with institutional, cultural, and political values and conditions (e.g., Dominelli, 2009, pp. 15-6). The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) defines social work as “a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of

people” (IFSW, 2014). Yet, in addition to such a broad definition, it is important to stress that few professional social workers have the privilege to freely interpret and employ such a mission statement as part their daily work routine. In addition to the values and principles of the profession, social workers must navigate a number of conflicting values and goals – to abide by the work description stipulated by the specific organization they work in, laws, their own moral values, as well as manage expectations coming from clients (Jonsson, 1997, p. 25), colleagues, and even the wider public.

That social dependency is a common topic in social work literature and social work theory, implies the belief that it is something important and valuable for practicing social workers to acknowledge and consider in their work. Such, is reflected also in one of the pillars of social worker competency: the conviction that humans are social beings whose well-being and personal development to a large extent, not only depends on, but is realized in and through our relationships with other people. Especially in ecological (e.g., Unger, 2003), and holistic (e.g., Pyles and Adam, 2015) or integrative (e.g., Moss, 2022) social work theory, the thesis of the *individual-environment relationship* is treated as a core principle. According to this principle, a person’s *whole* life – work situation, family life, living conditions, health, social network, spiritual beliefs, cultural identity, and so on – has to be taken into account when trying to understand that person’s needs and how to help them. In social work practice, this often means to tend to a situation that to a smaller or larger degree is characterized by social marginalization and suffering due to, for example, living with abuse, addiction, poverty, and so on.

The relational aspects of the individual-environment dynamic are perhaps most strongly emphasized in literature arguing for a relationship-based approach to social work practice (Bryan, Hingley-Jones, and Ruch, 2016, citing Howe, 1998, Wilson et al., 2011, Ruch, Turney and Ward, 2010). Howe (1998) writes that:

[s]ocial work practice... has to be a relationship-based practice in the sense that relationships are the most important influence on both our socio-emotional development... [A]s the self and many of its major attributes including personality, esteem, efficacy, beliefs, affective states and behaviour form within relationships, any service that attempts to deal with people’s behaviours and feelings as they arise in social environments – the-person-in-interaction-with-their-situation as Hollis, [citing Hollis, 1964] called it – would be at best foolish and at worst seriously negligent if it did not build-in a deep understanding of the part that relationship-based thinking and practice must play in major aspects of our professional lives. (pp. 49-50)

Howe sees interpersonal relationships, not only as a discrete approach (see also Murphy, Duggan, and Joseph, 2013; Trevithick, 2003) to be used by social workers in their work, but relationships as something that permeates social work practice. That is, interpersonal relationships *are there*, whether they are recognized as such or not. Hence, he considers it unwise – senseless even – to disregard their significance.

I would go as far as saying that without interpersonal relationships there can be no social work, at least not the kind of social work that this thesis mainly concerns, which is professional social work carried out in a face-to-face context.² Yet, the fundamental role of interpersonal relationships in these kinds of conceptualizations of social work practice presents a unique problem for social work theory, a problem that hinges on the very acknowledgement of such relationships. How does the worker-client relationship lend itself to being revealed for the persons involved in them? Furthermore, does not viewing interpersonal relationships as a discrete approach in social work practice restrict the notion of interpersonal relationships to, rather than opening up for, a more radical consideration of an interpersonal dimension grounding the worker-client relationship? Swedish social work researcher Stefan Morén (2015) touches upon these problems in his distinction between *social aid type 1* and *type 2*. I will consider Morén's model for the purpose of problematizing the relationship approach, as well as opening up a discussion on the need for considering the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding in social work practice. This, prior to stating the aim and scope of this present thesis.

Addressing the setting of Swedish professional social work, Morén (2015, pp. 52-3) indicates that social aid type 1 is comprised of all those kinds of interventions and support mechanisms clearly defined and developed in documents, policies, and guidelines in a social work organization, such as the local social services office. This is the kind of aid that the organization has taken upon itself to, or is obliged to provide, either because of organizational objectives and principles, or external expectations or demands, such as stature. In Sweden, certain kinds of social aid are regulated by law. For example, Swedish citizens have, if deemed eligible, the right to economical relief, as well as housing assistance, accessibility support, and more. Part of what characterizes these kinds of services is their tangibility, that service delivery is organized in some way; formalized, or even standardized. The process is – at least ideally – ordered, that is, plannable and goal-oriented. An organization providing this kind of social aid is often held liable for providing it in a correct and timely manner and the outcomes are often subject to careful evaluation. For the individual social worker, needs assessments become a central work task. It becomes a matter of *matching* the right intervention with the right client and his or her life situation.

Yet there is another form of more informal aid that is not as clearly visible, difficult to fathom, and that may even hide behind or in formal, intervention-based social work. Morén calls it *human aid*, or social aid type 2, and writes that aid type 2 does not fit into the problem-measure-result logic of interventions-based social work. Instead, it is life-oriented, addressing the very life situation itself; concerning

² Recent technological advancements may have changed how social workers and clients interact with each other (Pascoe, 2020, see also Ranerup and Svensson, 2022). Yet, face-to-face encounters are still essential for many forms of social work practice, including different forms of treatment, counselling, needs assessments, and so on. Sometimes, such forms of social work are addressed as micro practices (see Harrison, 2016).

someone for whom social needs and problems are felt, have their impact, and are hopefully overcome. He writes that:

There is not a clearly delimited problem that can be investigated and become subject for intervention – the task becomes instead to participate in a long-term project of remodeling a destructive life situation. This kind of life-altering change for an individual or family, includes almost always a remodeling also of the individual's or family's social network, and in extension, a renegotiation of the individual's or family's social role. Aid type 2 is, for all intents and purposes, the same as disclosing the conditions and possibilities for this very kind of remodeling and renegotiation. This means that the act of disclosure does not constitute a preceding or preparatory step for a particular intervention. It is rather the case that the disclosure *itself* is the intervention. When the client's life situation is disclosed, when new possibilities for interpretation are explicated, and when the client is able shape his or her own life, only then is this [specific kind of] intervention completed. (Morén, 2015, p. 55 [my translation])

What is taken for granted by Morén here is that a change of view of one's own life makes for an ability to change it for the better, to shape it according to one's own understanding and wishes. Whereas this contention seems to romanticize the power of individual determination and ignore the impact and durability of social inequality, we may look at Morén's suggestion in another way. It makes sense to say that significant life changes, no matter how they come about, are meaningful to the person undergoing them. Turning points – so common in stories about recovery – often include, not just a change of circumstances but a change in how one views oneself. Morén asks us to see this remodeling, not just as a possible consequence of intervention but as possibility in and by itself. The insight that one suffers from alcoholism may be a very emancipating experience, even if one, for the time being, is unable to take the necessary steps towards living a life in sobriety. Such insights, as being the result of an act of disclosure in which the social worker may play a part, is what Morén wants us to consider more closely. This, in order to get at a broader understanding of social work, or even its *hidden side*, a form of social change that may play a huge role in people's lives, but at the same time seems to take place beside the formal work (i.e., interventions).

How is such a disclosure carried out, then? In contrast to aid type 1, there is no protocol, no recipe. It seems to be an organic process that cannot be executed according to some plan; carried out in order to fulfill certain predefined goals. After all, if the point is to remodel one's life by reinterpreting it, indeed, by seeing it anew, it could never be formalized into a project with an anticipated conclusion – if that were to be the case one would already know and possess what is to come from self-discovery. Furthermore, to see that such a remodeling is at all possible actually seems to be what social aid type 2 is all about: to discover that one indeed is a person that has the ability to change, or even that change is a fundamental part of what it means to be a person. Reflecting a weakness in Morén's distinction is the question whether

aid type 2 can at all be designated an “aid” in the first place, at least in the conventional sense of the word, an aid provided by the social worker for the client, which would then subsume it within the framework of intervention-based social work. There is a tension present here that invites further consideration on what the disclosure of the constitutive role of interpersonal relationships means in a social work practice, and how such disclosures come about. One recourse, I believe, in order to advance this discussion, is to consider more closely the phenomenon of interpersonal understanding from a phenomenological philosophical perspective.

Aim and research questions

This thesis is a thesis by publication (a.k.a., compilation thesis), meaning that it consists of several papers and an extended introduction. The aim of the thesis has continuously shifted during the course of the project. What started off as an interest in making place in social work literature for phenomenological accounts of empathy evolved during the course of writing three additional papers into a wider concern for *interpersonal understanding in the context of social work practice*. The trajectory of this work can therefore be described as progressive rather than linear. An initial study [Paper I] challenging a conventional approach to empathy in social work education was conducted, drawing on phenomenological accounts of empathy and interpersonal understanding, and supported by empirical findings of how empathy is lived through in the context of professional social work (Eriksson and Englander, 2017). This was followed by a study [Paper II] with an outset in the phenomenon of not being understood, carried out as an investigation into how discussions on the concept of self-stigma may be enriched by phenomenological accounts of selfhood (Eriksson, 2019). The third study [Paper III] aimed at elucidating the order of interaction between social worker and client when interpersonal understanding appears, by tending to the favorable prospects of the peer-to-peer relationship through a dialogue with Heidegger’s reading of *First Thessalonians* (Eriksson and Storgaard, 2022). Lastly, the phenomenon of empathy was revisited in a fourth and last study [Paper IV] in attempting to clarify its recently contested role in social work ethics (Eriksson, 2023). In sum, the entire project can be seen as aiming to explore how phenomenological philosophy may contribute to the conceptualization of interpersonal understanding in the context of social work practice. Although the studies deal with disparate topics, interpersonal understanding becomes the common thread, in so far that the studies deal with different modalities of interpersonal understanding, that is, possible ways of disclosing the phenomenon of interpersonal understanding (see ch. 4).

Reflecting the distinction between social work as practice, research and education, the thesis is – very broadly put – primarily a study of social work as practice, but so mainly by providing theoretical input in dialogue with research (see

ch. 3). Social work as education is also partly actualized in and by the central topic of the thesis, that is, interpersonal understanding, and how it relates to discussions on knowledge and learning (see Eriksson and Englander, 2017; Eriksson, 2023).

The overarching research question that has guided the work with this thesis project is how interpersonal understanding relate to the interpersonal context of social work practice. As can be seen above, the four individual studies also followed specific research questions (see also Chapter 4 and Papers I-IV). In addition, the following two specific research questions have guided (what here follows as) the dissertation framework (i.e., Chapters 2-5) in relation to these four studies:

1. In what ways does the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding disclose a tension between the lived everyday character of interpersonal understanding and its conceptual clarification in phenomenological reflection?

2. What could be understood as an appreciation of the tension intrinsic to interpersonal understanding within the worker-client relationship in the context of social work practice?

Overview

This introduction is followed by a background chapter – chapter 2 – that aims to familiarize the reader with phenomenological philosophy, as well as make the case that certain elusive aspects of phenomenology seem absent in literature attempting to illuminate the value of phenomenological philosophy and theory in social work practice and research. I will argue that phenomenology may be understood as a radical practice that seeks to attain awareness of itself as a *how* by means of description, thus inescapably resorting to approaching its self-identity as a *what*. In so doing, phenomenology appears to resist becoming formalized and carried out as philosophical program. A possible inconsistency then ensues with the ambition of operationalizing phenomenology in social work practice, thus speaking for the need of a different approach to the question of applied phenomenology.

Chapter 3 is a combined theory and methodology chapter. The chapter is divided into two parts. In part I, I try to show how applied phenomenology demands that we rethink the meaning of application in the context of social work research. A distinction between applied and implied phenomenology is thus introduced and used as a framework for interpreting a selection of key phenomenological texts on interpersonal understanding. Part II deals with how the applied/implied distinction can be related to methodological concerns regarding the working process with my studies/papers.

In chapter 4, each of the papers are summarized in chronological order as well as related to the overarching aim of the thesis.

Finally, in chapter 5, the overall findings of the thesis are presented and discussed. One central finding is how the phenomenological distinction between act and object,

or the *how* and *what* of the act of experiencing contributes with an enactive approach to the phenomenon of interpersonal understanding in social work practice and research. The findings are discussed in relation to the notions of professional judgment and the professional role in human care work. I suggest that the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding can be viewed as something that is already part of how professionals potentially relate to others (i.e., clients or patients) reflectively. The tension between the conceptual and abstract “sides” of the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding may further articulate and value a dimension of uncertainty inherent in professional judgment in face-to-face encounters, as well as elucidate some of the impacts of technicalization of human care work.

2. Background

What is phenomenology? This is the starting point for this chapter, yet, in addition to answering the question of what phenomenology is, for pedagogical purposes, I also want to take a closer look at how this question is posed. By drawing on Merleau-Ponty's (2002) introduction to phenomenology in his book *Phenomenology of Perception*, I want to problematize the view that phenomenology can be tended to objectively, as a thing (i.e., *what*) in the sense of a discipline or program with a definitive and stable identity. By emphasizing some of the deeper and ambiguous layers of phenomenological thought, I will attempt to show that phenomenology can only be understood as a practice and personal activity (i.e., *how*). As such, phenomenology relies on enactment; phenomenology is something you *do*, and, therefore, phenomenology is *elusive* for propositional thought. This discloses a possible relationship between phenomenology and social work that goes beyond the standard account of operationalizing phenomenology as an empirical method for studying lived experiences in social work research. The chapter concludes with a critical discussion on the state-of-the-art of the interdisciplinary field of phenomenological and social work research, what will from here on be addressed as *phenomenological social work*. More specifically, I will attempt to flesh out a tension inherent in the proposal of applying phenomenological theoretical concepts to social work practice.

What is phenomenology?

So, what is phenomenology? This question forces us to go back to the beginning, beyond adaptations in the methods literature, and even further back than to Alfred Schutz (1967) *Phenomenology of the Social World*. One way to answer this question is to say that phenomenology was what philosopher and mathematician Edmund Husserl called his philosophical project and method. The term phenomenology had been used before by other philosophers, for example, Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, but Husserl gave phenomenology a new meaning. Even though Husserl's interests changed considerably during the course of his philosophical career, he came to develop and maintain a devotion to showing how the foundations of philosophical and scientific knowledge (i.e., epistemology) had

to be sought in how things appear to consciousness (Husserl, 1960; 1970; 1982; 1989; 2001), that is, by clarifying the first-person perspective on the world by describing it. Husserl had several ideas for how this first-person, or phenomenological perspective was to be clarified: one would have to look at the world in a particular way that makes the perspective itself come into view, that is, viewing the world phenomenologically. One of the most endearing ideas of Husserl was that phenomenology has to start with trying to make sense of how there first seems to be, in our everyday life, no perspective at all, that is, we tend to take our own personal point of view for granted. Husserl called this *the natural attitude*, and the point of phenomenology was, according to him, to leave the natural attitude, if only for a short while (Luft, 1998, p. 165). The phenomenological perspective, then, was to be reached by certain steps of thought, or as he called it, reductions, that would help to clear away misconceptions and assumptions at the level of the natural attitude, an attitude that otherwise would make it difficult, if not impossible to arrive at a correct structural account of consciousness, or its *pure essence*.

Now, there are some problems with this approach to presenting phenomenology. Because of our common sense understanding of words such as consciousness, essence, reduction, and even attitude, the reader may find him or herself already thinking that phenomenology, besides sounding complicated, also sounds very romantic, in the sense of being old-fashioned and something belonging to the past. One strategy that many phenomenological writers employ in order to maintain the relevance of phenomenology today is trying to reintroduce words from the phenomenological terminology in a way that would help the reader acquire a new sense of them. If I would do the same here, it would force me to go deeper within Husserl's terminology. Things would risk getting very technical and that would draw us further into philosophy, and away from issues pertaining to phenomenological social work, which instead requires a more broad and harmonic introduction of phenomenology as a philosophical and intellectual movement. As a movement, phenomenology brings together a whole array of thinkers: Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Edith Stein, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Hannah Arendt, Alfred Schutz, Simone de Beauvoir, Karl Jaspers, and others. All these thinkers took inspiration from some of Husserl's ideas while rejecting others, and in some cases ended up creating their own distinct philosophies, which, while being very different from each other, still have a phenomenological flavor to them. Even though none of the aforementioned thinkers stayed completely faithful to Husserl's phenomenology, and most of them did not even use the term phenomenology as a label for their own philosophies, most if not all were devoted to *describing* human life and experience and what this meant for our habit of taking human life for granted. While Husserl perhaps thought that he was creating a program for his followers to use and develop, what endured was instead his aim, captured in his most famous quote and dictum: to go back "to the things themselves [ger: Zu den Sachen selbst]" (Husserl, 2001, p. 178). As it turns out, there are many ways in which one can go back to the things themselves.

Hence, in order to not get stuck on Husserl and instead get at the wider meaning of phenomenology, we need to turn elsewhere. Merleau-Ponty's reception of Husserl's phenomenology is a good place to start. Merleau-Ponty was a student of Husserl, and is known for treating his teacher's ideas favorably. Yet, he did not shy away from dealing with the more difficult themes of phenomenology, as for example, the question of what it means to do phenomenology. Almost 50 years since its commencement at the turn of the 20th century, Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. vii) observes that the question of what phenomenology is remains largely unanswered. One would expect that Merleau-Ponty would go on to say that phenomenology is a rather complicated affair, which has led to a great deal of misunderstandings regarding its aim and scope, forcing Merleau-Ponty to "start over" and get the answer right but this is far from what Merleau-Ponty sets out to do. In the conclusion to the preface, he writes that phenomenology must, "in so far as it remains faithful to its intention, never know[...] where it is going" (p. xxiii). What is referred to here is not Husserl's many attempts at defining his phenomenological method nor (as alluded to above) that phenomenology was subject to change for how it was carried on by those adopting it. Rather, Merleau-Ponty refers instead to phenomenology itself and its everchanging character, that phenomenology is personal. Elsewhere, he writes that "[w]e shall find in ourselves, and nowhere else, the unity and true meaning of phenomenology" (p. viii). It should now be clear, following Merleau-Ponty, that our initial answer to the question of what phenomenology is, must be placed side-by-side with the very resistance that phenomenology puts up to such a question.

As it turns out, it is the question itself – what is phenomenology? – that we should turn our attention to: how it is posed and what it assumes, instead of simply trying to provide a clear answer to it. What characterizes this question? It asks for a *what*, an object, and thus it assumes that phenomenology can be captured as a thing or substance (e.g., a program, movement, method). And if we instead want to understand what phenomenology *means* – what it is *all about* – we cannot approach it solely as *what* since that would ignore phenomenology as a practice – or a *how* – as if phenomenology as an everchanging and personal practice would get lost in our attempt to say *what* it is! This is what Merleau-Ponty himself tries to show in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, and he does that so very elegantly. Yet, for a novice to philosophy, his writing may appear dense and difficult to understand, thus calling me to try to introduce phenomenology more plainly. More importantly, however, following Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on how phenomenology is everchanging and personal, I will try to introduce phenomenology by incorporating my own understanding of it and how this understanding has changed during the time of my growing familiarity with it.

If one looks up the entry "phenomenology" in an etymological lexicon, one can see that it stems from Greek where *phenomenon* means "that which appears" or "is seen" and "*-ology*", from the word *logos*, meaning (among other things) "study". Phenomenology would thus mean "the study of that which appears", but interestingly, this gives a quite narrow sense of what phenomenology is about,

especially if one does not know what is implied by *that which appears* (see Heidegger, 2008, p. 51). When I first started out reading about phenomenology – perhaps biased by being a student of the social sciences –, I was expecting to find within the phenomenological literature a wealth of different phenomena or appearances that had been described, that is, *that which appears*. After all, in the social sciences, the term phenomenology is often taken to mean a procedure with which to approach lived experiences, namely the experiences of study participants, for example, as represented as interview data. But when reading phenomenological texts more carefully, one may notice that they seldom offer simple descriptions of phenomena, as some form of taxonomy of the appearances of the world. Husserl gives in his writing considerable attention to consciousness, and what Husserl had to say about consciousness may give us an inkling to understand his study of that which appears a little bit better.³

Husserl famously argued that what mainly characterized consciousness was *intentionality* (cf. Zahavi, 2017, p. 103). Intentionality is a term Husserl borrowed from his teacher Franz Brentano who in turn picked it up from medieval philosophy (Caston, 2019). Brentano, who was a psychologist, used the concept of intentionality to describe consciousness as being characterized by a *directedness*: that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something; that consciousness is always oriented outside itself. Husserl took this idea to heart but also gave it a philosophical spin. As a student of philosophy, Husserl saw intentionality as the very thing that could solve the age-old dualism between mind and reality – the unfortunate legacy of René Descartes’ philosophical doctrine. Still much inspired by Descartes, Husserl set out to challenge this dualism with the help of the concept of intentionality. First, what needed to be clarified, in line with Descartes thinking, is that consciousness itself cannot be a thing. Instead, we are conscious *of* things. For Husserl (1989), this meant that we cannot inquire into consciousness without turning to the things around us, but perhaps more importantly, we cannot turn to the things around us without turning to the very manner of how they appear to consciousness – the very way of experiencing the world. Hence, consciousness is not *something* in itself. Instead, I am conscious *of* the tree over there, our friend’s voice, or that I am, say, running late to a meeting. Moreover, we are not just conscious but conscious in a particular way, in particular *acts* of which we are conscious. We *see* the tree, *hear* our friend, suddenly come to *think* about the fact that I am running late. These examples illustrate that consciousness *is* its acts, directed towards its intentional objects. Simply put, consciousness *is* intentionality.

Now, this idea at the center of Husserl’s phenomenology has been misunderstood a great deal. For example, intentionality can be misinterpreted to mean that only things that are experienced can be said to exist (Zahavi, 2017, p. 113). Yet, it is the

³ Notice here that we approach Husserl’s phenomenology thematically, not principally in an attempt to define phenomenology, but in order to try to understand what it means to practice phenomenology, in light of a brief account of Husserl’s theory of intentionality.

other way around: Things that are “said” to exist must in some sense be experienced or given to consciousness – even abstract ideas. Empiricists, such as John Locke, had maintained the notion of a mind-independent reality beyond our consciousness, of which we only have fallible models in our mind. But this view, called *representationalism*, did not make much sense to Husserl. He rejected such an ontological separation between subject and object, inner and outer, unreal and real. Intentionality helped him accomplish that, but to say that consciousness is intentional does not mean to deny that there is something we call reality, rather, it means to tend to its meaning for us, what it means for something to be experienced as real (p. 197). Husserl therefore came to hold the position that the only real world *is* the world of experience (ibid.). Whereas Husserl has often been considered one of the last great modernist thinkers, his clear and novel opposition to a dualistic approach to subjectivity and objectivity may, on the contrary, make him a possible forerunner of the postmodern turn in Western thought (Drummond, 1988).

What does all this mean in the course of reaching a better understanding of phenomenology as a practice? What I eventually came to realize as a novice of phenomenology (which I still am by the way) is that phenomenology is not so much an interest in appearances as it is an interest in the appearing (that which *appears*). And this insight reflects back on phenomenology itself and our initial question of what phenomenology is. Just like we cannot approach experienced things properly without at the same time inquiring into the very act of experiencing them – of perceiving, feeling, and thinking about them – we cannot approach the practice of phenomenology without trying to get at the how of phenomenology as contrasted to what. The what is by no means unimportant; after all, things appear as things – but not *just* as things. They need to acquire the status of thing for someone experiencing them, and we tend to forget this status-for-someone in the course of living our lives, that the people in the streets are *seen by me*, or that my worries are entertained by *my thinking*. A more mature understanding of phenomenology, then, is that phenomenology wants to remind us of our acts, of activity, of this utmost personal relation we have to the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, ch. 3). In so doing, phenomenology becomes a practice of reminding (and rediscovering!); a practice that seeks to understand and clarify its own endeavor precisely as a practice.

But this leads to a problem. If part of what characterizes practice, according to a phenomenological perspective, is that the separation between subject and object, inner and outer, is an accomplishment of reflection, can phenomenology then ever arrive at a complete clarification or self-awareness of itself through reflection? Seeing the tree over there, hearing my friend, or realizing that I am late is not the same as reflecting on that seeing, hearing or thinking as acts. These experiences, through reflecting about them as constituting (formed by) *this* or *that* act, or even reflecting about them as experiences in a general sense, loses touch with the experience as it is *lived* pre-reflectively. So, we see that there is a tension between Husserl’s descriptive approach and the how that is to be described. The *returning* to the things themselves becomes at once a break with the concrete experiences we

want to stress the significance of. The lived or the everydayness of experience continuously precedes and recedes our very attempts at describing it. Put differently, since phenomenology deals with describing its own practice it will always reach for the sense of the now of experience, but any description will be a description of something that has already come to pass. It is truly mind-boggling that such an insight is itself dependent on being thematized in thought, in description, of being reduced to a *what*, but it contains at the same time a trace to the *how* such descriptions attempt to capture. Moreover, what is known all too well for anyone who is knee-deep in phenomenology is that the description is always a shorthand of the experience being described. In this way, phenomenology *always remains elusive to itself*.

Still, it would be truly sad to see this ambivalence as a shortcoming. It is rather this very thing that makes phenomenology so fascinating. Phenomenology “fails” in the most illuminating way to give a complete account of human experience, and this “failure” still has much to teach us. The critical thrust of phenomenology and its inner conflict are two sides of the same coin. This is captured in Merleau-Ponty’s case for why we still ought to pay interest to phenomenology; that phenomenology reminds us of the beginning of science and philosophy in the everyday life:

The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression... Scientific points of view, according to which my existence is a moment of the world’s, are always both naïve and at the same time dishonest, because they take for granted, without explicitly mentioning, it, the other point of view, namely that of consciousness, through which from the outset a world forms itself round me and begins to exist for me. To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is. (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, pp. ix-x)

Within Merleau-Ponty’s presentation of Husserl’s phenomenology resides both a great asset as well as a possible contradiction. How can we ever arrive at a precise assessment if a part of that assessment is the impreciseness of human experience? As Merleau-Ponty further writes: “The world is there before any possible analysis of mine” (p. x) and must this starting point not also include phenomenological analysis and description? Arguably, every schematization – philosophical or scientific – “is an abstract and derivative sign-language” (ibid.) However, to hold this against phenomenology would miss out on making a greater point, not that phenomenology will afford science with the precision it lacks, but to help us underline the readily precarious conditions of human knowledge!

We have now begun to disentangle the relationship between phenomenology and social work by first having preliminarily addressed the meaning of phenomenology. We arrived at an understanding of phenomenology as a critical and radical form of practice. This, according to Merleau-Ponty's interpretation, a practice that may remind scientists of their own personal point of view, or first-person perspective, readily tends to be taken for granted and not brought into relation to the world which it seeks to know about. But given the many developments within the sciences since Merleau-Ponty's critique in the 1940's, including the birth of qualitative research practices that in many cases advocate for the importance of elucidating the first- and second-person perspectives (i.e., interviewer/interviewee-relationship) in the research process (see Englander, 2020; Churchill, 2018), is Merleau-Ponty's critique still warranted? We need to address more precisely the "science" of which we are to remain critical, and what better way to do this than to look closer at the slim selection of social work literature that has dealt theoretically with the relationship between phenomenology and social work practice. What is taken for granted to be social work practice in this literature and what is the role of phenomenology in this practice? An appraisal of this literature may also help us to maintain relevance in discussing these century old ideas in relation to contemporary social work research.

Phenomenology and social work research

This section deals with how phenomenology has been received in social work research, specifically focusing on the small selection of literature that has tried to link together phenomenological theory and social work practice. I will try to show that this literature has missed out on engaging with the more elusive aspects of phenomenology, leading to a possible conflict or tension in the attempt to operationalize phenomenology in social work theory, such as that phenomenology can be conceived of as form of "tool" to be used by professionals in their relationships to clients.

Phenomenology and social work theory

While there is a considerable amount of social work literature that adopts methods inspired by phenomenology, or that freely use phenomenological concepts, there is not much that explicitly engages with the relationship between phenomenological philosophy and social work from a theoretical perspective. Before looking closer at what actually has been written about this, it is reasonable to first motivate why the literature falling just outside this narrow scope will not be considered more closely here. Some publications do provide more detailed introductions of, for example, Husserl's and Heidegger's philosophies, for example, as part of their methods sections, but without discussing what the impact of these philosophies by themselves

may have for social work practice (or research) (e.g., Cornish, 2018; see also Newberry, 2012). Among the qualitative methodological adaptations of phenomenological thought, for example, Jonathan Smith's (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2021) interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is mentioned, as well as Amedeo Giorgi's (2009) modification of the phenomenological method for psychological research (see ch. 3). Yet, referring the reader to such literature would not be of much help for anyone who wants to know more about phenomenology *and* social work, specifically, and from a theoretical viewpoint, since the aforementioned empirical methodological adaptations of phenomenological philosophy were developed with other disciplines in mind (e.g., psychology), although they have been flexible enough to adapt to most disciplines within the human and social sciences.

But putting aside phenomenology considered purely for its input in the philosophy of science, what about phenomenological themes and concepts? *Lived body* as well as *life-world* are two concepts that have become very popular outside phenomenological philosophy, including in social work research. However, most often they are utilized as stand-alone concepts without being related to their inception in phenomenological thought. One example is Grunwald and Thierch's (2009) discussion of the concept life-world in the historical context of German social work and care. Life-world is by Grunwald and Thierch viewed as synonymous to an "everyday orientation [drawing from] people's direct experiences, their living contexts, their life skills and the strength of their self-responsibility" (p. 132). Following the German tradition of social work, one would expect Grunwald and Thierch to include reference to their kinsman Husserl (1970) who, while not coining the term, gave it the meaning that is clearly (but loosely) referred to by Grunwald and Thierch, that is, as signifying the world of everyday life (as opposed to the objective world of science, i.e., nature). Surprisingly, there is no such reference provided.

The concept of lived body has perhaps wandered even further from its birthplace in Husserl's (1989) philosophy, and later development by Merleau-Ponty (2002). According to a philosophical purpose, Merleau-Ponty argued that the lived body is experientially unified before it becomes separated as mind and body(-thing) in reflection. As such, the lived body is a concept that challenges *Cartesian dualism*. Whereas Descartes treated the body as a vessel for the mind, Merleau-Ponty argues that our bodies is what *allows* us to take an objective approach to ourselves and the world. As Merleau-Ponty (1968) famously wrote⁴ "I do not have a body... I am my body" (p. 141). In social work, the notion of the lived body is often used for emphasizing a spatial dimension and the role of the body in bestowing and expressing meaning (cf. Storm, 2018). Common expressions such as *body work*, or *embodied social work*, strongly remind us (at least semantically) of the notion of lived body in phenomenology. Studies that simply use phenomenological terms for

⁴ N.B. Merleau-Ponty here paraphrases the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel (see Moran, 1999, p. 406).

those other purposes, and that therefore can be associated only more or less vaguely with phenomenological philosophy, provide at best a limited outlook into the relationship between phenomenology and social work theory and research.

Among the few examples where phenomenology is considered both for its possible methodological as well as theoretical contributions to social work research and practice, an in-depth discussion of social work is often omitted. For example, Pascal et al. (2010) present several first-person accounts of carrying phenomenological research in the field of social work, yet do not touch upon possible implications for social work practice.

But what about the more explicit discussions that are concerned with not only taking inspiration from phenomenological philosophy for methodological or theoretical purposes but actively discuss the role phenomenological concepts and ideas may play in social work practice and research? Here, the literature is in a far more meager state, and a comprehensive model for phenomenological social work seems to be missing (see Houston, 2014, p. 92). However, there are encouraging indications of a growing interest in phenomenology in social work theory (see Smeeton and O'Connor, 2020, p. 675). Three texts that I here will consider more closely are provided by social work researchers Stan Houston (2014), Marie L. McCormick (2010) and Russel Whiting (2021). I will argue that they, while drawing upon elusive aspects of phenomenological thought, end up promoting an instrumental approach to phenomenology, which misses out on a more radical approach to phenomenological ideas from the position of phenomenological social work. This will further elucidate what is meant by phenomenology as a radical practice, as well as ground the case of interpersonal understanding as a relevant case for this present thesis.

The life-world and Being in social work

Houston (2014) provides one of few texts in the social work literature that directly reflects on the possible value of phenomenological philosophy for social work practice. With an encompassing approach to phenomenological philosophy, Houston explicitly states that the aim of his introduction to phenomenology is to strengthen the role of phenomenology in social work. By drawing on a number of central concepts within phenomenological philosophy – such as consciousness, natural attitude, Being and life-world – Houston attempts to show that phenomenology may not only “enlarge our conception of what it means to practice social work” (p. 88), but also contribute to counteracting a dangerous development in social work of today. In Habermasian fashion, Houston argues that

social work in the UK has been ‘colonized’ by a bureaucratic rationality that privileges procedures, systems, pro-formas and the ‘electronic turn’. This inordinate response has undercut the ‘lifeworld’ of human subjects: their essential meanings, routines, rituals and use of everyday communication to problem solve. Hence, the ‘system’ and

‘lifeworld’ in social work need to be brought into a meaningful counterpoise but this can only be done by strengthening interventions that draw on the ‘lifeworld’. (p. 98)

Houston here develops a theme that was previously touched upon in the introduction to this thesis. He describes social work in the UK as having succumbed to a system-oriented mindset on the policy level that effectively makes social workers unable to help clients in response to their everyday life and challenges. I think that Houston’s concerns are warranted, as well as I find the call for philosophical input in this debate highly agreeable (see ch. 1 and 6). Yet, what I want to stress here is how such philosophical input must not be done too eagerly as to miss out on what philosophy can do besides enriching social work practice with, what Houston calls: “person-centered forms of intervention”. Returning to Houston’s quote above, what does it mean to conceive of “interventions drawing on the lifeworld”? Is this not an attempt to systematize or at least formalize the very aspects of human life that Houston wants to “counterpoise” against the so-called “system approach”? As differentiated from systematized interventions, Houston writes that:

‘social work as art’ emerges from the social worker’s being-in-the-world-of-the-social. It is not about attempts to manipulate the ‘social’ according to some pre-defined instrumental purposes. Importantly, these insights show that authentic social work might be realized through practices that reveal ‘Being’ in all its richness, pain, solemnity and quotidian predictability. (p. 93)

Houston here refers to Heidegger’s notion of Being but does Houston provide a sound interpretation? Let us take a closer look at how Heidegger himself introduces the notion of Being in the book that Houston refers to, that is, Heidegger’s (2008) *Being and Time*.

Heidegger was and remains a controversial and provoking figure in philosophy. His ties to Nazism are well-known, and it remains an open question exactly how and to what extent Nazi ideology influenced his thinking. Two things are, however, certain. Firstly, such influences are limited (Brencio, 2016), and secondly, Heidegger’s philosophy is provocative in its own right. Like Husserl’s, Heidegger’s philosophy changed greatly during his life: from giving lectures on the phenomenology of religious experiences, to later writings on the relationship between philosophy and poetry. Heidegger always sought to reinvent himself and to do the unexpected – sometimes when you read him you almost get the sense that he did not want to be understood, or at least not pinned down as belonging to a particular philosophical camp. This includes Husserl’s phenomenology, which he eventually came to renounce and distance himself from. Yet, this does not mean that Heidegger’s thinking ought to be considered non-phenomenological. No one conveys the elusiveness of phenomenology better than him. In the following passage in *Being and Time*, Heidegger (2008) outlines his investigation into the phenomenon of Being, and he finds that to subject Being to philosophical inquiry is a complicated

endeavor indeed since the inquiry must account for a Being that hides in everyday life.

Inquiry, as a kind of seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought. So the meaning of Being must already be available to us in some way. As we have intimated, we always conduct our activities in an understanding of Being. Out of this understanding arise both the explicit question of the meaning of Being and the tendency that leads us towards its conception. We do not know what 'Being' means. But even if we ask, 'What is "Being"?', we keep within an understanding of the 'is', though we are unable to fix conceptionally what that 'is' signifies. We do not even know the horizon in terms of which that meaning is to be grasped and fixed. But this vague average understanding of Being is still a Fact.

However much this understanding of Being (an understanding which is already available to us) may fluctuate and grow dim, and border on mere acquaintance with a word, its very indefiniteness is itself a positive phenomenon which needs to be clarified. An investigation of the meaning of Being cannot be expected to give this clarification at the outset. If we are to obtain the clue we need for Interpreting this average understanding of Being, we must first develop the concept of Being. In the light of this concept and the ways in which it may be explicitly understood, we can make out what this obscured or still unilluminated understanding of Being means, and what kinds of obscuration-or hindrance to an explicit illumination-of the meaning of Being are possible and even inevitable. (p. 25)

Heidegger illustrates above a fundamental difference between Being and the philosophical investigation or act of searching that seeks to attain Being as a phenomenon – a search signifying far more than being rational. Being always encapsulates and precedes any attempt at explicating it conceptually, according to Heidegger. This also includes the philosophical investigation that tries to encompass this very insight, that is, *phenomenology* in Heidegger's sense. Heidegger tries to show precisely how we cannot explicate Being as if it were interchangeable with things said to exist, like a chair or a table, this since Being is characterized as implicit to and implied in the very question of Being, or to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty: Being is already there before the act of seeking it out commences. For Heidegger, the philosophical challenge was to explicate the implicitness of Being *as* implicit – it is *already there* –; in other words, doing justice to its elusive character. Further on in *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that the Being of things is intimately related to their function, not only their substance. As with his famous hammer example (see p. 98), a hammer is rarely considered for its physiological make-up. The *being* of the hammer is first and foremost for me in the act of hammering, to which a shoe or a rock *are* also hammers in so far as they may function as hammers to me (in the absence of a "proper" one). According to Heidegger, then, we simply cannot keep separated Being as such on the one hand, and the investigation on the other. What becomes clearer further on in *Being and Time* is that Being is intimately connected with the act of seeking "it" out.

The many intricacies in the two paragraphs above can of course not be unraveled here. Instead, I wanted to give the reader a sense for Heidegger's understanding of the notion of Being as very different from Houston's interpretation. Recollect Houston's attempt to link *social work as art* with Heidegger's notion of Being, especially with respect to Houston's use of the word *realized*, indicating that social work as art is a political project and a form of ethical action. Yet, with Heidegger we find a notion of Being that may not only oppose a rationalistic understanding of human life but also problematize the very project of ethics in philosophy. Can Being really be sought as a way to ensure social justice and promote human relationships? While there might be elements in Heidegger's philosophy that suggests this, we also find complexities in regard to this that may very much suggest the opposite. The idea of a state-of-being, in Houston's view, free from or opposed to rationalization appears, not only far too romantic for Heidegger, but also seems to take for granted a metaphysical notion of Being that Heidegger so desperately tries to shed light on.

Houston's aim of strengthening phenomenology in social work is admirable, but to what end? The phenomenology to be strengthened seems to get somewhat lost in the process. While considering phenomenological concepts and theories, the doing of phenomenology is not considered. Moreover, what is here revealed to be social work in Houston's view? I take the being-in-the-world-of-the-social to be an attempt to try to illuminate a social context shared by social worker and client, an everyday context that come before as well as endure the systematizing grasp of interventions and programs; what must be in place in order for people to *become* clients (i.e., clienthood), or for *learning* the due course of processing social benefits, or participating in formalized interviews. The "system" is not self-sustaining, but "takes place" somewhere, and what makes matters complicated is that social work practice and research may want to recognize this everyday space, as this recognition is believed to part of social work itself (cf. Morén, 2015, p. 55). The social worker's being-in-the-world-of-the-social, which Houston hopes to realize, reveals itself instead as precisely not something that can be realized, since it is *already there* when one starts looking for it. Houston hopes that phenomenology can be instructive to social work practice and research, but perhaps insisting on the contrary, that it *cannot*, may precisely be what makes phenomenology valuable to consider more carefully.

The lived body, intercorporeality and social work

This tension between system and life-world can also be recognized elsewhere in the literature. McCormick's (2010) and Whiting's (2021) attempts of bringing together phenomenology and social work also presents us with the problem of turning the everyday dimension into an object for work. Yet, they come much closer than Houston to pinpointing how this significance of the everyday may be encountered by social workers, an everydayness that never completely allows itself to be captured. Arguably, it is not through philosophizing behind a desk that the social worker (and client) lay bare the social context of their relationship. We must turn our

attention to this relationship itself (rather than to the Being of it) and look more closely at what would characterize this experience from a phenomenological perspective.

McCormick's (2010) study centers on how the lived body may be envisaged as an essential dimension in social work practice. Lived body, may not only provide an increased understanding for the subject's relationship to the world, which is the role the concept has had within phenomenological thought, according to McCormick. McCormick alludes to the idea that lived body may also work as a conceptual bridge from the researcher-participant relationship in qualitative research practice to the worker-client relationship in social work practice. While recognizing the fact that the worker-client relationship is no longer the only way in which social work is practiced, it is of historical significance as "the principal vehicle to affect change" (Tosone, 2004, p. 481, as cited in McCormick, 2010, p. 69). Here, McCormick finds an overlap with phenomenological human science research:

Relational social work practice is consonant with phenomenological human science research – both are relationship-based approaches to knowing; both 'emphasize[s] the meanings clients assign' [citing Tosone, 2004, p. 482] to their lived experience of phenomena. From this perspective the researcher-participant relationship parallels the social worker-client encounter. To the extent that the lived body is the essential dimension in the researcher-participant relationship, to that extent it is the essential dimension in the social worker-client encounter. (McCormick, 2010, p. 66)

Yet, McCormick here not only refers to phenomenology in the sense of a research method, she also directly engages with Merleau-Ponty's thinking in order to give the reader the full sense of how the lived body may work as a parallel between researcher-participant and worker-client. "The lived body in phenomenology is not a possession of the 'self' it is the 'self'" (p. 70), McCormick emphasizes by citing Merleau-Ponty (2002). At the same time, "[phenomenology] holds that consciousness of 'self' emerges in an interactive process" (McCormick, 2010, p. 70; see also Smeeton and O'Connor, 2020), meaning that the self is disclosed in and through our interaction with others. And given that the self is embodied, such relationships among selves are always corporeal experiences, McCormick implies. This would suggest an inter-corporeal dimension between the bodies of the social worker and client but McCormick does not consider what this might entail, and instead focuses on the self-body relationship as mutually shared by both researcher and participant, as well as worker and client.

How are the researcher/participant and worker/client relationships interrelated, then, in McCormick's view? That the body cannot be treated merely as an object for the self, but through which objectivity is mediated (e.g., for grasping and holding something in our hands), tells us that the researcher can never be a detached observer in the interview situation. This insight is also what can be brought over to the worker/client relationship:

Attending to the mutuality of embodiment in the researcher–participant and social worker–client relationship is a willingness to be seen and to be known through that seeing. Maintaining awareness that two bodies are continuously ‘self’ revealing and ‘self’ disclosing is not a literal noting and recording... [S]eparating the ‘self’ from conscious experience to transform that experience into written language distances the ‘self’ from the lived experience of the interview. (McCormick, 2010, p. 81)

Above, McCormick explores the lived experience of the interview in a way similar to how I previously concluded that phenomenology carries an inner conflict in having to resort to objectifying lived experience through description in order to lay bare the *how* of experiencing – experience as lived rather than simply thought. This tension resurfaces with the ambiguity of the lived body. The body is ambiguous in both being an object and a *lived* body which allows for that very objectification to take place (e.g., by way of a simple experiment of placing your hand on your own body, you may experience both touching and being touched by shifting the focus of your attention (see *double sensation* in Merleau-Ponty, 2002, pp. 106-7)). In Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, this calls us to reconsider the very meaning of materiality, a limit usually drawn between mind and body. Instead, as Merleau-Ponty (1968) famously declared, “the things pass into us as well as we into the things” (p. 123). However, this quote is interpreted differently by McCormick (2010), not as a call to question materiality but a call for the researcher, as well as the social worker, to *be in the moment*. After quoting Merleau-Ponty on how the temporal structure of experience (i.e., how we first must experience a mind-body unity in order to take up an objectivistic approach to our body as an object in the world), McCormick (2010) writes that, “[t]his temporality challenges the social work researcher and practitioner to be present with her embodied ‘self’ to the embodied ‘self’ the participant/client has come to share without disembodiment her ‘self’ through retreat into cognitive knowing that risks the momentary-ness of ‘self’ disclosure” (p. 82). McCormick argues that the lived experience of self through the lived body is elusive, expressing a momentary quality that is lost by thinking about it. But how can such momentary-ness play a role in social work? Phenomenological self-disclosure that is attentive to the lived body of both researcher and participant is for McCormick an achievement of honesty, or as she writes elsewhere, a “truly healing and fully humanizing” potential. This potential is what may be brought over to the worker-client relationship, to which the lived body – it’s here and now – becomes an essential dimension.

Yet, arguably, something becomes lost in the translation from momentariness to potential. On the one hand, the lived experience of the interview should not be mistaken for the formalization of that experience into noting and recording interview data. On the other hand, this insight is by McCormick turned into a call for *being in the moment*, of seeing or sensing the momentariness of the other’s self. Is this call not very similar to noting and recording in so far as being at risk of becoming a technique? And if it is a technique, is not the non-cognitive aspects of bodily self-experience then rendered into an object for work? Unlike Houston’s approach,

McCormick's is much more sensitive to the elusiveness imbedded in phenomenological philosophy and what this might imply for a phenomenology of social work. Yet, she still ends up with an attempt to "realize" phenomenology in social work, to borrow Houston's term, through something resembling mindfulness.

A similar problem surfaces in Whiting's (2021) account of compassion and intercorporeality in social work practice and education, although with Whiting there is possibly an increased attention but also subtleness for how to employ phenomenological ideas and concepts in social work practice. In similarity to Houston's (2014) hope to enlarge the meaning of what it means to do social work, Whiting (2021) wishes to provide a language or vocabulary through the phenomenological philosophy of Michael Levin; a language that enables social workers and social work students to "explain and understand how they can take a compassionate position" (p. 215) in their work. Compassion is something that is often deemed valuable for social workers to have towards their clients, Whiting observes, and argues that it remains unclear precisely how this compassion is to be endorsed. Levin defines compassion as a form of openness to others, and this openness can be promoted, according to Whiting, by having social workers explore their intercorporeal relationships to other people, and perhaps especially to clients. This may make social workers and social work students more open to usually underemphasized sensory "points" of connection, such as listening and even smell, which are usually downplayed in favor for the hegemony of vision (which is also the title of one of Levin's books). This fosters a more relational understanding of the different modalities of learning that are deemed central to social work practice, that is, being, knowing, and doing, Whiting argues (p. 211). Turning to intercorporeality, "[s]tudents are focused on their being in the fullest sense rather than on their doing so if they get a sense of ease in the interaction they should be able to work through how that happened and what it means – connecting together doing, thinking and feeling" (ibid.). This emphasizes, as we have seen previously with Houston and McCormick, subtle aspects of the worker-client relationship, how "feeling" may be put into words, and as such valued differently.

But intercorporeality is ambiguously not something that students and workers achieve in their relationship to clients. Instead, it is always there, even "intrinsic to personal identity" (Whiting, 2021, p. 210), and as such helps to challenge a dualistic view of the worker-client relationship, according to Whiting. Here, Whiting draws on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, which Levin in turn took much inspiration from. Whiting sees a direct value in Merleau-Ponty's critique of Descartes, not only for challenging the duality imposed by viewing the mind as separated from the body, but the worker and client as individuals separated from each other. Whiting writes:

Humanism in general and humanists in social work might try to resist such isolationism by suggesting that social workers seek to recognise something of themselves in the person they are working with as a way to foster a sense of mutuality [citing Whiting, 2015]. But Merleau-Ponty and later Levin are both seeking something

deeper—a communal sense of Being between beings... [Merleau-Ponty] does not just say that a person can recognise themselves in another person's facial expression—he says 'they live' in that facial expression. This is the essential meaning of the word 'Intercorporeality'. (ibid.)

Whiting observes that these “various dualisms which Levin [and Merleau-Ponty] is resisting remain deeply embedded in [social work] theoretical discourse” (p. 211). Intercorporeality is thus a two-edged sword in social work practice, both a critical concept and a practical focus. Yet, are these two aspects fully compatible?

Whiting's suggestion that phenomenology can inspire social work students (and social workers?) to pay notice to their emotional and embodied interaction with others I find to be more in line with phenomenology viewed as a radical practice, more so than the suggestions made by Houston and McCormick. Instead of asking students to do something particular, even like trying to be in the moment, Whiting (2021) seems to suggest that acquaintance with the phenomenology of the lived body has the potential to make students more receptive to sensorial layers of their interactions with others, layers that they otherwise perhaps would take for granted. Yet, this is not entirely clear. For example, when Whiting writes that students may “focus on their being in the fullest sense” (p. 215), is this something they supposedly do deliberately or is this something rather brought on by the interaction itself? The former would arguably place thinking *before* being and doing, thus illustrating that the interrelation between the three are not as straightforward as it first might seem. Also, when Whiting ponders the possibility that intercorporeality may become lost in the worker-client relationship, it is unclear whether intercorporeality is a condition for the relationship or something to be achieved within it – or both. How can intercorporeality become “lost” if it is always there in the first place? And disclosing that this is so, that intercorporeality *is* always there but is taken for granted within interpersonal relationships, what does it mean to first discover it? What might this say about social work practice?

Conclusions

To summarize, Houston's, McCormick's and Whiting's different engagements with phenomenological philosophy is a welcome addition to an otherwise hardly existing debate in social work literature. Areas of joint interest to phenomenology and social work are identified, and Whiting (2021) especially manages to approach the worker-client relationship in a novel way through dialogue with the more radical elements of phenomenological thought by showing how the concept of intercorporeality may challenge the tendency to approach the worker and client in isolation from each other, as individuals, who then are to be brought together in some way, for example, through recognizing oneself in the other. As Whiting implies, that we already live in relation to one another, can also be sensed in Houston's (2014) *being-in-the-world-*

of-the-social and McCormick's (2010) thesis on lived body as an essential dimension in social work. It is not how there can be a relation between worker and client that is in need of being explained; rather, there is already a relationship there and this is what is in need of description.

Yet, recollecting Merleau-Ponty's (2002) view of phenomenology as radical practice capable of reminding science of its own taken for granted and obscured phenomenological perspective, there is definitely more to explore here. What I find problematic with the accounts in question is that phenomenology is added on top of the predefined rationale of social work, leaving untouched the assumption that the social worker can accommodate for phenomenology as propositional or formal knowledge. As soon as social workers are supposed to start working on the interpersonal (or social) by realizing (Houston, 2014), being in the moment of (McCormick, 2010), or focusing on it (Whiting 2020), thinking is effectively *put in front* of doing, and thus detached from it, as if the social workers could place themselves "outside" the very relation they just found themselves already a part of. In the end, it is assumed that social workers and students wield phenomenology as a tool among others, when in fact it is this very assumption that I think phenomenology can help to clarify. I think that more attention must be given to phenomenology as a radical practice that may disclose what we take for granted to be social work in interpersonal (and intercorporeal) relationships. Here phenomenology has much more to say, not only in regard to those interested in phenomenology but also in regard to those who approach the face-to-face context of social work from other theoretical viewpoints. For such to become clear, the relationship between phenomenology and social work cannot only be tended to with an interest in phenomenology as such but also the phenomena that disclose the face-to-face context in social work practice and research. As it were, this is the very appearing through which the interpersonal is revealed. In the next chapter I will argue that this is the significance of interpersonal understanding, as laid bare in some phenomenological philosophical accounts that have been central to this thesis project.

3. Theory and method

This thesis is a case of applied phenomenology, that is, an effort to employ phenomenological insights in the field of social work practice and research. I argued in the previous chapter that the elusive character of phenomenological thought complicates an instrumental approach towards the aim of operationalizing phenomenological concepts and theories in social work practice. Phenomenology starts with the phenomena – appearances – or, as Husserl stated, the things themselves. Phenomenological reflection on these *things* is thus emergent and progressive by the very activity of reflecting on and describing them. Conversely, to apply something to something else suggests that both what is to be applied and what it is being applied to are clearly delimited and defined before being brought into relation with each other. This sets up an ambiguity with the aim of applying phenomenology, for example, in the social sciences, and confronts us with several difficult questions. Phenomenology and *applying* are both practices – which one ought to have precedence, that is, can phenomenology still be phenomenology when being applied to a science? And furthermore, can you at all *apply* a practice? Is not every practice a form of application in and by itself? What is at stake here is the meaning of application as it relates to phenomenology. Whereas we cannot provide definitive answers to the questions posed above, the ambiguity inherent in the aim of applying phenomenology must be addressed more thoroughly if we are to make sense of how phenomenology can make a contribution to our understanding of the role of interpersonal understanding in the worker-client relationship in social work practice.

In this combined theory and method chapter, I want to elaborate on this ambiguity and how it is manifested in some of the phenomenological philosophical texts that have been central to my papers (part I), as well as expressed in the original papers (Papers I-IV) as themselves cases of applied phenomenology (part II). Although theory and method are conventionally discussed under separate headings in most social scientific literature, I think that a combined approach is merited in this case since phenomenological insights (i.e., theory) are intimately connected with how one arrives at such insights through phenomenological reflection (i.e., method). In order for this to transpire clearly, I have chosen to organize the first section of this chapter as a detailed introduction to phenomenological key texts on interpersonal understanding that are cited in the original papers. This, rather than focusing on introducing a set of phenomenological concepts. Phenomenological philosophical texts reflect the setting in which phenomenological insights are “generated”. Merely

adopting phenomenological concepts, and their definition, as well as explain such a procedure more or less schematically, would less accurately mediate, and perhaps even contradict, the style and practice of phenomenological thought, thus defending a more comprehensive approach to phenomenological texts and theory. Most importantly, to approach applied phenomenology in the social sciences as simply equating the application of phenomenological concepts would risk missing out on the elusiveness characterizing phenomenological philosophy, in my view. The notion of application, as it relates to applied phenomenology, must be approached differently than is the case according to the standard account of applying concepts in a generic scientific framework. More specifically, I want to explore the meaning of application, not only in the sense of *added to* but also as *implied in*. More than being added to the field of social work research, phenomenological insights can be seen as originating in or springing from reflection of everyday experiences, which in turn may hold relevance to social work practice and research. This more elaborate sense of application is necessary, I think, for keeping with a sensitivity to the elusive aspect of phenomenology to promote an understanding of phenomenology as a radical practice.

The chapter is organized as follows: After opening up the discussion on theory and application in the social sciences, I will elaborate on some of the points indicated in the previous sections on interpersonal understanding and phenomenology. We will look closer at some sections on empathy (ger: *Einfühlung*) in the fifth chapter (or meditation) of Edmund Husserl's (1960) *Cartesian Meditations*; excerpts from Martin Heidegger's (2004) lecture on *First Thessalonians* of the New Testament, especially focusing on his concept of *co-enactment*; as well as selected parts of the chapter on *the look* (fre: *Le regard*) in Jean-Paul Sartre's (1992) *Being and Nothingness*. In addition to these texts, we will also tend to Alfred Schutz's (1967) theory of interpersonal understanding, and more specifically, his distinction between *we-relation* and *Thou-orientation*, as it is laid out in his book *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. While I have not engaged with Schutz's thinking to any serious extent in any of my papers, it may help us to directly engage with what has already been written on the topic of applied phenomenology – here Schutz's account will be treated as seminal. Yet, with, Husserl's, Heidegger's and Sartre's accounts, I hope to illustrate the merits of refraining from restricting a social scientific approach to phenomenology to sources on applied phenomenology alone, and of considering philosophical sources as well. I will argue that these theoretical accounts on interpersonal understanding, as philosophical texts, illustrate both what philosophical analysis may add to the understanding of lived experience of the face-to-face encounter in social work and how the analysis itself reveals a sense dependency on these pre-theoretical experiences of other people in our everyday life.

The points made in part I will be brought over to part II, which will account for some central methodological considerations made in relation to my papers. I will

discuss how the ambiguity of applying phenomenology is expressed in relation to my papers, using Paper II (Eriksson, 2019) as an illustrative example. The chapter concludes with some thoughts on my role as a phenomenological researcher in the process of this thesis project.

Part I: Applying phenomenology

The problem of application is by no means unique to interdisciplinary fields between phenomenology and the sciences. The very notion of applying theory presents us with some serious challenges. Yet, according to the standard account of applied theory in empirical research we find no such challenges. In one way of looking at it, the application of theory is fairly straightforward. For example, if I am to apply a theory to a data set, I need to read up and understand the theory, as well as generate and transcribe the data, before I can theoretically analyze the data and subsequently arrive at an explanation of (certain aspects) of the data with the use of said theory. In short, theory is used to make sense of the data by being added to it, and according to this view, theory and application – or method, that is, how to go about gathering or generating and analyzing the data, and applying the theory – can be kept as separate stages in the research process.

Now, many would say that this is an oversimplified and even misconstrued way of viewing the craftsmanship of empirical research. Surely, if theory as such is made equal to a concept (or a series of concepts), an argument or an idea, it is not farfetched to think that a theory can be applied to data. This claim fits well with the often pluralistic, eclectic, and pragmatic approach to theory in the social sciences. The researcher then approaches concepts and theories as if they were tools in a toolbox, and you proceed by using the right tool for the job. Marxist theory can be used to understand class struggle, and attachment theory for understanding the relationship between parent and child, and so forth. The same line of reasoning may be used when it comes to the choice of method. It is often said that the research question should dictate what method to use, rather than the other way around. Yet, as many researchers know, it is seldom that simple. Research questions are often formulated according to the methods one prefers to work with and that one feels comfortable using. Also, with the use of theory, it is seldom a plug-and-play situation. A phenomenological approach to knowledge begs the question of whether a theory or concept can be used without the act of theorizing, to engage in imaginative thinking about the very transition from data to theoretical concept and vice versa. Similar views to this are well-represented in a number of qualitative research methodologies, namely: that theory is not simply something brought and applied to the data at a certain point in the analytic process.

What quickly becomes clear is that already at the initial stage of designing a study, for example, pondering how to generate the data (e.g., through interviewing)

and later transcribe it, decisions are made that can rightfully be called theoretical. What kind of interview questions are relevant to pose to this specific participant? Should I ask the same questions to all the participants? Should I include pauses in speech when transcribing? Should I include descriptions of body language when transcribing? Such questions of procedure (i.e., method) are motivated by a certain interest for the phenomenon (or phenomena) under study, an interest that is informed by a number of theoretical assumptions about what knowledge is and how to “get” (to) it. For example, the Marxist theorist sees class struggle where the attachment theorist sees attachment issues. We have by now indeed expanded our initial definition of theory, including the view that theory may be understood as a way or style of thinking; as an explanatory account for something that does not add up or is “missing” in the data; or even as assumptions about what and how something *is*. Nevertheless, we can at least make the following conclusion: what theory and method are is not clear cut, and they cannot be neatly kept apart.

In the following, I want to approach theory and method in a narrower sense. Theory is here made equal to the insights or points made in phenomenological descriptions of interpersonal understanding. By method, I mean the manner in which these insights are reached. Yet, we are not concerning ourselves here with anything like a formal and replicable procedure. Neither are we concerned with how these theoretical insights are used in an explanatory sense, for example, claiming that a phenomenological theory of empathy offers an explanation for how empathy “works” in the brain. Instead, we are inquiring into how these phenomenological descriptions of interpersonal understanding rely on a particular mode of thinking, that is, phenomenological reflection, and how this relates to the face-to-face context being described – the very situation which is theorized about. This situation or context, I will argue, coincides with but also differs in terms of approach from the context of the objects (or reality) studied by the scientist, which is made into a *material context* (see Kisiel, 1993, p. 153) that the scientist can generate knowledge about – the very same context that applied phenomenology is supposedly applied to. Yet, in order to spell this out we need to consider more closely philosophy and science as two distinct projects of knowledge.

Applied phenomenology – a brief overview

Let us continue by looking towards how phenomenology already *has* been applied within the sciences. How does one go about applying phenomenology in a way that does not do away with its elusive character? From a philosopher’s point of view, Dan Zahavi (2018) provides an overview. He thinks that it is possible to apply phenomenology to the sciences, although finds it important to recognize that phenomenology and science, on the whole, pursue different kinds of knowledge.

As a philosophical endeavour, phenomenology isn’t primarily interested in contributing to or augmenting the scope of our positive knowledge. Its task is not to

uncover new empirical knowledge about different areas of the world, but rather to investigate the basis of this knowledge and to clarify how it is possible. As Heidegger once remarked, ‘to philosophize means to be entirely and constantly troubled by and immediately sensitive to the complete enigma of things that common sense considers self-evident and unquestionable.’ [citing Heidegger, 2010, p. 18]. Indeed, according to one reading it is precisely this domain of ignored obviousness that phenomenology seeks to investigate, and its ability to do so is premised on its adoption of a specific philosophical attitude.

Given the distinctly philosophical nature of this venture, one might wonder whether phenomenology can offer anything of value to positive science. Can it at all inform empirical work? ... [T]he answer to these questions is very much in the affirmative. By offering an account of human existence, where the subject is understood as an embodied and socially and culturally embedded being-in-the-world, phenomenology is not only able to analyse and illuminate a framework that is operative and taken for granted by most scientific disciplines; it has also been able to offer crucial inputs to a variety of disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, education, literary studies etc. (Zahavi, 2019, pp. 103-4)

According to Zahavi, it is clearly possible to apply phenomenology to the sciences. Yet, he seems to suggest that it is only through staying radically philosophical that phenomenology can make a sound contribution by making us aware of what we take for granted in our own scientific discipline. He also implies that the sciences do not share the same aim as phenomenology. Does this mean that phenomenology, besides being applied, needs to be modified in some way in order to fit scientific aims?

This has been much debated within interdisciplinary fields of study that have long since drawn on phenomenological thought as a source of inspiration: phenomenological psychology, psychiatry, and sociology. One of the more well-known names in social work research when it comes to applied phenomenology is the phenomenological sociologist Alfred Schutz. Schutz (e.g., 1967, 1945) borrowed heavily from Husserl’s phenomenology, in meeting his own ambition of developing a sociological method that was intended to clarify the first-person perspective of the sociologist. In short, Schutz (1967) believed that the sociologist could not just venture out in the social world and start investigating social action – what Schutz, by following Weber, believed to be the basic subject matter of sociology since the sociologist is never only confronted with social actions, Schutz emphasized, but with how actions are endowed with *meaning* in everyday life; an everyday life which the sociologist is always first part of before he or she turns to investigate it. Hence, the sociologist cannot look at social action from the outside, approaching it objectively, but only from an “inside” perspective of the social world. As Schutz so astutely declares, echoing Zahavi’s point above, “if social phenomena are constituted in part by common-sense concepts, it is clear that it will not do for sociology to abstain from a scientific examination of these ‘self-evident’ ideas” (p. 9). If theory, in the sense of a theoretic model, builds upon a number of

other theoretical assumptions in the context it is applied to, we may get a clearer understanding for that context, and even a whole discipline, if we try to unearth and interrogate these assumptions. This is what Schutz tried to do when turning to the first-person perspective of the sociologist and his or her social world, and in a way, this is what I am doing in this thesis and in relation to the field of social work research.

Despite Schutz's strong reliance on phenomenological concepts and ideas – this to the point of calling his sociological method a phenomenology of the social world –, Schutz was adamant in stressing that he was a sociologist, not a philosopher. In an appended note in the introduction to *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, Schutz (1967) offers an explanation for how he intends to apply phenomenology in his own sociological methodological investigation. Schutz writes that,

The purpose of this work, which is to analyze the phenomenon of meaning in ordinary [mundane] social life, does not require the achievement of transcendental knowledge that goes beyond that sphere or a further sojourn within the area of the transcendental-phenomenological reduction... What we are... seeking is the invariant, unique, a priori structure of the mind, in particular of a society composed of living minds [citing Husserl, 1930, p. 555]. However, since all analyses carried out within the phenomenological reduction hold true essentially also in psychological introspection, and thus within the sphere of the natural attitude, we shall have to make no revisions whatsoever in our conclusions concerning [Husserl's theory of] internal time-consciousness when we come to apply them to the realm of ordinary social life. (p. 44)

What Schutz basically says here, through very technical language indeed, is that he intends to use *half* of Husserl's phenomenological method, that is, to stay on a level of thought that enables him to focus on the natural attitude (i.e., the taken-for-granted-attitude towards reality that characterizes everyday life) without having to follow Husserl all the way to a philosophical level of inquiry (i.e., where consciousness is disclosed as constituting objects of experience through intentionality). Schutz does not want to leave the natural attitude behind since he recognizes that it is that very worldly or material context in which sociology operates. Schutz wants to know more *about* everyday life, in this case the social aspects of everyday life – our life with others. This is his scientific aim, a concern for getting to the *what* of the social world, rather than uncovering how the social world plays a role when it comes to the possibility of knowledge (as we will see in the next section, this is what Husserl was after). This is one of the main differences between phenomenological philosophy and phenomenological sociology, in Schutz's view, and similar distinctions have been made by Giorgi (2009) in psychology as a human science and by Davidson (2003) in a recovery-oriented psychiatry; although

the latter two uses an applied phenomenology within the context of qualitative research.⁵

However, Schutz also says in the quote above that philosophy like sociology, has its beginning in everyday life (see also Barber, 2021). Since phenomenology departs in the natural attitude, the philosophical conclusions Schutz considers are not altered by being applied to a scientific inquiry of everyday life. I see this as a point of unity between phenomenology as philosophy and applied phenomenology, respectively, which may de-emphasize their differences. Merleau-Ponty (1964) arrives at a similar conclusion when he discusses the relationship between philosophy and sociology (see also Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Merleau-Ponty (1964, ch 3) compares the role of the sociologist and the philosopher, and while admitting that these roles are all but interchangeable (i.e., that the sociologist and the philosopher are motivated by different aims and concerned with different matters), Merleau-Ponty finds the activities of the sociologist and philosopher to be interrelated, not mainly in the sense that sociology and philosophy may influence each other as disciplines, but that both disciplines depend on both philosophizing and researching activities alike. The researcher philosophizes whenever he or she interprets, and as such, understands the facts generated by research by drawing on his or her lived experience, which places the facts in a social context wherein they gain their significance – their meaning for the researcher him or herself –, but also for the research community in a wider sense. Respectively, Merleau-Ponty highlights the worldly situation of the philosopher by referring to his interpretation of Husserl’s position in this matter. He writes that, “the philosopher could not possibly have immediate access to the universal by reflection alone—that he is in no position to do without anthropological experience or to construct what constitutes the meaning of other experiences and civilizations by a purely imaginary variation of his own experiences” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 107). This is the same as saying that phenomenology, too, has its beginning in the world. Yet, this insight is itself easy to forget, and according to Merleau-Ponty, this is what philosophy can remind us of: “Philosophy is not a particular body of knowledge; it is the *vigilance* which does not let us forget the source of all knowledge” (p. 110). To phenomenology, the source of all knowledge is the personal relation each and every one of us has to the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, ch. 3, esp. p. 112), and so, phenomenology reminds us that the sociologist and the philosopher stand united: despite their distinct activities, they still draw power from the same source, lived experience of the (same) experienced world.

As such, the challenge of applying phenomenology to social work is not about dealing with a phenomenology that is different in “type” but only in its *focus*.

⁵ I have myself used Giorgi’s (2009) and Davidson’s (2003) qualitative phenomenological methods as part of an earlier study that I refer to and build an argument around in one of the papers (Eriksson and Englander, 2017) included in this doctoral thesis (for a more detailed discussion, see this chapter, part II).

Looking at this from the perspective of philosophy, is not all phenomenology, in a sense, applied phenomenology? (cf. Natanson, 1973, p. 105). In conclusion, we must consider the notion of application, not only as phenomenological philosophical insights added to the context of social work research, but how phenomenological philosophy relies and draws on lived experiences for its subject matter. Let us keep this nuance in mind when now tending to phenomenological philosophical accounts of interpersonal understanding.

Husserl's *Einfühlung*

Husserl took an interest in intersubjectivity relatively late in his career but when he eventually did, it grew to become a subject of immense importance to his philosophy (Zahavi, 2003). One would think that for a philosophy that deals so extensively with the mind and reflection, the question of intersubjectivity – that is, philosophically speaking, how there can be other minds besides my own (i.e., the philosophizing mind “of” the philosopher) – could merely play a supplementary role; that it would be like commenting on sociology from the position of psychology. And in a way, this was precisely what Husserl tried to do, but more specifically to get to the social *through* the psychological, and yet in a strictly methodological sense. Husserl was not content with simply asserting sociality, to say that the world is social and then back up that claim with a set of arguments. In line with his phenomenological method, Husserl (e.g., 1960) believed that philosophy first had to account for how the social world is presented to consciousness, how we can lay claim to it as a fact. Without such a social experience, any conceptual discussion on sociality would remain groundless, in Husserl's view. First and foremost, such a primary social experience would have to be rigorously described.

It was never, for Husserl, about doubting the existence of other minds or even about proving that there are other minds besides my own, that is, the philosophizing mind. This did not have to be doubted nor proven, in Husserl's view, but is completely obvious to us, and this obviousness is precisely what needs to be clarified. In a naïve sense, we take for granted that other minds exist. We simply need to refer to our lived experience to find that our life is lived as ubiquitously social – that life is a life among others. We relate to others on a daily basis; consider others, care for others, become irritated with others, or even fear others, and this long before we sit down to contemplate if others do in fact exist. Not only do we interact with other people – they are with us in other ways as well. I am immersed in an inherently social world also through customs and traditions I partake in, the language I speak, through collectively shared social meanings (Husserl, 1970). For Husserl, these two “kinds”, or layers of intersubjectivity – face-to-face interaction and social tradition – are complimented by yet a third, one that relates intersubjectivity to objectivity. This third layer of intersubjectivity was what interested

Husserl the most (Zahavi, 2003, pp. 111, 120-1). In Husserl's view, if it were not for other people, the very notion of *objects* would be inconceivable since I would not know what an object is as being distinguished from myself. I would not know where the object "begins" and "ends". Husserl argues that objects receive their objectivity or "realness" only by being experienceable by others through so-called intersubjective validity (Husserl, 1973, pp. 382, 388-9; as cited in Zahavi, 2001, p. 160). That you can see what I see may demonstrate what is already taken for granted by me in immediate experience: that objects in the world are and can be experienced by you as well. It should be emphasized that Husserl's phenomenology does not by any means rest on an individualistic or solipsistic ontology even though Husserl was convinced that consciousness played a fundamental part in the understanding of social phenomena – or put differently: to depart from the first-person perspective when exploring what a second-person or third-person perspectives entails. Husserl's late phenomenology aimed not to end up where it started, that is, with consciousness, but to arrive at the social world "supporting" constitutive consciousness (Zahavi, 2003, pp. 120-1). As such, Husserl did not only provide a novel approach to the so-called problem of other minds in philosophy, but questioned the very framing of this question as a problem in the first place (Husserl, 2006). It was not other minds that was the problem, but the inadequacy of the philosophy of his day that was brought to make sense of the fact that I experience other minds directly.

It is here that empathy comes into the picture, or *Einfühlung* (feeling in), which was the German term used by Husserl. Among other phenomenological accounts of empathy made around the same time as Husserl's, we find Scheler's (2008) *Nature of Sympathy* and Edith Stein's (1919) *On the Problem of Empathy*. Yet, I here focus on how Husserl dealt with the subject. Husserl's account of empathy or *Einfühlung* can, in light of the above, be interpreted as motivated by his epistemological interest in objectivity. Yet, the experience of the other – what we above addressed as the first layer of intersubjectivity – is given much attention by Husserl since it is *the* experience in need of being described in order to arrive at an account of the other layers, in his view. Husserl believed that empathy was a kind of perceptual and reflective moment wherein other people appear precisely as other people to consciousness. In Paper I (Englander and Eriksson, 2017), I discuss how the phenomenological accounts of Scheler, Stein, and Husserl (as put forth by Zahavi (e.g., 2010)) may work as a critique of a common-sense notion of empathy in social work research. Here, however, I want to focus on how Husserl's account of empathy can be seen as a case of applied phenomenology.

One of the few published texts where Husserl (1960) discusses empathy is in *Cartesian Meditations*. The book is based on a set of lectures that Husserl gave at Sorbonne University in 1929. As the title implies, *Cartesian Meditations* uses a Cartesian approach to introducing phenomenology. As already mentioned, Husserl's philosophy went through some big changes during his career and *Cartesian*

Meditations partly represents what some phenomenological scholars have labeled *the transcendental turn* in Husserl's authorship (e.g., Luft, 2004). Here, we find some of the precursors to Husserl's (e.g., 1970) late phenomenology – for example, his phenomenology of the life-world – in the few published works following *Cartesian Meditations* before his death.

In the excerpt below, Husserl introduces the concept of empathy in his analysis. Husserl argues that we cannot simply place ourselves and other people in a world pre-objectified into nature. To paraphrase Schutz, that would be to try to understand social actions without social meaning, as if we could look at and disentangle the question of intersubjectivity from outside of the social world, or like trying to add intersubjectivity to what is first conceived of as a non-social world, a world conceptualized “before” or “without” the social. (And how could I ever know what a world is, if not for other people from whom I have inherited and now share this meaning with?). Such a third person view, when taken for granted as a departure for understanding others, makes the mistake of seeing intersubjectivity as something accomplished by separated individuals who subsequently become *inter-subjectively* related by somehow building “bridges” or connections amongst themselves (Zahavi, 2001). No, for Husserl, it was the other way around: only by manner of how others experience the world with me does the world and others become objective to me. In the following passage, this point transpires in Husserl's distinction between *thereness-for-me* and *thereness-for-everyone*.

I *experience* the world (including others) – and, according to its experiential sense, not as (so to speak) my *private* synthetic formation but as other than mine alone, as an intersubjective world, actually there for everyone, accessible in respect of its Objects to everyone. And yet each has his experiences, his appearances and appearance-unities, his world-phenomenon; whereas the experienced world exists in itself, over against all experiencing subjects and their world-phenomena...

Thus the problem is stated at first as a special one, namely that of the ‘thereness-for-me’ of others, and accordingly as the theme of a transcendental theory of experiencing someone else, a transcendental theory of so-called ‘empathy’. But it soon becomes evident that the range of such a theory is much greater than at first it seems, that it contributes to the founding of a transcendental theory of the Objective world and, indeed, to the founding of such a theory in every respect, notably as regards Objective Nature. The existence-sense [*Seinssinn*] of the world and of Nature in particular, as Objective Nature, includes after all, as we have already mentioned, *thereness-for-everyone*. (Husserl, 1960, pp. 91-2)

Husserl here portrays empathy as being an important topic, as well as a transcendental theory. What does this mean? For Husserl, the experience of the other is not just the experience of an object – the other's body. It is a body of someone; I experience a lived body. Nor is it a case of self-experience, completely analogous to the relation I have with my own body. It is not myself I experience. When I experience the other, I essentially experience *experiencing* other than my own. In

this way, the other is experienced as transcending me. The other is presented as being *more* than an object (i.e., body) but *through* his or her objectivity (i.e., body) in my experience. In this way Husserl sorts out how the other can be both an object to me, as well as part in constituting objectivity with and for me.

How can I experience the *other-as-object* and *other-as-other* – all at once – as in this being a unified experience for me? The experience of the other is one that, according to Husserl, involves acts of perception as well as *apperception*. An act of apperception usually refers to what is not directly perceived but still within the horizon of my experience. Referring to animate objects, I do not directly see the back of, say, the coffee mug in front of me. Still, I expect it to be there, as a possibility, and my experience of the mug would be incomplete without it. Furthermore, I can turn the mug around and confirm with perception what was until that point only apperceived in experience, which subsequently would put what was previously perceived as the front of the mug out of view. I cannot experience the whole surface of the mug at one and the same time. As with all objects, experience is characterized by fulfilment, not in perception alone, but in perspective, that is, I can only see something by viewing it from *somewhere*.

Correspondingly, I perceive the other's body but this does not itself disclose the other *as other* for me, it merely discloses the object-side of this relationship, that the other has a body that is analogous to my own. Still, it is not my own body I perceive. Furthermore, the other's body does not appear as the body of the other merely by looking different from my own, neither by being a body *over there*. It is experienced as a *lived* body. Rather, I *apperceive* that the other has a relationship to his or her body, in the same way as I have a relationship with my own body, but I cannot experience this relationship directly in the case of the other. Hence, what I experience is *the absence of the relation I have with my own body* – the experience of the other is “based” on a negation. Husserl (1960) writes:

What I actually see is not a sign and not a mere analogue, a depiction in any natural sense of the word; on the contrary, it is someone else. And what is grasped with actual originality in this seeing – namely that corporeality over there, or rather only one aspect of its surface – is the Other's body itself, but seen just from my position and in respect of this aspect: According to the sense-constitution involved in perceiving someone else, what is grasped originally is the body of a psyche essentially inaccessible to me originally, and the two are comprised in the unity of one psychophysical reality. (p. 124)

The fact that my body is presented to me as my body, belonging to me – which is obvious to me in self-experience – is simply not there when it comes to experiencing the other. While I perceive the other's body, what makes the other appear precisely as other is by virtue of something I do not perceive, or even cannot perceive, yet still experience in apperception.

By describing empathy in this way, that the other's subjectivity is only indicated to me, Husserl is able to assert that the experience of the other is to experience the

limit of self-experience (Zahavi, 2003, p. 114). Husserl even proposes that “the mother-child relation [is] the most original of all relations” (p. 113). According to Husserl’s thinking, via Zahavi, such a primary empathic experience must condition the experience of mere objects, The other experiences things, as well as me, in a different way than I do, and this insight, dependent on my experience of an absence of self-relation in the other, in turn, allows me to acknowledge that I inhabit a world which is not only a world for me but a world for *us*.

All this has implications for how to view the issue of applying phenomenology, as well as forcing us to consider the notion of application in a new way. In one way we could say that phenomenology is applied by Husserl, for example, when he comments on the relationship between mother and child, which is a worldly relation. He does then not only concern himself with philosophy, or interpersonal relationships viewed purely abstractly nor universally, but engages in what can be called an anthropological phenomenology. However, in another sense, what is described is precisely not a phenomenology applied in the sense of first conceived and then added to a material context, but a phenomenology that arises or springs from everyday experiences. In stressing the paradigmatic importance of the experience of the other, Husserl seems to suggest that such an experience is inherently phenomenological or at least *proto-phenomenological*. That is, if the empathic experience is crucial for grasping intersubjectivity in its phenomenological sense, reversely, it cannot be excluded as a sort of starting point for phenomenological thought itself! That is, only if I have had such experiences, can I tend to objects in their objectivity, and further, to how their objectivity is constituted both by consciousness and intersubjectivity. What follows from this is that without the empathic experience, phenomenology cannot essentially be realized as a philosophical method, and in so far as that phenomenology depends on such experiences, phenomenology is already “implied” before it is realized as a philosophical method. To do phenomenology means to be referred back to one’s personal relationship with the world (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1964, ch. 3); where phenomenology itself resides prematurely. Given this insight, it would impoverish phenomenology if we thought of its application in the sciences to merely be about taking phenomenological concepts and placing them in a scientific framework, as concepts used for the sake of explaining phenomena. There is, aside from application, an aspect of implicitness in phenomenology. To do phenomenology means, not only to reflect on what we take for granted, in this case, in the discipline of social work, it also means to recover and clarify, by way of reflection, those experiences that make phenomenology possible.

Schutz’s *we-relation* and *Thou-orientation*

No matter how we put it, Husserl’s account of empathy is premised on it being a conclusion of philosophical reflection. It is the phenomenologist, in his or her role as philosopher, that turns to the experience of the other in order to describe and

clarify it. And this is true even if we find, through our investigation, that this experience discloses a so-called transcendental intersubjectivity that conditions my acts of investigating. It is still a philosophical inquiry, and in such a way, Husserl provides only a very general account of empathy. We do not get particularly close to how we normally experience other people in everyday life. After all, we experience others, not in careful philosophical reflection, or as part of the question of intersubjectivity, but as involved in our everyday concerns and projects. All the same, the social scientist reader is then left to recover the everyday or situate empathy again among people and ordinary relationships, through Husserl's highly general account.

This is, in part, what phenomenological sociologist Alfred Schutz (1967) tries to achieve with his theory of interpersonal understanding. Schutz offers a more nuanced and multilayered account of interpersonal understanding than Husserl's. Schutz considers interpersonal understanding to not only take place in the proximity of the face-to-face, but also from a far, both in the sense of geographical distance, but also that of time as well as the degree of "formality" in relationships. A variety of different interpersonal relationships, then, needs to be considered. For example, I have some form of understanding of people that have lived before me, my *predecessors*, that is distinct from my understanding of those I share my life with – my *consociates*, as in colleagues, friends, and family – which in turn is different from those that are my *contemporaries* of whom I have only a generalized understanding. Schutz uses the example of the mailman (p. 197). I can be said to understand the mailman *as* mailman but only in a very formal sense, by expecting him or her to do his or her job, and deliver my mail on time. Similarly, I have stock knowledge that comes into play whenever I interact with others face-to-face, Zahavi (2010) stresses in relation to Schutz's sociological analysis, and adds: "Indeed, it is crucial to realize that our understanding of others never takes place in a vacuum; it doesn't have the format of a snapshot" (p. 299). As we shall see, Schutz's interest in empathy is, like Husserl's, driven by methodological concerns. Yet, his account of empathy is more firmly "situated" in the social setting where it usually takes place.

The aspect of implicitness within Husserl's phenomenology of empathy can perhaps be developed and clarified further by turning to Schutz's sociological take on empathy. Can Schutz's applied phenomenology even reveal how phenomenology itself can be viewed as implicit in everyday experience? I want to elaborate on what Schutz has to say about interpersonal understanding in the face-to-face encounter, and specifically his notion of a shift of attention from *we-relation* to *Thou-orientation*. I think that the inherent ambiguity of applying phenomenology presents itself in how Schutz has trouble reconciling with whether the *Thou-orientation* is a shift of attention deliberated by the sociologist, or a spontaneous one, taking place in everyday interactions with others.

A suitable starting point is to take a closer look at Schutz's (1967) analysis of social meaning, this being the overall objective of his close engagement with

Weber's interpretative sociology. While Schutz recognizes that Weber afforded sociology with the basic element of sociological inquiry, that is, social action, Schutz thought that Weber did not address carefully enough how actions are endowed with meaning. In line with Schutz's philosophical interests, he saw it necessary to tend to the temporal structure of social action. Simply put, we can only conceive of actions in and through their meaning for us, and this will always mean to tend to them as *past* actions – as complete Acts – by grasping them retrospectively in reflection (Natanson, 1968, pp. 222-3). Schutz's view was that, without considering how social actions are endowed with meaning by individual social actors, we would not be able to properly distinguish between your actions and mine as meaningful to you and me in different ways, as well as how we can understand each other's actions by manner of how meaning is shared intersubjectively. Schutz saw this as of fundamental importance for the sociologist who both investigates the social actions of others, while also partaking with them (as contemporary and consociate) in endowing action with meaning.

Meaning, Schutz writes, is first and foremost characterized by being something we take for granted. "In the simple process of living we directly experience our acts as meaningful, and we all take for granted, as part of our natural outlook on the world, that others, too, directly experience their action as meaningful in quite the same sense as we would if we were in their place" (Schutz, 1967, p. 9). Since social action is endowed with meaning, the actions of others are predictable for me, that is, others' behavior or conduct is typified. Concretely put, this means that when I engage in social interaction with someone else, this will usually lead to a response that lies within my horizon of anticipation. The other's conduct is meaningful to me, and vice versa, and this guides or directs our interaction in a fluent manner, usually without interruption (and if I or the other were to do something perplexing, there are other typified conducts that may assist us in such a situation – e.g., I may ask what the other meant by what they just did, and expect to get some sort of explanation).

Social actions are meaningful without necessarily presenting themselves *as* meaningful. Meaning is, so-to-speak, hidden in action but may at any time be grasped and thematized, which is precisely what the sociologist does, according to Schutz. This shift in attitude towards meaning is thus of methodological importance to sociology, and yet, Schutz traces this shift not to a methodological procedure, but to everyday life. That is, a shift *from* a taken-for-granted attitude towards others in what he calls a *we-relation* that is disclosed through a shift of attitude *to* a so-called *Thou-orientation* when the other ceases to be taken-for-granted as a fellow human being and appears as a Thou, or *you*. Schutz (1967) writes,

I 'understand' you without necessarily paying any attention to the acts of understanding themselves. This is because, since I live in the same world as you, I live *in* the acts of understanding you. You and your subjective experiences are not only 'accessible' to me, that is, open to my interpretation, but are taken for granted by me together with your existence and personal characteristics... However, I can at any given time change all this and bring these acts within the focus of my gaze. For

instance, I may ask, ‘Have I understood you correctly?’ ‘Don’t you mean something else?’ ‘What do you mean by such and such action?’ These are typical of the questions that I am forced to ask every day in my relations with other people. The moment I raise such questions, I have abandoned my simple and direct awareness of the other person, my immediate grasp of him in all his subjective particularity... [M]y attention has shifted to those deeper layers that up to now had been unobserved and taken for granted. I no longer experience my fellow man in the sense of sharing his life with him; instead I ‘think about him’. But now I am acting like a social scientist. (pp. 140-1)

The last sentence here reminds us that we are here dealing with a theory of empathy that is methodologically framed. And as Schutz writes: “I can at any given time change all this and bring these acts within the focus of my gaze” (p. 140). The Thou-orientation here appears to be something that one may deliberate, in the sense that the scientist can start contemplating the actions of other people with the aim of analyzing them sociologically. Yet, elsewhere, a passivity is instead emphasized, as when Schutz reminds us of the typicality “of the questions that I am *forced* to ask every day in my relations with other people” (pp. 140-1 [my italics]). Forced suggests that it is the situation that dictates my shift of attitude to the other. It is out of a breakdown of my assumptive appreciation for the other, that the other appears as *someone* to my reflection, someone whom I no longer can take for granted as part of a *we*, but as distinguished from myself, with their own unique way of relating to the world and to others, including me.

Whereas both these senses firmly relate the social scientific perspective to everyday life, they do so in different ways. In the first sense, I supposedly apply the Thou-relation freely, out of scientific motivation, while in the latter sense, the Thou-relation seems rather to be something happening to me, something I undergo (cf. Dewey, 2005). Natanson (1968) determines that the Thou-orientation is not anything like “a conscious *judgment*. This is a pre-predicative experience in which I become aware of a fellow human being *as a person*” (p. 220). Yet, this pre-predicative status is not entirely obvious, which is made evident by an ambiguity inherent in Schutz’s distinction between the Thou-orientation as a formal concept, as opposed to how it occurs in everyday life. He writes,

In its ‘pure’ form the Thou-orientation consists merely of being intentionally directed toward the pure being-there of another alive and conscious human being. To be sure, the ‘pure’ Thou-orientation is a formal concept, an intellectual construct... In real life we never experience the ‘pure existence’ of others; instead we meet people with their own personal characteristics and traits. The Thou-orientation as it occurs in everyday life is therefore not the ‘pure’ Thou-orientation but the latter *actualized* and *rendered determinate* to some degree or other. (Schutz, 1967, p. 164)

So, what does this actualization or determination of the worldly Thou-relation then signify, according to Schutz? This is not clear. I think, however, that the notion of reciprocity may help us disentangle the distinction between the formal (or pure) and

everyday Thou-orientation. In the concrete face-to-face encounter, in contrast to merely thinking about such encounters, we are confronted with the possibility of not only the other becoming a Thou for me but me becoming a Thou for the other. This reciprocal Thou-orientation (what Schutz terms pure we-relation) is also conceptual and something we do not come across in everyday life, according to Schutz. Yet, what Schutz partly wants to draw our attention to is how the Thou-orientation of everyday life involves us concretely and has a direct impact on our self-experience – we are involved in it, have a stake in it. The face-to-face is not only disclosable as an experience of the other but another experiencing me. As such, Schutz would say that empathy in everyday life is always situated and contextualized. Yet, does not Schutz here, precisely by stating that there is no “pure” Thou-orientation in everyday life, also undermine the possibility of being “intentionally directed to the pure being-there of another” (ibid.) person? Schutz does not provide an answer for this, and so there seems to be a gap between his everyday Thou and the “pure” Thou, the Thou supposedly intended by the social scientist. Similar to our interpretation of Husserl’s account of the experience of the other as proto-phenomenological, the Thou-orientation is ambiguous in being both a concept applied by the social scientist, while, in a different sense, constituted by and implied in our involvement in face-to-face encounters themselves.

The notion of *co-enactment* in Heidegger’s reading of *First Thessalonians*

Heidegger is especially interesting to consider when discussing the topic of applied phenomenology and interpersonal understanding – he was skeptical of empathy and allowed relatively little space in his publications for discussing methodological issues. Regarding empathy, Zahavi (2019) writes that:

For Heidegger, the notion of empathy was introduced in order to explain how one (isolated) subject could encounter and understand another (isolated) subject [citing Heidegger, 2001]. In his view, this approach fundamentally misconceived the nature of intersubjectivity, in that it took it to be first and foremost a thematic encounter between individuals, where one is trying to grasp the emotions or experiences of the other... But as Heidegger points out, the very attempt to thematically grasp the experiences of others is the exception rather than the rule. Ordinarily, we do not encounter others as thematic objects of cognition. Rather we encounter them in the world in which our daily life occurs, or to be more precise, we encounter others in a worldly situation, and our way of being together and understanding each other is co-determined in its meaning by the situation at hand. (p. 94).

We find here with Zahavi’s exposition, a point of similarity between Heidegger’s and Schutz’s mutual emphasis placed on situatedness of sociality. Yet, there is also a clear point of divergence between Heidegger and Schutz, and also in regard to Husserl, in that Heidegger so clearly stresses that the concept of empathy (or the Thou-orientation for that matter) is not the right way to go about this social situation.

In terms of method, it is perhaps no coincidence that his magnum opus, *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 2008), contains relatively few passages on methodology while being the same publication in which he distances himself from Husserl's philosophical project. Heidegger scholars have readily turned to his earlier publications to get a clearer sense of his phenomenological "method" (see Kisiel, 1993). We will do the same, but not for delving into the intricacies of Heidegger's methodological concerns but for looking closer at how interpersonal understanding as well as the ambiguity of applying phenomenology is brought together in an early lecture of his, on the subject of phenomenology of religion.

In the lecture course entitled *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, given at University of Freiburg in 1920-21, Heidegger explores a range of methodological questions that he would pay much less attention to later in his career. And when first reading the transcripts from his lectures, one gets the sense that the lecture course is really more about Heidegger's views on philosophy than it is about religion. But to conclude here would be to treat Heidegger's effort of investigating religious experience unfairly, and in support of this is an anecdote surrounding the lecture course, an anecdote that I want to recount briefly (see Kisiel, 1993, pp. 170-3). In the middle of the course, right before the Christmas break in the winter semester of 1920, Heidegger simply interrupts the introductory section of the course dealing with phenomenology, and immediately devotes himself to phenomenological analysis of a selection of biblical texts; not providing any comment whatsoever on this transition from talking *about* phenomenology to the subsequent practice of it. No matter what brought on this sudden change of plans (ibid.), it is an event that speaks in favor of the view that phenomenology is something you learn by practicing it (see Ihde, 1986). Furthermore, the vagueness surrounding Heidegger's procedure coincides with some central points that he makes in one of his analytical excursions in the course, in his lecture and reading of *First Thessalonians* of the New Testament.

First Thessalonians recounts the mission of St. Paul and is one of two letters that he allegedly sent to his then newly formed congregation in Thessalonica. According to pretext, it has reached Paul that the Thessalonians are faltering in their faith and that they want him to spell out to them when the Second Coming is to occur – when will Christ return to earth so that they can all reach Salvation and be reunited with God? Heidegger finds that what characterizes Paul's way of responding to the Thessalonians in the letter is precisely the vagueness of his answer.

It should already at this point be noted that Heidegger (2004) is interested not mainly in the religious canonic significance of *First Thessalonians*. Heidegger's reading is not theological but philosophical (read: phenomenological). What Heidegger sees in Paul is a philosophically valuable case of the Christian religious experience. More specifically, Heidegger focuses on how Paul, according to his letter, shares his faith in Christ with the Thessalonian congregation. Heidegger finds that the way Paul answers the Thessalonians' question about the Second Coming is paramount for understanding Christian faith in a phenomenological sense. According to Heidegger, a key passage in Paul's letter is the following: "5 Now,

brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (New International Version Bible, 2011, 1 Thess 5.1–2). From an atheistic standpoint, this vague answer given by Paul can be interpreted cynically, that Paul does not and cannot know when Christ is to return. For Heidegger, on the contrary, the vague way in which Paul answers the Thessalonians, in that he refers them to themselves, is significant for understanding the Christian religious experience. What characterizes this experience, then, according to Heidegger? In short, it is to endure the waiting of the Second Coming. To be in this perpetual waiting is what it means to be Christian, or as Heidegger enigmatically puts it: of *having become* Christian (Heidegger, 2004, e.g., p. 65).

What is peculiar about all this is that Paul does not spell this out. There is a more general phenomenological point made here by Heidegger in how Paul’s vague answer mimics the very character of lived experience; experience as lived through practically and not propositionally. This is mediated by Paul’s vague answer, Heidegger (2004) argues, as he writes:

The entire question for Paul is not a cognitive question (cf. 5:2:[... ‘] For you yourselves know very well[‘]). He does not say, ‘at this or that time the Lord will come again’; he also does not say, ‘I do not know when he will come again’—rather he says: ‘You know exactly. . . .’ This knowledge must be of one’s own, for Paul refers the Thessalonians back to themselves and to the knowledge that they have as those who have become. This sort of answer determines that the question is decided in dependence upon their own life. (p. 72)

The familiar phenomenological distinction between the *how* and *what* of experience (or experiencing) can be very much sensed here in Heidegger’s phrasing. It “is not a cognitive question” (ibid.), that is, of thinking or knowing *that* but a know-*how* of experience that does let itself being grasped objectively. This is reflected not only in how Paul refers the Thessalonians to their own lived experience but in how he refers them also to his. At several places in the letter, Heidegger emphasizes that Paul stresses his own insecurity and impatience in enduring the Second Coming together with the Thessalonians. In this way, Paul *co-enacts* the Christian lived experience with the Thessalonians, that is, he is sharing his life with them by waiting together with them (cf. Eriksson and Storgaard, 2022).

Co-enactment is central to Heidegger’s reading of the Pauline letters, but not only for understanding the relationship between Paul and the Thessalonians and how Paul conveys his non-objective answer to their inquiry. There is an additional layer to Heidegger’s analysis, to which I now want to turn the readers’ attention: how the students (and we, as readers of Paul’s letter) also understand Paul in the mode of co-enactment not in the sense of co-enacting the Christian religious experience with him, but, as Heidegger (2004) stresses at the start of his reading, “[w]e perform the letter-writing, or its dictation with, [Paul]” (p. 61). Here, Heidegger makes an

interesting critical remark about empathy viewed as perspective-taking (i.e., not to be confused with Husserl's phenomenological account). Heidegger writes:

One could say it is impossible – or possible only in a limited way – to transport oneself into Paul's exact situation. Indeed, we do not know his environment at all. This objection arises from the view that what is given in the manner of objects is primary for a situation with which one must 'empathize.' But one must judge Paul's position with regard to his surroundings from out of his personality and ask whether the surroundings are important for him at all. The 'empathy' problem is posed, for the most part, epistemologically, and is therefore misguided in its starting point. (ibid.)

Given Paul's historical and cultural situation, Heidegger is faced with the methodological problem of how we, as people of today, can at all understand him. For Heidegger this objection is without merit. How so? Heidegger insists that we do indeed understand Paul and that this understanding is more than a simple conviction that we do. I want to discuss this freely with the help of a problem. From one point of view, interpersonal understanding seems to confront us with the problem of how we could ever know with certainty whether we have understood someone else. Even if we have someone in front of us that can confirm to us that we have understood them correctly, what is to say that that account is not misinterpreted in some way? We can indeed think that we talk about the same thing only to realize much later that we did not – is this not proof that understanding, or at least "complete" understanding, is nothing more than an illusion? However, one must come to the conclusion that such a skeptical outlook ends up saying very little about the phenomenon it tries to illuminate. Viewed phenomenologically, understanding is not the absence of naivety but relies on it. If I have understood someone, only to later realize that I was wrong in my positings, the initial experience was still an experience of understanding, just as my later realization that I was wrong is an experience of understanding that in turn may be revised. Understanding is naïve, and in such a way we are unable to describe it if we approach it objectively, from a third-person perspective: what the other *really* thinks or feels about something. For Heidegger, it makes no difference that Paul is a religious figure whom we only know from an ancient letter. No matter how much (or little) I have in common with someone, the criteria for understanding cannot be to know exactly what that other person is going through, since that would mean, essentially, that I must "become" that other person in order to understand him or her, which would render the act of understanding completely superfluous to begin with. Similar to what Zahavi (2001) argues in relation to Husserl, interpersonal understanding, or empathy, precisely presents the other's perspective as elusive and inaccessible to me; this is what it means to thematize my understanding of someone else, to understand the other *as* other (cf. Zahavi, 2010)!

We cannot know what the other knows – this is what Heidegger means by saying that the problem of empathy is often post-epistemological and, from the very outset, misguided. Whether Heidegger is correct in this assessment is not of interest here. What is of interest, however, is how Heidegger does not completely give up on the

concept of empathy. In the second to last sentence in the quote above, Heidegger seems to suggest another kind of empathy, perhaps of an ontological kind. He writes, and I reiterate, that “one must judge Paul’s position with regard to his surroundings from out of his personality and ask whether the surroundings are important for him at all” (Heidegger, 2004, p. 61). To really consider Paul’s point of view, then, is not to try to take his perspective, as if his point of view – his surroundings – is what he himself is attentive to. Paul does not consider himself and his perspective on things so why should we? Just as we cannot see things the way Paul sees them, we cannot see Paul as distinguished from his surroundings. To understand Paul, then, is not to try to see what Paul is seeing or feeling, or that Paul sees them in this or that way. He is given to us, not as separated from his surroundings but *in* his surroundings – *out of his personality*. We experience him as involved in his own life. In getting a sense for this involvement – his enactment of letter writing – we understand him, we become involved with him, we co-enact the letter writing with him by reading it. In so we are understanding Paul, and the conviction that understanding can only arise when and if we for certain can say what Paul thinks or feels is overshadowing this experiential fact.

At first glance, Heidegger’s reading of *First Thessalonians* seems to have provided us with a clear-cut case of applied phenomenology – a phenomenological investigation of a religious text. Yet, the way Heidegger applies phenomenology here very much expands the meaning of the word application to mean more than simply adding phenomenological insights, or even a phenomenological form of analysis to the study of religious texts. Heidegger is certainly not applying phenomenology as one would apply a theory in order to explain a case. In Heidegger’s reading, phenomenology “grows” out of the reading as if it is implied in it rather than added to it. To say that Heidegger applies phenomenology in the sense of illustrating how the Christian religious experience can be analyzed phenomenologically by focusing on how Paul relates to the Thessalonians through co-enactment, does not at all consider what characterizes Paul’s co-enactment. Paul refers the Thessalonians to themselves (Heidegger, 2004; cf. Eriksson & Storgaard, 2022). He asks them to reflect on what they have taken for granted, and not in the sense of searching in themselves for answers that they have overlooked, but to consider *how they already live as Christians precisely by not knowing the answer to their question*. In such a way, Heidegger shows that Paul *is* phenomenological in his very approach to the Thessalonians. At once, Paul becomes so much more than being simply a case in support of Heidegger’s argument, or even a case to be understood phenomenologically. In correspondence with the vagueness of Paul’s answer, as well as his own insecurity in waiting, phenomenology too appears to be implied in the co-enactment itself. This point is strengthened further when Heidegger addresses the lecture audience on their co-enactment of Paul’s letter writing. We are by Heidegger guided in seeing that our own understanding of Paul is already there as we tend to his situation. Perhaps, this can be taken to mean that our phenomenological

understanding arises from reading Paul's letter, and not preconceived as a framework of thought to be used for analyzing it.

Sartre's *le regard*

At first it may appear strange to turn our attention, lastly, to Jean-Paul Sartre and what his philosophy may contribute to our understanding of empathy and intersubjectivity. Those acquainted with Sartre's existentialism may call to mind his notion of individual freedom and the angst that follows from it. "Man is condemned to be free" (Sartre, 1948, p. 34), Sartre said in one of his most famous lectures, and of which he meant that to be free is to choose, and to choose means to confront oneself with the moral condition of living. I and only I can be held accountable for how I live my life. Even in the direst of situations (say, at gun point), I do have a choice – to comply or resist (and perhaps get shot). Unfortunately, Sartre's notion of freedom has been interpreted as a call for individualism, which has led some to conclude that Sartre's promotes an under-socialized, individualistic philosophy that is of little use to social work theory (Anderson, 1999). Viewed differently, we may interpret Sartre's interest in the concept of freedom as a concern for self-responsibility – a popular theme in philosophy dating back to antiquity. Arguably, self-responsibility and social responsibility are by no means mutually exclusive. However, if one engages more carefully with Sartre's thought, it soon becomes apparent that Sartre's philosophy reaches much deeper than the popularized version of his existentialism (a popularization of which he himself is partly responsible (Sartre, 1948)). Whereas I will not here attempt to propose a more nuanced interpretation of Sartre's concept of freedom (see Eriksson 2017), I will look toward another concept of his, namely: *the look* as found in his book *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1992). I hope to show how the look poses a novel approach to interpersonal understanding as we have covered the concept thus far, and that it is far from being an individualist take on the experience of others (cf. Anderson, 1999).

What makes Sartre's account of the look different from Husserl's *Einfühlung* and Schutz's *Thou-relation*, as I see it, is that Sartre (1992) does not commence his account from the perspective of the investigative mind, a mind reflecting on the being of the other. Sartre focuses not on my apprehension of the other but the other's apprehension of me – the experience of the other looking at me. Through the look, I experience that the other is another person in and by that I am seen, that *I am* for the other. In an acute sense, the reflective I is placed in the middle of social life, being exposed to it. Whereas the I of Husserl and Schutz indeed is involved and by no means detached from the experience of the other in describing it, Sartre's I is involved in an even more pervasive sense. Similar to Heidegger, Sartre's I is put at stake, but not by declaring one's own insecurity, as we saw with Paul's way of answering the Thessalonians, but by being at risk of becoming changed through the eyes of the other.

Let us look at Sartre's argument in more detail. In line with Sartre's aim of contextualizing intersubjectivity to everyday life he immediately starts referring to an example to support his argument. In the example, Sartre writes about how he observes a man in the park, thus placing himself right in the middle of his analysis. Sartre (1992) writes:

I am in a public park. Not far away there is a lawn and along the edge of that lawn there are benches. A man passes by those benches. I see this man; I apprehend him as an object and at the same time as a man. What does this signify? What do I mean when I assert that this object *is a man*? (p. 341)

What Sartre then sets out to do is make sense of how he (I) can perceive this man, not as an object but precisely as a man. How is this possible? he asks. Through his evolving example he tries out what can be drawn from it and how these progressive "observations" can help him arrive at what he seeks, that is, a clarification of the original or primary relation of Others. He starts out by proposing that this relation may be one of probability, but quickly finds reason to deny that this is the case. At this point in the text, Sartre argues that I can apprehend that the lawn that I see is a thing not only in relation to me but in relation to the man. The man manipulates the thing. I can see that he moves upon it, "as exercising a certain pressure on the ground" (ibid.). But to Sartre this does not disclose to him (I) that the other man is a man, only that he probably is. Probability is the concern of the scientist. This is an epistemic relation, and hence, one that does not satisfy Sartre: probability is not enough for accounting for how we experience other people in everyday life, not as probably people but *as* people, and to think of this experience as one of probability amounts to an insufficient account of intersubjectivity, in Sartre's view. And so, Sartre is inclined to look elsewhere than to the man's relationship to his surrounding world.

It is also very clear from Sartre's introduction that he here engages critically with Husserl's account of empathy. Sartre applauds Husserl for clarifying that the other is experienced by me as having their own relation to objects in our shared world. Quite poetically, Sartre writes, still pondering the status of the man-as-object, that "suddenly an object [i.e., the man] appears which has stolen the world from me" (p. 343). The experience of the man-as-object does indeed correspond with the experience of someone else's acting in the world, that objects that have meaning for me also have meaning for him, Sartre argues. Yet, this experience of the other's experiencing is not enough for Sartre in getting us to the original relation to the other. Sartre refers to Husserl's thesis on the experience of the other as founded on an absence of a self-relation, and shortly thereafter stresses that, with this way of describing the original relation the other, "*the Other* is still an object *for me*... He belongs to *my distances*; the man is there, twenty paces from me, he is turning his back on me" (p. 255). Shortly after, Sartre writes: "None of this enables us to leave the level on which the Other is an *object*" (p. 256).

But something happens, according to Sartre, when I consider the possibility of the other turning towards me and looking at me. He cannot treat me as an object like the grass, Sartre stresses, and in looking at me, he too is at once more than an object. This is what Sartre finds underemphasized in Husserl's account; that the other is an experiencing subject must not, according to Sartre, be accounted for as an apperception of the other's subjectivity, but that I have someone in front of me who not only perceives the things around us as objects, distinguishable from my relation to them, but someone who can perceive *me*. Referring again to Husserl, Sartre (1992) argues:

If it is this which defines the objectivity of the Other, then to what original presence of the Other does it refer? At present we can give this answer: if the Other-as-object is defined in connection with the world as the object which sees what I see, then my fundamental connection with the Other-as-subject must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of *being seen* by the Other. It is in and through the revelation of my being-as-object for the Other that I must be able to apprehend the presence of his being-as-subject.

... [T]he notion of the Other can not under any circumstances aim at a solitary, extra-mundane consciousness which I can not even think. The man is defined by his relation to the world and by his relation to myself... [T]he original relation of myself to the Other is not only an absent truth aimed at across the concrete presence of an object in my universe; it is also a concrete daily relation which at each instant I experience. At each instant the Other is *looking at me* (pp. 344-5)

In such a way, Sartre firmly situates his theory of intersubjectivity in everyday life, it is an intersubjectivity that is lived, not in and through reflection but how I am apprehended by the other, not only in face-to-face situations but in whatever situation the look may manifest itself.

[T]he look will be given just as well on occasion when there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain. During an attack men who are crawling through the brush apprehend as a look to be avoided, not two eyes, but a white farmhouse which is outlined against the sky at the top of a hill...

The look which the eyes manifest, no matter what kind of eyes they are, is pure reference to myself. (pp. 346-7)

The look is hence not confused with the eyes of the other. This distinction is paramount. The meaning of the look is not the look itself but what it *beholds*, that is, me.

As with all the texts we have been looking at in this chapter, there is clearly a double-sidedness to Sartre's concept of the look. In one sense, the look works as a philosophical concept with which Sartre seeks to lay bare the original relation to others. Yet, when considering the look in everyday experience we are not confronted with the look as a concept, or even how the look relates to the Other's eyes, but

precisely what the look intends and forces upon me when I experience it, that is, myself. What becomes clear when Sartre elsewhere in *Being and Nothingness* considers experiences such as shame and pride, we do not directly experience the look in everyday life. As Sartre writes: “It is shame or pride which reveals to me the Other’s look and myself at the end of the look. It is shame or pride which makes me live, not know the situation of being looked at” (p. 261). Sartre saw shame as being an experience of involuntary self-exposure, a situation wherein the self becomes thematized precisely as a self that can be judged by others (Zahavi 2014, pp. 238-9; see also Eriksson, 2019). And so, the meaning of the look is that it refers me to myself and not the look per se.

In contrast to Sartre’s example, when standing face-to-face with someone looking at me, I cannot reflectively fixate on this as an original relation, at the other as other, without objectifying it conceptually and so lose “sight” of it. To pre-reflectively experience the other’s look means to experience what the look does, that is, drawing me in, involving me here and now. And so, the look has an altering quality; it interrupts me by making me aware of myself. In the first sense, as a concept, the look exemplifies how a phenomenology of interpersonal understanding always seems devoted to reflecting on the taken-for-granted structure of the experience of others, highlighting aspects of that experience that Sartre himself thought had been overlooked by those before him (including Husserl). In the other sense, the look brings about a self-awareness in which I no longer can take myself and my relation to others for granted (i.e., a we-relation, to use Schutz’s term). I am forced to reflect on myself, and while this reflection may be devoted completely to my everyday concerns (e.g., how I am to hide myself from the other’s view), the movement from taken-for-grantedness to disclosure of intersubjectivity in my life with others is very much a phenomenological one. We see with Sartre’s account, as we did with Husserl, Schutz, and Heidegger, an account of intersubjectivity that touches upon implied phenomenological insights in everyday experience. In short, it is an applied phenomenology in the sense of turning our attention to phenomenological insights implied in everyday life and concerns. This, in addition to the formal articulation of such insights in phenomenological concepts and descriptions.

Conclusions

What is shared by the phenomenological descriptions reviewed for this chapter is that they in different ways are attempts to get as close as possible to how it is to experience social relationships. As such, these descriptions upend commonly held assumptions and misconceptions about how we know other minds. Interestingly, this commitment leads to a sort of distancing from the describing subject. Husserl’s (1960) fifth meditation, Schutz’s (1967) theory of social action, Heidegger’s (2004) reading of the Pauline letters and Sartre’s (1992) key passages on the look all explore how the social situation embeds and permeates philosophy and research. In an ambiguous way, phenomenology is applied in order to make sense of a worldly

experience that, when recognized as such, in different ways reflects back and defines the describing activity aimed at explicating it. This is seen already in Husserl's argument on apperception, that the experience of the other is an experience of a non-presence, something that cannot be fixed conceptually, as well as Schutz's distinction between pure and lived Thou-orientation, and his emphasis on the fact that the experience of the other must be located in our worldly social life – not in conceptual thought. Heidegger maintains that the experience of the other must be approached, not as an experience of their otherness, their uniqueness or singularity, as if it could be singled out by us, but as an experience of the other's situatedness or being-in-the-world. Sartre takes this even further when he stresses that the experience of the other is an experience of myself being subject to other people's appraisal of me through the look. These texts conceptualize social experience in order for us to appreciate it in a new way. Yet, this is done precisely by going beyond the conception of this experience as something achieved cognitively, as if our life with others starts with us thinking about them. Only then do we get a true sense of the significance of others: that our life with others extends so much further than its clarification in theoretical thought.

Part II: Applied phenomenology and social work

As stated in the beginning of this chapter, this thesis is a case of applied phenomenology. We have also seen how the notion of application is ambiguous and can be understood in a number of ways, especially when relating it to key texts in the phenomenological literature on interpersonal understanding. In this section, I want to address how I have applied phenomenology in social work research, yet also tried to reveal *implied* phenomenological insights at the level of everyday experiences. *Self-stigma, the experiential self and bad faith* (Eriksson, 2019), which for the remainder of this chapter will be addressed simply as Paper II, will function as an illustrative example. I want to show how Sartre's concept of the look can be applied as a theoretical concept as well as disclose the experience of stigmatization as a kind of informal phenomenological reflection on behalf of the stigmatized person. This approach does my no means resolve all difficulties surrounding the application of phenomenological ideas in social work research. However, I think that it amounts to showing an increased sensitivity for elusive aspects of phenomenological philosophy, as well as how these aspects may be valuable to emphasize in phenomenological social work research.

Applying phenomenological concepts in social work research

Starting with the notion of applying phenomenology, my papers clearly demonstrate how phenomenological philosophical texts can be used as sources of inspiration for studying the role of interpersonal understanding in a social work context. In hindsight, my procedure has been to identify topics of which there are overlapping interests in discussions in phenomenological literature and social work literature, respectively. Among other things, I have worked towards finding out what a phenomenological perspective can critically add to these discussions. In Paper I, entitled *Empathy in social work* (Eriksson and Englander, 2017) and Paper IV (Eriksson, 2023), with the working title: *Empathy, will and responsibility*, my focus have been to challenge common-sensical approaches to empathy in social work practice and research by arguing that these common-sense approaches not only rely on but also obscure a direct form of interpersonal understanding that has been elucidated in phenomenological literature (cf. Zahavi, 2010).

Paper I draws on secondary data from a previous study (Eriksson, 2015), data that underwent phenomenological analysis in accordance with Giorgi's (2009) and Davidson's (2003) qualitative research methods that are grounded in a phenomenological theory of science. The data was generated from in-depth interviews with social workers about their lived experiences of empathy in face-to-face encounters at work with asylum seekers (see Eriksson, 2015). Paper I, which is included in this thesis, is an example of an applied phenomenology with the purpose of showing how insights from the phenomenology of empathy correlates with findings in a qualitative phenomenological study, contributing with conclusions that can challenge preconceptions about empathy within mainstream pedagogical methods used in social work education (for summaries of Paper I-IV, see ch. 4). In other words, a phenomenological perspective was employed in order to show how the lived meaning of empathy was expressed in social workers' first-person accounts. The interview data is used to support the phenomenological theoretical framework, rather than using the latter as a means for explaining or interpreting the former. By bringing to attention a phenomenological perspective on empathy, part of our aim was also to clarify the role that empathy may play in social work practice. No empirical data was used in the subsequent papers.⁶

Later, in Paper IV, I returned to the topic of empathy but in the context of social work ethics, investigating how Husserl's and Emmanuel Levinas' phenomenological accounts of empathy may add clarity to discussions questioning the role and potential of empathy in social work ethics. To return to the initial question of overlapping interests, it is perhaps empathy that poses the clearest example in my papers of such an interest between phenomenology and social work research.

⁶ Since the empirical study (Eriksson, 2015) was conducted before the doctoral thesis, I have chosen not to present and discuss phenomenological empirical methodology in these introductory chapters. Such a methodological account and method section can be found in the original study.

In Paper II and Paper III, bearing the title *Talking, Listening and Emancipation* (Eriksson and Storgaard, 2022), the link between phenomenology and social work is less obvious and motivated by my wish to employ an explorative approach to limit cases of interpersonal understanding in the context of social work practice. Out of the many ideas for further research generated by Paper I, I subsequently, in Paper II, wanted to engage with topics adjacent to empathy rather than sticking to explore the empathy concept further and right away while maintaining a foothold in phenomenological philosophy as well as social work practice. In the preparatory phase of working with the second paper, the phenomenon of stigmatization appeared to be a sort of polar opposite to empathy. An initial question was whether stigmatization could disclose a kind of interpersonal misunderstanding, as opposed to understanding, in the worker-client relationship. Although this question was later abandoned in favor of pursuing a more delimited research topic, it was important to all the while maintain a phenomenological perspective on interpersonal understanding in all papers for the sake of keeping with the overall aim of the thesis.

Stigmatization can be generally defined as the process wherein a person or group is ostracized or otherwise treated negatively by others for possessing an undesirable trait or attribute. Considering that social workers often meet marginalized individuals and groups in their work, it is perhaps not strange that stigmatization is a well-represented concept in social work literature (e.g., Parker and Burke, 2006). Phenomenological literature, however, has not taken much interest in the stigma concept. Instead, I came to concern myself with phenomenological accounts of the concept of self, as well as shame and freedom, as insights in these accounts appeared relatable to discussions in stigma research, and more specifically, the interdisciplinary research field of self-stigmatization (Eriksson 2019). Against the backdrop of this thesis project, the paper can be viewed as investigating the socially perceived self as a dimension or modality of interpersonal understanding in face-to-face relationships. Also here, the aim of the paper developed into challenging the state-of-the-art, in this case involving how the concept of self-stigma has been framed in sociological and health science literature. In the paper I focus mainly on literature discussing how self-stigmatization can possibly be alleviated through social intervention, thereby still maintaining a social work angle to the paper and the reviewed literature. I will shortly return to discuss Paper II in more detail.

In an attempt to combine the topics of Paper I – being empathy and otherness – and Paper II – being stigmatization and selfhood – it felt reasonable that the third paper in some way should touch upon the modality of *we*, or *we*-relationship to paraphrase Schutz. Paper III seeks to make a contribution to the research field on self-help with a more radical concept of the peer-to-peer relationship, or simply peer-relation. The peer-relation is by research deemed as a unique form of interpersonal relationship in voluntary social work practice (Munn-Giddings and Borkman, 2017). It is believed to encompass reciprocity between people with similar experiences (e.g., the lived experience of alcoholism or mental illness) as opposed to the more fixed helper-helpee roles of the worker-client relationship in a standard account of

professional help. The peer relation seemed like a perfect fit for seeing what could be gained from comparison with Heidegger's notion of enactment in his reading of *First Thessalonians* (e.g., the situational understanding playing out between Paul and the congregation, discussed above). A fictive case of the peer-relation was used as a kind of intermediary between Heidegger's philosophy and the field of self-help research. The fictive case includes the experience of being understood by someone else, yet in a peculiar and different way than what might be expected in the standard account of professional help and listening. Like in Paper I and II, Paper III is argumentative in style, yet not so much seeking to critique but to add to the existing conceptual base on the concept of peer relation by employing phenomenological philosophical insights.

In all the papers, phenomenological texts, insights, and concepts can be said to have been applied to different topics in social work practice and research. Furthermore, beyond being phenomenological studies, the phenomenologies of interpersonal understanding by Husserl (1960), Schutz (1967), Heidegger (2004) and Sartre (1992) also emphasize how the description of the encounter reflects back on the phenomenological perspective brought to investigate it. This poses two questions when addressing a more in-depth consideration for how phenomenology has been applied in my papers. First, in what way can phenomenology be said to be implied in the lived experience of empathy, stigma, peer-relation? Secondly, how does this reflect on my own role as researcher, that is, in what ways is phenomenology disclosed as a personal relation to the world? I will try to address these questions by focusing on how Sartre's concept of the look is applied to understand the concept of self-stigma but also show how phenomenology is possibly implied in the experience of stigmatization.

Phenomenology implied: the case of self-stigma

The Look plays an important part in conceptualizing self-stigmatization as a case of self-objectification in Paper II. What is a self-stigma or self-stigmatization? If I were to self-stigmatize, I would endorse public stereotypes about an attribute I possess. I turn this attribute into a stigma by fixating on it and stigmatizing myself for thinking badly about myself because of it (see Corrigan, 1998). For example, "obese people cannot amount to anything, I am obese and therefore I am worthless". Whereas this statement is highly disagreeable in terms of its normative content (it is simply not true), we find from a phenomenological perspective that it also does not offer a very good description of what it means to be a person. Persons are not objects but subjects that may engage in acts of objectification, that is, endow objects with objectivity, objectify others as well as themselves. But how do we do that? Sartre's (1992) the look provides a partial answer in my view. As we saw in the previous section, Sartre argues that it is my objecthood in the eyes of others that discloses the other's being for me. Yet, Sartre also argues that the look may as well disclose my own subjectivity

for myself. In the experience of shame, Sartre argues, I become painfully aware that I am a person that others can judge (p. 221). This corresponds with the intentionality of experiencing the look. What I become aware of is that *I am seen*, as Sartre writes, not simply that someone else is looking at me (p. 259). Yet, experiencing shame does not necessarily mean that I am aware of what others experience me as. This I cannot know for certain, and it may actually be the uncertainty of the other's gaze that makes it especially painful to bear. In Paper II, I link Sartre's concept of the look to the experience of self-stigma by making the following suggestion: if what constitutes the experience of shame is the uncertainty of the look, self-stigma may reinstate certainty as the very thing I take others to see and judge me as (Eriksson, 2019, p. 399).

Moreover, Sartre's concept of the look is not only applied in my paper in order to make sense of self-stigmatization on a conceptual level, as if approaching self-stigma from a strictly theoretical and "detached" position. In similarity with how Sartre stresses that the experience of the look is an experience that forces me to consider others and my situation and concerns in everyday life, in Paper II I also wished to say something about the stigma experience aside from it being relatable to phenomenological concepts. At the level of experiencing a self-stigma lies also a possibility for emancipation (Eriksson, 2019). Whereas I may take for granted that I self-objectify, this is still an act, and as an act it is something I am committed to with my person. Hence, I cannot simply be an object to myself, something which I take for granted in my lived experience of stigmatization. Just as the look reveals to me that I can be objectified in the eyes of the other, this is still an experience that in so being disputes my status as object to myself. Here lies an emancipatory possibility on the level of self-stigmatization that is independent from it being clarified phenomenologically. I can reach the same conclusion about myself – that what I think of myself depends on how I view myself – and this, without the need of tending to my experience by carefully describing it phenomenologically. That is, I can become aware of my personal commitment to a stigma, perhaps aided by a therapist or professional, and I can do so without necessarily having read Sartre, or any other theory on selfhood for that matter. Yet, to reflect about myself in this way, to reflect critically on my own commitment to a stigma, can, indeed, be called a form of phenomenological reflection. It discloses my personal relation to the world (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1964, ch. 3) which has been taken for granted by me in the course of my everyday life. As such, it illustrates that phenomenological reflection is a lived practice that precedes its clarification in phenomenological description and by phenomenological concepts (cf. Barber, 2021).

Similar conclusions can be drawn from the other studies included in this thesis, thus, further strengthening the distinction between *added to* and *implied in* when it comes to applied phenomenology. In Paper I, the study participants engage in reflections about empathy that reveal what they previously have taken-for-granted about empathy. Paper III finds a connection between Heidegger's account of Paul and how peers may possibly relate to each other in a non-objectifying way, which

may be interpreted phenomenologically as an enactment of communication, that is, emphasizing the acts of talking and listening in addition to and aside from what is communicated. Lastly, in Paper IV, I show how critical accounts of empathy in social work ethics rely on a minimal form of understanding for conceptualizing an ethical commitment to other people in which empathy can be renounced or problematized. In conclusion, a phenomenological perspective reveals what is already inherently phenomenological about these phenomena in everyday experience.

Conclusions

In light of my own phenomenological research, we come back to the question of what the distinction is between phenomenological philosophy and applied phenomenology. Applied phenomenology can be partly understood as taking phenomenological philosophy as a source of inspiration for understanding a field of research, or material context, such as social work. Yet, we have also seen how phenomenology cannot be easily placed alongside a philosophy of science that separates theory and the manner (i.e., method) in which an object (e.g., empirical data) is to be theorized. This is clear when tending to phenomenological philosophical accounts of interpersonal understanding, where both application but also a sort of implication characterize these accounts. The notion that all kinds of phenomenology – philosophical and applied phenomenology alike – is applied in the sense of drawing on lived experience, shows that phenomenology in both philosophy and the sciences have much in common. It is perhaps the use of data, how a context is materialized, and the kinds of knowledge claims made from analyzing this data, that sets phenomenological philosophy and applied phenomenology apart. Yet, suggesting that phenomenology is something brought to a field of research in order to illuminate it is a dubious proposal. On the one hand, phenomenology can be understood as a radical practice – a pursuit of the how of experience – as experience is lived through. This, as we have seen, suggests that phenomenology is everchanging, personal, and elusive. On the other hand, if phenomenology is understood as a theoretical tool used to explain or understand a case, it is assumed to be tangible; even an object possible to bring into relation to another object. This problem is not dodged in my own research designs, where phenomenology is brought into discussions on particular topics and phenomena with the promise of bringing something concrete and useful to the table. In order to mitigate this incongruency and align myself more carefully with the elusive side of phenomenology, I have chosen to focus on how phenomenology may be viewed as, not only applied to, but also implied in phenomenological philosophical accounts of interpersonal understanding; how phenomenological reflection reaches back to grasp and make sense of a proto-phenomenological or lived dimension of experience before it is

thematized and articulated in phenomenological description. This provides a different facet of the connection between phenomenology as philosophy and social work as a field of research.

All this also touches upon my role as a phenomenological researcher. Whereas application suggests a form of problem-solving approach to research, implication draws on the notion of discovery. Yet, not in the sense of the natural scientist discovering the up until then hidden properties of its research objects, but a personal discovery of one's own relation to things of experience, that is, through phenomenological reflection. In this sense phenomenology amounts more to a rediscovery of the structure of experience, which in turn is described for the critical reader who thus becomes invited to partake in the phenomenological findings by relating to a shared experiential structure. It is not only about showing the reader a sound argument but also encouraging the reader to follow your description of intersubjectively shared meanings (cf. Giorgi, 2009, p. 136; 2018, p. 69). It is as if phenomenological research is carried out according to two moods, that of arguing philosophy with confidence reflected in persuasive language of academic writing, but also that of an exploration of experience that is much more insecure and vulnerable in its performance. I think that the latter mood is much more visible in my later papers as compared to my earlier ones. Still, my hope is that both moods are reflected in my papers throughout, so that they agree with the phenomenological Geist that I identify in phenomenological philosophical texts, both in terms of their theoretical output, but also how these theories are conveyed in letter.

4. Results

Paper I

Empathy in social work

Karl Eriksson and Magnus Englander⁷

Paper I (Eriksson and Englander, 2017), is, as previously mentioned, a phenomenological study on the lived meaning of empathy. As already stated, the paper draws partly on empirical findings from a previous study (Eriksson, 2015). The main argument, however, is theoretical, and draws on phenomenological accounts on the phenomenon of empathy. With these accounts, the paper seeks to challenge a dominant conceptual approach to empathy, that is, simulation theory, which has been advocated by social work researchers Karen E. Gerdes and Elisabeth A. Segal in several publications (e.g., Gerdes, 2011; Gerdes and Segal, 2011; Gerdes et al., 2013; Segal, 2011; Segal et al., 2013; Segal, Wagaman, and Gerdes, 2012). Gerdes et al. (2011) suggest that simulation theory may work as a ground for training social workers' capacity to empathize with clients. What Paper I contributes with to the conception of interpersonal understanding in social work, is the proposal that social workers do not need to train their capacity to empathize since they already enact an empathic attitude towards clients in their work. With such an outset, the difficulty felt by the study participants when it comes to talk about empathy may be attributed to the character – the very elusiveness – of the phenomenon of empathy itself, rather than being dismissed as the result of a supposed lack of knowledge or experience with empathy.

Empathy remains a central topic in social work research, due, for instance, to the conviction that understanding client needs is essential for social workers to provide a good matching of interventions (e.g., Turnage et al., 2012, p. 91). Yet, concerns have been raised over the lack of a unifying concept of empathy for social workers

⁷ K. Eriksson is first author and M. Englander is corresponding author to this paper. The paper is based on an earlier study and master's thesis authored by K. Eriksson (2015). M. Englander supervised said thesis project. A first draft of the paper was made by K. Eriksson. M. Englander revised the first draft, focusing on form and language style. Subsequent revision work is to be considered a joint effort. Both authors approved of the final version of the manuscript as well as its submission for publication.

and researchers to rally behind (cf. Gair, 2013). In one article, Gerdes et al. (2011) sets out to provide social work with such a concept, by adhering to neurocognitive research that explains our ability to empathize on the basis of how so-called mirror neurons simulate observed behavior in others. By way of extrapolation, the mimicry mechanism of mirror neurons is assumed to be the foundation for higher forms of interpersonal understanding, including explicit mental acts, such as perspective-taking. Gerdes et al. see this as evidence for a possible nature-nurture approach to empathy in social work practice, and suggest that the cultivation of empathy among social workers can be achieved through exercises of roleplay in an educational setting. Thus, a straight line is drawn between classroom simulation and simulation at the neural level. Cultivating empathy through simulation in such a way, the authors argue, may lead to the betterment of social work practice, as social workers who tend to their empathic ability may “create more and more effective interventions, particularly with clients from different backgrounds” (p. 127). Perhaps because of this, Gerdes et al. also hope that their turn to neurocognitive science can be guiding for future research on empathy in social work.

In our paper, we object to the above proposal by referring to an alternative way of looking at empathy, that is, in accordance with phenomenological accounts. By bringing together several accounts of empathy in phenomenological philosophy and sociology, provided by Husserl, Scheler, Stein, and Schutz, Dan Zahavi (2010; 2001), suggests that the simulation approach to empathy is seriously flawed. Among other things, it fails to uphold the self-other distinction implied in the act of understanding others. What the phenomenological accounts make clear, he writes, is that,

empathy is a basic, irreducible, form of intentionality that is directed toward the experiences of others... In empathy, the experience you empathically understand remains that of the other. The focus is on the other, and not on yourself, not on how it would be like for you to be in the shoes of the other. (Zahavi, 2010, p. 291)

According to Zahavi, the simulation theory adopts a phenomenologically naïve view of intersubjectivity, which assumes that other minds are hidden from first-personal view, and thus misinterprets the self-other distinction implied by empathy. According to the phenomenological proposal, then, the behavior of others is not in need of being simulated but is, through an act of direct social perception, experienced as already meaningful (e.g., a *happy* smile, or a *frustrated* head shake) in the first-person perspective (cf. Gallagher and Zahavi, 2012). Hence, we do not need to adopt someone else’s perspective in order to understand them. When reflecting on this act of direct social perception, the meaning expression of the other is disclosed as pre-reflectively lived through and taken for granted by me – what Schutz (1967) terms *we-relation*. Yet in a reflective act, or the *Thou-orientation*, in Schutz’s phrasing, the distinction between self and other is upheld. That is, I can never with certainty know what others are thinking or feeling; this is not an obstacle to my understanding, but

rather what makes the other appear as a unique person to me. In such a way, my taken-for-granted understanding of the other, and the elusiveness of the other's experience to me, are different sides to empathy that support and are compatible with each other – at least from a phenomenological point of view.

Provided with the phenomenological proposal to empathy, we set out to challenge Gerdes and Segal's proposal with support from empirical findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with social workers working with forced migrants (see Eriksson and Englander, 2017). Peculiarly, the conventional view of empathy as mediated by perspective-taking was almost completely absent in the study participants' accounts. Instead, other themes emerged across the data set. The participants all placed great importance on empathy as facilitating a professional stance towards clients, and across the interviews, participants gave empathy a sense of having a motivational quality. Focus was put on how empathy is received precisely as an empathic gesture by the client; that you as a social worker convey devotion and interest in the other person.

But the participants also had qualms about the role of empathy in their work. One participant was very hesitant over whether she even *could* understand what the unaccompanied minors she worked with were going through. Other participants made similar remarks, but importantly, not in order to dispute the possibility of empathic understanding with clients. Correspondingly, the participants repeatedly showed in their descriptive accounts of empathy at work that they understood their clients all the time without putting considerable weight on it, for example, when their clients were feeling stressed about the asylum process (p. 616). As one participant puts it, there is a form of empathy that is about the fact that you share a sense of humanity with your clients. This recognition was coupled with emphasis placed by the participants on respecting the other person's experience as *their* experience, as unique and inaccessible to one's own point of view. In summary, the results of the study were found to be in support of the phenomenological proposal to empathy as a direct social perception, thus refuting simulation theory as able to provide *the* guiding concept of empathy in social work. The article concludes with reference to Englander's (2014) phenomenologically inspired empathy training, and we suggest that empathy training, from a phenomenological point of view, should not focus on training mental acts, such as perspective-taking, but instead focus on teaching students to reflect on how empathy is expressed pre-reflectively in face-to-face interaction with others.

To summarize the paper through the lens of the overarching aim of the present thesis, the study participant found it difficult to explain what empathy is and what role it plays in their job. In parallel to the elusiveness constituting the experience of the other (Zahavi, 2001), the empathic act may itself appear as elusive to the empathizing subject. From an objectivist approach to empathy, such experiences can supposedly be explained away as testament to an insecurity that can be overcome by training one's ability of perspective-taking. That is, focusing on how well an individual subject may represent *what* another subject is feeling, as viewed from a

third-person perspective. However, such an interpretation would miss out on what would be gained from taking such experiences more seriously. When stressing the enactive dimension of empathy, the difficulty felt in talking about or trying to make sense of one's understanding of others, corresponds with the tension in the act-object relationship – the *what* and *how* of experiencing – as disclosed in phenomenological reflection. Hence, from a phenomenological point of view, the participants were possibly expressing, not simply their lack of familiarity with the empathy concept, or even the tacit character of practical knowledge (Polanyi, 2005), but that interpersonal understanding is concretely experienced a pre-reflective and spontaneous social activity. The phenomenology of interpersonal understanding offers an opportunity to articulate the difficulty of conceptualizing the enaction of empathy as a valuable professional experience, thus encouraging self-reflection while at the same time countering exaggerated expectations and demands on professionals' sense of self-control in face-to-face-encounters.

Paper II

Self-stigma, bad faith and the experiential self

Karl Eriksson

Paper II (Eriksson, 2019) is a theoretical paper that critically engages with the concept of self-stigma as it appears in sociological and health science literature. The concept of self-stigma by Patrick Corrigan and colleagues (e.g., 1998; Corrigan and Watson 2002, Corrigan and Rao 2012) has been regarded as a paradox, especially in terms of the possibility of recovering from self-stigma. I try to challenge this alleged paradox, along with the self-stigma concept itself, by suggesting that the literature on self-stigma operates with a one-dimensional notion of selfhood. To remedy this, I suggest that various phenomenological investigations of the self, but also of shame and freedom, may open up the discussion on self-stigma and make conceptual room for how it is possible to become emancipated from a stigmatized self.

Similar to the previous study (i.e., Paper I), Paper II offers a non-objective approach to interpersonal understanding. Whereas self-stigmatization at first appears to be a psychological phenomenon, a phenomenological account makes clear that self and selfhood cannot be omitted from a wider discussion on interpersonal understanding in a social work context. As has been discussed previously, in chapter 3, the reflective I constitutes the thematization of pre-reflective lived experience of interpersonal understanding, and yet so from a philosophical point of view. Certain self-experiences, such as, the experience of stigma, offer a more hands-on approach to showing how the modality of the self – or I – relates to a phenomenology of interpersonal understanding; how the self presents itself in a socially lived context.

What the paper contributes to the conception of interpersonal understanding in social work is a complimentary analysis of the social self, as a basis for considering the enactive aspects of selfhood in discussions on helping relationships (see Eriksson & Storgaard, 2022).

While the concept of self-stigma was briefly defined already in chapter 3, in relation to methodological considerations, a more detailed presentation is needed to appreciate the present contribution of phenomenological input on this subject. Self-stigma can basically be understood as the process wherein an individual takes to heart a negative stereotype about an attribute that the individual perceives that he or she is in possession of, that is, the individual stigmatizes him- or herself. This process, that also has been termed internalization of stigma, means that a social stigma becomes personal by manner of how public stereotypes are incorporated as a central identity for the individual (Link et al. 1989, p. 402), where it lies dormant to later be activated by cognitive priming in stigma-relevant situations (Corrigan and Watson 2002, pp. 40-1; cf. Pinel and Bosson, 2013, p. 60). This cognitive approach works as an explanation for the fact that, while sharing the same attribute, only some people and not others suffer from low self-esteem and self-worth. But pushing the argument further, why do some and not others internalize a stigma? Corrigan and Rao (2012) see this as a paradox: how some people may be indifferent to or even actively try to resist public stereotypes (e.g., expressing indignation rather than shame). They argue that if we are to find ways to help people who stigmatize themselves, we should best look closer at what the resisting group is doing, that is, how members of this group seem exempted from self-stigmatization. Corrigan and Rao (2012, p. 466) found that empowerment may be the key to understanding this. Individuals may cease to self-stigmatize if they, with the help of others (e.g., through treatment programs and peer-support groups), grow a healthy skepticism towards the public stereotypes that they otherwise may apply to themselves and take for granted as legitimate. Yet, given the alleged paradox playing out between those with a stigma identity and those without, how is this empowerment to be accomplished from the viewpoint of the stigmatized self? More specifically, if the self is viewed as synonymous with the social identity *qua* stereotype internalized as a central identity for the individual (cf. Link et al., 1989, p. 402), how is it possible for that self to contest and perhaps also change this identity? The notion of self that the concept of self-stigma operates with cannot make sense of this “empowering” move, which motivates a more careful investigation of what constitutes stigmatizing experiences from a first-person perspective.

Fundamentally, the concept of self-stigma struggles to make sense of how a public stereotype becomes *my* stigma. The problem here, as identified in the paper, is a separation adopted between the mind and (social) world, and as we previously saw (see ch. 2), phenomenology is famous for opposing such a dualistic view. This, since such a view fails to account for how objects are constituted by consciousness, and whereas this concern for consciousness in phenomenology has sometimes been seen as an unbridgeable divide to sociology, in the paper, I attempt to show that that

does not have to be the case. According to Zahavi (2014, ch. 2, 3), by adopting a view of the self as an intrinsic aspect of experiences themselves, it is possible to arrive at a notion of self that is both social and “personal”. This *experiential self* that coincides with the for-me-ness quality of my experiences, is not interchangeable with the content of a social identity, while not being something else either in a substantial sense. If experiences are not viewed as representations of reality but a co-givenness of both self and world, it is only through worldly (and social) involvement that we can clarify what a self is (ibid.), such as a stigmatized self. Yet, we are confronted not only with a worldly object (i.e., a stigma) but enactment of such an object through self-objectification. Experiences of having a stigma are, hence viewed phenomenologically, both something situational but still not reducible to the situation as if the situation passively “triggers” the stigma in me (cf. Pinel and Bosson, 2013, p. 60). What is going on here, I argue, is something much more active, which also allows for considering how I can possibly become emancipated from a stigmatizing identity.

Whereas Paper I locates the insight into the elusiveness of enaction in interpersonal understanding to social workers’ lived reflections on empathy in interviews, Paper II explores how such an insight instead may come about in the lived experience of stigmatization. I argue that it is with the ambiguity between the self as neither *pure activity* nor *pure objectivity*, in accordance with Sartre’s (1992) and Merleau-Ponty’s theories on intersubjectivity, that the possibility for emancipation from self-stigmatization lies. Sartre’s concepts of shame, the look, and bad faith, as well as Merleau-Ponty’s notion of freedom are discussed in the paper and related to the phenomenon of stigma. What unites Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, in my view, is that both emphasize the pervasively ambiguous state-of-being of the subject in relation to other people. As Merleau-Ponty’s (2002) declares, I am “never a [mere] thing and never bare consciousness” (p. 527), although each and every one of us might act *as if* we are, from time to time. This is what Sartre (1992, ch. 2) tries to capture with his concept of *bad faith*. When I treat myself as a thing, Sartre argues, I reduce myself to a victim of circumstance and I act in bad faith since I do not own up to the uncertainty that characterizes my existence, in Sartre’s sense, of “having perpetually to re-choose, or re-commit, ourselves to what we do [in life]” (Crowell 2017, sec. 3.1, §6). I suggest that self-stigmatization is a similar experience. I am never *just* obese, I am a person committed to this view of myself, thus expressing my agency even when I may deny that I have any. But neither is freedom from stigma, something achieved by negating a stigma through some kind of wishful thinking. Rather than an objective approach to social identity, which may suggest that emancipation from a stigma depends on changing a “bad” identity for a “good” one, I suggest that the freedom from stigma is a possibility that appears *together* with experiences of stigma – not in their absence. That is, only in experiences of stigma may I clarify how objectivity and realness of a stigma depends on my enaction of self-objectification. Perhaps, I suggest, this reflective insight provides a starting point for overcoming a stigma-identity in a social work context.

Paper III clarifies how such an emancipative possibility may play out in a face-to-face context.

Paper III

Talking, listening and emancipation: A Heideggerian take on the peer-relation in self-help

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Paper III (Eriksson and Storgaard, 2022) is a theoretical paper centering on how Martin Heidegger's (2004) reading of the *First Thessalonians* of the New Testament, via a case taken from the context of self-help, poses a novel take on the concept of the peer-to-peer relationship in voluntary social work practice. In light of the two previous studies, Paper III contributes with yet another way to approach the enactment of interpersonal understanding, that is, through the modality of *we*. Whereas prior research has come to stress the presence of shared identity between peers as a basis for equality, we instead try to show how the peer-relation may disclose the significance of communicative acts in helping relationships.

The peer-relation has previously been distinguished from the professional social worker-client relationship on the basis of reciprocity (see Munn-Giddings and Borkman, 2017). Within the peer-relation, peers are believed to engage in mutual help and support. An example of this would be how sober addicts meet in a so-called sharing circle to share their experiences of recovery with each other. In contrast, the traditional worker-client relation has usually been conceived as one-sided – the worker helps the client and not the other way around. In challenging this hegemony, peer-support researchers have paid special interest in what characterizes the benefits of the peer-relation as opposed to the standard account of professional help (ibid.). However, our study observes that the point of departure for the state-of-the-art is a rather objectivistic understanding of the peer-relation. What is key to understanding the peer-relation, according to research, is how peers – say, sober addicts – share an identity as addicts and how they then through trading insights and wisdoms with each other renegotiate this identity into something more positive (i.e., from stigma to resource) (e.g., Borkman, 1999, pp. 150-1). This focus on content is analogous to professional knowledge, we argue. For example, more experienced peers, or peers having come further in their recovery, are expected to guide the newcomers of the group. Upon further investigation, little then seems to distinguish the helper-helpee

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roles of peer-support from professional help, other than that of turn-taking (in that one takes turns being helper and helpee). Thus, the question is whether the peer-relation is that unique and special after all, or simply echoing the power structures found in traditional helping relationships.

With the help of a case, we try to show that there is possibly a more radical instance of the peer-relation available to research, that is, further supporting rather than doubting the possibility that the peer-relation is distinguishable from the worker-client relationship. The case features Mia, a sober addict, who gives an account of her first encounter with her peer Bosse (Törnblom, 2009, pp. 84-87; see Eriksson and Storgaard, 2022, pp. 83-86). Much to Mia's surprise, the encounter with Bosse results in that she, very openly, starts sharing her life story with him. Mia stresses that what was so special with this encounter, as opposed to the one's she had had with professionals, prior to meeting Bosse, was that he did not expect anything particular from her. He did not expect her to talk about herself. Instead, he started simply to talk about himself and his life. In the story, this is portrayed as the driving force behind Mia's initiative to do the same, to open up to Bosse, and start looking at her own prior experiences of addiction in a new light.

In order to expand on these points in Mia's case, we consider closely Heidegger's reading of *First Thessalonians*. *First Thessalonians*, as well as Heidegger's reading of it, is summarized above (see ch. 3) but will here be recounted briefly. The Thessalonian letters correspond to chapters in the New Testament (New International Version Bible, 2011, 1-2 Thess.) that recounts St. Paul's communication with his congregation in Thessalonica. Heidegger's philosophical (as distinguished from a theological) interest in St. Paul can be found in Paul's rather peculiar approach to the Thessalonian congregation. The letters of Paul are written after the presumed question directed to him from the Thessalonian congregation about the exact time of the second coming of Christ. Paul does not offer the congregation any assuring answer but rather refers the Thessalonians to themselves. Heidegger sees that Paul is himself uncertain and it is through his uncertainty that he conveys to the Thessalonians that they are on the right track in their belief; they already live in salvation and as Christians through their activity of waiting, which they would not do if they were convinced of exactly when Christ would return (Heidegger, 2004, esp. p. 66). We frame this co-enactment on behalf of Paul as *an enactive sense of we* that transgresses the sharing or transmission of an objective identity, such as a certain answer to rally around (Eriksson and Storgaard, 2022, p. 79).

The *enactive we* makes for a novel approach for thinking about the peer-relation, in our view. We find a similar enactive approach in Mia's depiction of Bosse. Analogous to Paul's vague answer to the Thessalonians, Bosse does not indicate for Mia how she should view herself, or even that she is expected to talk about herself following his act of sharing. By focusing on himself, Bosse assumes that Mia is capable of listening to him. She is invited to relate to him rather than the other way around, where Bosse then would be the listener expecting Mia to talk. What sets

Bosse apart from the professional social workers that Mia had met with before can, through phenomenological analysis, be interpreted as precisely not giving Mia any ready-made answers on how to view herself. By the absence of a professional agenda that would indicate for Mia what to do in order to become helped (to be listened to, to talk, to acquire a new identity, and overcome self-blame) – that is, referring to an objective we – Mia depicts Bosse as helping her indirectly, by *moving* her to talk, and engage in dialogue about herself, that is, enacting the peer-relation with Bosse.

Whereas the prospects of self-narration are well-known to peer-support research (see e.g., Borkman, 1999), we conclude our study by saying that we provide a conceptual framework that allows for an understanding of agency, and the possibility for a form of emancipation that relies on enactment. Emancipation, in this view, relates to the communicative activities (i.e., talking and listening) themselves and not just the content being transferred through such activities. That is, also listening and talking, and not just *what* is talked about or listened to, may facilitate the favorable prospects of peer-support. In such a scenario, a stigmatizing-identity is not something overcome by deliberately trying to change one's view of it, but overcome by indirectly allowing for what is denied by a stigma, that is, agency and personhood, to be expressed interpersonally. Bosse's expectation on Mia as capable of listening to and understanding him, is, or so we suggest, what makes his approach non-stigmatizing. She is allowed to explore her own experiences in the light of his act of sharing his experiences. Viewed in terms of its contribution to the conception of interpersonal understanding in a social work context, the paper invites the reader to consider the idea that interpersonal understanding is a mutually shared process. Interpersonal understanding is not something reserved for the professional; not simply about how one person attempts uncover the inner world of the other in order know how to help him or her. Such a view fails to account for something that many professional counselors, at least intuitively, know to be true: that often, it is the conversation itself that is perceived as helpful by clients, and not so much what is specifically being talked about, or even how.

Paper IV

Empathy, will and responsibility: Clarifying the contested role of interpersonal understanding in social work ethics

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In the last paper, Paper IV (Eriksson, 2023), I revisit the phenomenological proposal on empathy and look towards how it may bring clarity to a critical discussion on empathy in literature of relevance to social work ethics. Given that it is reasonable to demand that empathy, as a watchword and norm in social work practice, ought to

withstand scrutiny, can social workers then opt for other ways of relating to other people? I take a closer look at three critical accounts of empathy from the field of applied alterity ethics. Nai Ming Tsang (2017), Sharon Todd (2003), and Hanna Bäckström (2020) have all in different ways problematized a common-sense notion of empathy understood as perspective-taking. They have done so by applying Emmanuel Levinas' alterity ethics to the relationship between social worker and client (Tsang 2017; Bäckström, 2020), as well as between teacher and student (Todd, 2003; Tsang, 2017). These accounts are right in being skeptical of the assumption that I must understand what something is like for another person in order for me to have an ethical commitment to that other person. Rather, ethical commitment arises through our way of *responding* to the fact that we per definition cannot access the *other's* point of view, the authors argue in accordance with their interpretations of Levinas' ethics. Yet, may not empathy be the very phenomenon that precisely discloses that the other is someone else whose point of view does not coincide with my own? By turning to Edmund Husserl's (e.g., 1960) theory of empathy, and Levinas' (1983) critical reception of it, I show that empathy, in terms of a direct social perception, may be approached as a pre-reflective and thus spontaneous activity. This makes my immediate experience of the other's subjectivity elusive for ethical reflection. I find this to correspond with Levinas' (p. 535) point that the encounter with the other cannot be intended but is a disruption of intentional experience. In regard to the conception of interpersonal understanding in the context of social work practice, the paper explores a non-ethical account of empathy. This means to problematize the notion that social workers can ethically deliberate interpersonal understanding, which in turn points to the problem of exactly how to promote responsivity in applied alterity ethics.

Levinas and his ethics appear as a theme throughout this paper, so it makes sense to continue this summary with a short introduction to his philosophy. Levinas (e.g., 1980) famously argued that ethics, in a radical sense, arise not from ethical principles or ethical reflection on behalf of the ethical *I*, but through confrontation with *the other* in the face-to-face context. It is the other that *summons* or constitutes the *I*, which can be taken to mean that it is only through encountering the other that we can become confronted with ourselves and what we assume to be our ethical obligation to other people. In such a way, the other (or *the face of the other*) calls the *I* to be responsible, in the sense of responding to the other. It is in the difference or asymmetry between *I* and other where ethics has its beginning, not our alleged similarity, according to Levinas.

How does Levinas' ethical account of the face-to-face encounter stand up against Husserl's theory of empathy, informed by his epistemological philosophy? We have elsewhere reviewed the phenomenological proposal on empathy as a direct social perception and it will not be rehearsed here. What is added in this paper is an ethical layer to Husserl's account that also corresponds with Levinas' critique. Levinas' critique of Husserl's theory of empathy revolves around the idea that the encounter with the other cannot be disclosed merely as an experience for reflection. As Levinas

(1983, p. 535) stresses, the other is *beyond* experience; the other disrupts my intentional acts. Perhaps, this is what happens when I become baffled or surprised by someone else, when they give themselves out to be more than what I *thought*. Levinas also emphasizes that this *beyond* cannot be a “mere continuation of intentionality” (ibid.), which I interpret to be a reminder of that otherness, or the difference between I and other, cannot be sought by me as an ethical “goal” or objective but must emanate spontaneously and concretely from the I-other encounter.

One would think that this marks a definitive break with Husserl’s theory of empathy, but in the paper I argue that it must not necessarily be that way. Rather, we may understand Levinas’ critique as being, in part, a development of elements that are already present in Husserl’s theory of empathy, of how we come to experience others. The fact that we can experience others does not mean that the other is completely accessible to my experience. As the reader might recall, Husserl (1960) argued that, while the other has a body that resembles my own, the other’s body is presented to me precisely as not being *my* body, but the body of someone else (see also ch. 3). The alter-ego, or the other’s subjectivity, is thus only indicated to me. Hence, while I can focus on the other’s behavior, their body or even the concept of “the other”, these objects of thought do not stand in or replace the other as he or she is given to my immediate pre-reflective experience. In such a way, also for Husserl, the other is not turned into an object for consciousness but is experienced as precisely transcending objectivity in reflection.

Going back to Levinas’ thesis on otherness, it is not strange that Tsang (2017), Todd (2003), and Bäckström (2020) have found purchase in Levinas’ ideas for problematizing empathy as perspective-taking. Yet, a tension emerges in this critique when considering the aspect of spontaneity implied in Husserl’s view of empathy as direct and pre-reflective. Both Tsang and Todd end up portraying empathy as egotistically motivated, which coincides with the notion of an ethical I that already knows what is ethical. Empathy thus fails to make sense of how we can be responsive to and learn from others that are found to be unlike ourselves. Let us look at Tsang’s account in more detail: Tsang (2017) argues that empathy is a way of relating to the other that relies on one’s own experiences. As such, empathy embodies a knowledge-based approach to other people, in her view. This approach does not, according to her, do justice to ethical commitment in the worker-client relationship, as well as the teacher-student relationship in social work practice and education. Tsang stresses that empathy is blind for individual differences, differences in culture, language, and emotions. Furthermore, understanding what something is like for the other does not necessarily lead to the willingness to act in the face of inequality and injustice, thereby suggesting that such disparities is what instead fuels our responsibility towards clients, not our alleged similarities from which empathic understanding supposedly emerge.

What is needed, according to Tsang (2017), is a dialectical “stance of ‘understanding and not understanding’ that regards service users as people who can both be known and unknowable” (p. 316). Concretely, Tsang envisages a pedagogic

approach that helps students to actively listen to clients in order to learn things that they did not already know beforehand. This, with the hope of helping students become more humble and self-critical in their future work. Yet, a contradiction arises in Tsang's argument: Are we with these suggestions for education not turning the unknowable into something knowable; a method or tactic that can be taught and employed? Does this not reiterate the notion that the social worker in the end is in control of his or her ethical commitment, just like the alleged egoism of empathy? There is a similar contradiction in Todd's (2003) account, while Bäckström (2020) adopts a more nuanced approach (see Eriksson, 2023, pp. 17-29). Nonetheless, what is shared by all three accounts is the assumption that interpersonal understanding needs to be intended by the ethical subject, thus reiterating the problem of will in conceptualizing the ethical encounter with the other.

The paper concludes by arguing that Husserl's theory of empathy, as well Levinas reception of it, points to a fundamental problem for applied alterity ethics in social work: how are we to promote responsivity in light of "a persistent will that seems to enter the scene whenever we stop and think about others instead of taking them for granted in living with them pre-ethically" (Eriksson, 2023, p. 30)? It is dilemma pointing back to the limits of professional action; that it cannot render itself passive.

5. Discussion

Taken together, the original papers afford a relational inquiry into the subject matter of interpersonal understanding in the face-to-face situation in the context of social work. The first study challenged a conventional understanding in how the professional understands the client in the mode referred to as empathy (Eriksson and Englander, 2017). The second study critically explored the concept of self-stigmatization and self-understanding in relation to others (Eriksson, 2019). In the third study, Eriksson and Storgaard (2022) explored the self-other relation in the modality of we, that is, the indirect approach of interpersonal understanding within the peer-relation. The fourth study addressed the topic of social work ethics and its relation to empathy (Eriksson, 2023), in which self-confrontation during the encounter discloses a form of interdependency within the worker-client relationship. As such, each of the papers play a distinct role in a progressive investigation into elusive relational modalities of interpersonal understanding relevant to social work practice, research, and education; that is, topics that are difficult to objectify, and need to be elucidated and understood within the interpersonal context in which they appear.

What overall discussion can spring from this investigation and what is the value of applying a phenomenology of interpersonal understanding within the social work context? The conclusions seem to keep coming back to the phenomenological distinction between activity and objectivity, as well as the value of grasping the deeper layers of the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding. As we could see in the above studies, much of mainstream research seem to overlook non-objective, enactive aspects of interpersonal understanding. Consequently, such research fails to appreciate the fundamentally implicit and constitutive elements pertaining to face-to-face interaction. In a positive sense, then, the phenomenological distinction between activity and objectivity could foster alternative ways to approach interpersonal understanding within social work research. Working from the distinction between objectivity and activity makes it possible to see how social workers take a basic form of empathy for granted that they consequently do not reflect upon. Such an insight could contribute to social workers' appraisal of their relationships with clients as interpersonal relationships transcending professional aims (Eriksson and Englander, 2017). Furthermore, the phenomenological distinction between activity and objectivity helps to lay bare an emancipatory possibility for the stigmatized self, emanating from how the enactment of selfhood

transcends self-images, that is, as objects of reflection (Eriksson, 2019). Additionally, the concept of enactive we, as distinguished from an objective we, expands the notion of togetherness between peers as not necessarily founded on a shared discourse or identity (Eriksson and Storgaard, 2022). Lastly, a notion of professional control in the ethics of empathy is reappraised (Eriksson, 2023). The other's interruption of the I's act of understanding is what discloses the other as transcending objecthood, and not the I's attempt at becoming receptive to the other, the study suggests. An understanding at the very outset of the professional relationship can thus be characterized as spontaneous and receptive. Therefore, the four studies reported on within the context of the overall thesis project contributes to a critical commentary on an objective approach to interpersonal understanding within social work practice.

The following can be stated in response to the first research question (which was: In what ways does the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding disclose a tension between the lived everyday character of interpersonal understanding and its conceptual clarification in phenomenological reflection?): The phenomenology of interpersonal understanding discloses the inert problem in most mainstream research and idea of professional practice, as in confusing the *how* with the *what*. Consequently, phenomenological inquiry can thus help to clarify the reciprocal enactment of interpersonal understanding within social work practice. As such, the we-relation can be reflected upon. Previously we saw this dynamic play out as the very ambiguity of applying and implying phenomenology, and prior to that, that phenomenology is elusive to itself in its attempt to get to the *how* of practice by describing it in terms of the *what*. With an investigation into the subject matters of empathy, stigmatization, and peer-support, indeed confronted with the elusive relations of understanding, neither the social self, nor the other, can be objectified and measured. Instead, such concepts must be disclosed as phenomena, that is, as lived through in pre-theoretical or pre-conceptual everyday life. Interpersonal understanding, it is suggested, must be approached through phenomenological reflection that enigmatically reaches beyond itself to its original relation within pre-reflective lived experience. This movement of phenomenological reflection presents a tension between the concrete and the abstract "sides" of the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding and how these sides mutually support one another dialectically. Interpersonal understanding is something we are already engaged in, whether we pay attention to it or not, and only by manner of attempting to grasp the enactment of interpersonal understanding in reflection, that is, by abstracting it, can the concrete character of such an enactment become articulated.

A similar dialectic is central also to Bornemark's notion of professional judgment. Revisiting it, may provide a way to discuss the findings within this thesis project in relation to their possible relevance for practice, and thus also answering the second (2) research question of this thesis project: namely, what could be understood as an appreciation of the tension intrinsic to interpersonal understanding within the

worker-client relationship in the context of social work practice? In short, the insight that professional judgment cannot completely disclose the other as an object for professional action, may pose as a challenge to the technicalization of interpersonal relationships in social work practice.

Professional judgment and the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding

According to Bornemark, professional judgment is upheld by tensions, paradoxes, and dilemmas. Teachers, Bornemark (2020, pp. 81-2) notices, are well aware of the balancing act involved when having to tend both to the class as a whole, as well as to those individual students in need of extra attention and support. Such dilemmas create a space of uncertainty towards which we cannot remain inert. In this space, judgment is called for and forces us to act, even though we cannot know beforehand what the outcome is going to be. With inspiration taken from the works of German medieval philosopher Nicolaus Cusanus, Bornemark argues that such acts can never be completely “fulfilled”, but always take place within horizons of *not-knowing* (swe: icke-vetande), horizons that unfold beyond any kind of knowledge. My judgment is informed by what I know, but judgment is always carried out from a position of partial knowing. If I were to know beforehand the consequences of my actions, which I cannot, judgment would not be needed.

This kind of progressiveness of professional judgment has also been discussed by profession researcher Donald Schön (1983) in his theory on professional reflection. In similarity to Bornemark’s argument, Schön stresses that uncertainty is a driving force in professional reflection, and especially in the mode of *reflection-in-action*, which Schön distinguishes from *reflection-on-action*. Deliberate acts of reflection (i.e., reflection-on-action) where one may sit down to contemplate what to do are rare in the work life of the professional. Problems seldom come predefined but are instead worked out from what Schön calls a *problem setting*; a setting that, as opposed to being ordered, is confusing and messy (p. 40). A great part of professional reflection has to do with framing problem settings into manageable problems, Schön argues. Such reflection-in-action is a form of experimenting, of figuring things out as you go along, where prior experiences are necessary but only partly helpful when it comes to grasping new situations (p. 63).

Although Schön, like Bornemark, draws on the spontaneous and intuitive aspects of professional judgment, Bornemark’s model stands out in important ways compared to Schön’s model. As opposed to the end-oriented movement of reflection-in-action (i.e., from problem setting to manageable problem), implying a sort of prevailing of order, conflict and ambiguity are more continually present for Bornemark. Professional judgment in her view means not to overcome the tensions that support and “feed” it. This is especially clear when Bornemark (2020, p. 26)

considers the face-to-face encounter. Other people are indeed horizons to me whenever I really pay notice to them; when I look into their eyes, Bornemark stresses, and continues:

To see a human as the living being she is, is to see that one does not see. I see that I don't see everything, that the other's life traverses me, exceeds beyond what I can possibly know. Despite the possibility of really getting to know this other human being, our relationship would become dead where I to believe that there was nothing left to know about her. (ibid. [my translation])

The encounter with the other expresses perhaps more saliently than any other situation the tension between the known and not-known, and as Bornemark emphasizes, there would be no need for relating to others if they were only objects of knowledge. Still, the other person – as a client, patient, student – becomes objectified in the professional judgment of social workers, doctors, and teachers. The fact that there is much beyond what I can plainly see in the other's face does not stop me from making up my mind (at least partly) about who the other is and what they need. Furthermore, and as we previously saw, even to abstract a concrete someone into “the other” is itself a form of objectification (cf. Eriksson, 2023). Yet, from another point of view, my objectifying grasp of the other does not necessarily make me blind for their elusiveness, that I do not and cannot ever fully know them. Rather, my judgment is spurred by these hidden depths of the other, perhaps even what calls me to act on the other's behalf (cf. Levinas, 1980).

Bornemark's concept of professional judgment illustrates how interpersonal understanding cannot be seen as simply instrumental to professional judgment, in the sense of informing the choices of professionals as a skill or principle, since the tension between the concrete and abstract sides of the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding can be seen as intrinsic to professional judgment itself. If our taken-for-granted understanding of the other is left unattended, that is, if it were to remain on the level of concrete pre-reflective experience, we would never be able to tend to the other as a unique person, and we would never be able to question our assumptions about the other as precisely assumptions that might be wrong and in need of being interrogated critically. And still, to tend to my concrete life with others reflectively, by abstracting it, can never guarantee for me a more proper or correct appraisal of the other person. My understanding of the other is never really a question of arriving at a precise knowledge of what the other knows or feels (cf. Heidegger, 2004). The phenomenological insight that the other is presented to me as other precisely by eluding my objective grasp *is an insight that I can only arrive at in my attempt to know the other*, and at the very same time become confronted with the futility of such an attempt. My act of judgment of the other – what the other needs, what they feel, or how to help them, and ultimately: who the other is –, potentially discloses the very limit to my approach of knowing the other. The professional judgment of the other *as other* never “arrives” to a final conclusion, but revolves around itself perpetually, as a reminder of its own incompleteness.

Technicalization and the face-to-face

Phenomenology offers human care professionals something as peculiar as an articulation of the incomplete comprehension of social life. In so far as the professional may find him or herself engaged in social interaction which goes beyond that of problems (or problem settings) of importance only to the professional role, the professional role may precisely be ceased as one having limits. Rather than being an obstacle to professional development, such a limiting condition may elucidate some of the impacts of the current trend of technicalization in human care work.

In technologically-mediated interaction with others, as in the case of using manuals, we may at times and to a certain extent become bereft of the possibility to be confronted with our own limitations. Martinell Barfoed (2014) shows in her ethnographic study on professionals' use of an interview questionnaire (i.e., Addiction Severity Index) for assessing client needs, that the questionnaire itself easily becomes the center of attention in the face-to-face interaction between worker and client. Focus is given mainly to interpreting and filling in the questionnaire items correctly, rather than to the client and their situation. Likewise, Jönsson (2019) illustrates how technology in the form of workflow charts may "skew" the perception of social workers. When her study participants complained about not being able to make their weekly quota of cases, they tended to blame themselves for lack of efficiency, rather than the seemingly unrealistic expectations on behalf of the system enforcing the quotas (p. 220). Such experiences of inadequacy in regard to either ourselves, others, or the tools we use shield us from acknowledging our own limitations. The "inefficient worker" feels that he or she ought to be able to do more, and similarly, when the interviewer asks a question that appears difficult for the interviewee to answer, the situation compels us to think that it is either the tool or the interviewee that is at fault (cf. Martinell Barfoed, 2016, pp. 10, 16).

At least some forms of technology seem to insulate – more so than isolate – us from others, and in extension, from ourselves. The obvious paradigmatic example is the much debated echo chambers of various online forums that while arguably bringing like-minded people together, effectively shut out diverging opinions. In a social work context, a more fitting example would be the increased use of videoconferencing, in the wake of Covid-19. Pascoe (2021, p. 3270) argues that the apparent benefits of videoconferencing as a means for interacting with clients, such as increased accessibility, have to be weighed against the loss of full bodily presence in such encounters. Showing kindness with a gentle touch on someone's shoulder, or speaking up against unfair treatment with the full force of one's voice and posture are things that are only possible to do when two people share the same physical space. Yet, adding to Pascoe's point about how the face-to-face context allows social workers to use their bodies as a tool (p. 3282), social workers are not tools, but people. The face-to-face may not be conceived of merely as an arena or playground for professional expertise. The face-to-face is also a space of absolute

proximity wherein the professional is potentially put at risk. They are put at risk as persons beyond their professional role, who (at least sometimes) are placed in an emotionally vulnerable state through their confrontation with the other, and this not only in situations of facing (threats of) violence but also, for example, in situations of intimacy (cf. Todd, 2004, ch. 3).

When we become insulated from each other, we are no longer confronted with anything new, weird, strange, or scary – we do not develop but stagnate. If there is some truth to this claim, ought we then not safeguard and possibly even promote more face-to-face interaction in human care work? It is a difficult question to answer, not only because it far exceeds the scope of this thesis project but because it also assumes that the face-to-face is something unequivocally good. We simply have to look to our own lives and how we communicate with others to find that the face-to-face is far from always preferable to other forms of communication. Furthermore, there is nothing to say that a similar degree of immediacy (and intimacy), as offered in face-to-face encounters, cannot be created virtually, now or in the future. Rather than posing the question of the to-be-or-not-to-be of the face-to-face, we need to continue to ask ourselves about the meaning of the face-to-face context and what it signifies in professional human care work. Consequently, what is important is to promote open dialogues among practitioners and researchers where, for example, hard-to-capture aspects of practical knowledge and shared practices may be talked about as well as cared for (cf. Bornemark, 2021, pp. 68-71). What this thesis adds to such discussions is, among other things, that it is not in the *absence* of an objectifying approach towards others that the enactment of interpersonal understanding is revealed, but in *surplus* of and *contrast* to it. In that sense, our taken-for-granted outlook on the world and others – our natural attitude, to use Husserl's phrasing – will remain for us, as well as for phenomenological thought, a constant source of inspiration for exploring our sense of togetherness.

Social work and interpersonal relationships – some final thoughts

We now return, lastly, to the promise of relationship-based social work and its possibly unique concern among the human care professions for realizing the true significance of interpersonal relationships (e.g., Howe, 1998). A radical consideration of interpersonal relationships means to acknowledge that we are already in them, they involve our whole person, and we may become changed by them. As Morén (2015) argues, the remodeling of social identity puts at stake not only the self-image of the client, but the self-image of the social worker as well:

The helping relationship implies a mutual questioning of self-images and worldviews. The social worker cannot help to make a change of the client's life situation without

being prepared to examine and change him- or herself. The official role, handed down by the organization, becomes peeled off and perforated and does no longer provide any protection... (p. 56 [my translation])

It is almost as if what defines the social worker role, in a radical sense, according to Morén, is the readiness to abandon it. Or perhaps we encounter here a broader notion of what it means to be a social worker, that is, not merely as a bearer of an official role, or someone engaged in the development and refinement of their skills as professionals, but as someone set on disclosing their interdependency on others. What does the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding propose for such a someone, and, further, for the discipline as a whole? The true meaning of interpersonal relationships is not found with those relationships yet to come, but with those we are part of today. We must allow ourselves to notice these relationships, and think about them, and eventually realize that we cannot completely cease them and make them into our aim and ideal. In other words, what is already taking place within these elusive relations cannot be overlooked nor completely objectified. As we have seen in the four studies within this thesis, some understanding is already present within the context of interpersonal understanding. To claim that this pre-reflective, interpersonal understanding can be pre-known or objectified, is to adhere to dogma and thus try to ignore intersubjectivity altogether. Ultimately, the phenomenology of interpersonal understanding could remind social workers that they are as subjects indeed *thrown* into social life (cf. Heidegger, 2008, p. 178), which is a condition they share with their clients – and everyone else.

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