



## With the Lifeworld as Ground: Introduction to the Special Issue. An Outline of the Gothenburg Tradition of the Lifeworld Approach

by Jan Bengtsson

### Abstract

*This paper outlines the history of the lifeworld tradition since its initiation in the Nordic countries during the 1980s at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden.*

*In this presentation, the tradition of the lifeworld approach focuses mainly on doctoral theses within the tradition although it should be noted that publications in the tradition are not limited to only these kinds of writings. Many lifeworld researchers have published extensively in books and journals as well as other forums, and have been enormously successful in the academic world.*

*Although the lifeworld approach largely had its origins in philosophy and education at the University of Gothenburg, it has rapidly spread to other disciplines and universities as well as other countries, even beyond the Nordic regions. The lifeworld approach has seen considerable growth in Europe as well as internationally as it continues to attract proponents and researchers from a broad spectrum of human and social science scholars.*

The lifeworld approach is an established research tradition in the Nordic countries. Since 2000 its hub has been the Centre for Lifeworld Phenomenological Research, which is located at the Faculty of Education, University of Gothenburg. The Centre attracts researchers from all the Nordic countries with some 130 persons on its send-list. When an international committee evaluated the research of the university in 2010, the Centre was said to be “playing the role of hub in their network, corresponding to the grade Excellent” (RED 10 research evaluation, 2010, p. 105).

According to Gadamer, all traditions are embedded in histories (Gadamer, 1960/1975). There is thus a question regarding the specific history within which the tradition of the lifeworld approach is embedded.

History is made of actions and activities, and in research traditions they consist of significant actions such as publications and activities such as courses, seminars and lectures. In the history of the lifeworld approach, the text entitled *Sammanflätningar: fenomenologi från Husserl till Merleau-Ponty* [Intertwinings: Phenomenology from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty] by Jan Bengtsson (Bengtsson, 1988a) has played a crucial role in the development of this tradition. The book was published by the Swedish publisher Daidalos in 1988, but was based on lectures held in 1986 at the Department of Sociology in Gothenburg and published in the Department’s report series in 1987 (Bengtsson, 1987a, 1987b) before it was published as a book. The lectures were attended by a large number of people and resulted in an invitation to give a course in phenomenology for their doctoral

students as well as to write a chapter about phenomenology for a textbook in sociology (Bengtsson, 1988b). When *Intertwinings* was published, this was the first book about phenomenology in Sweden. It introduced phenomenology with a lifeworld focus and was addressed more to social and human scientists than philosophers. The book has been used extensively in all the Nordic countries and has been published in several revised editions and printings. Both in the doctoral course and in the book chapter, a lifeworld perspective for researching the social world was used. The publication of this book sparked an interest in phenomenology within the social and human sciences in the Nordic countries. This resulted in doctoral theses in different subjects such as physiotherapy (Engelsrud, 1990), education (Duesund, 1993; Torstenson-Ed, 1997) and architecture (Wikström, 1994; Hurtig, 1995; Herklint, 2000). However, these theses were more inspired by ideas from the lifeworld perspective than from the research design of the lifeworld approach.

The lifeworld approach officially began when seminars, doctoral courses and supervision started on a regular basis in the Department of Education, University of Gothenburg, in an empirical environment. Before this, the lifeworld approach had its domicile at the Department of Philosophy, also at the University of Gothenburg. The first lecture on phenomenology at the Department of Education was given as an invited lecture in 1983, followed by a new lecture in 1985. Subsequently, there have been lectures on lifeworld phenomenology in the doctoral course on methodology each year. The lectures have been published as a series of Husserl-studies, in which the limits and possibilities of Husserl's phenomenology are discussed from a lifeworld perspective. The titles of the publications are significant: *Husserls erfarenhetsbegrepp och kunskapsideal: den teoretiska erfarenhetens begränsningar och den praktiska erfarenhetens primat* [Husserl's concept of experience and ideal of knowledge: The limits of theoretical experience and the primacy of practical experience] (Bengtsson, 1984) and *Konkret fenomenologi* [Concrete phenomenology] (Bengtsson, 1986). In 1990, a series of seminars on phenomenology, devoted to close reading of phenomenological classics, were given to the doctoral students over two semesters. These seminars were later continued by courses on the lifeworld approach and other topics. Supervision of doctoral students in education began and seminars were given regularly. These were important steps in the development of the lifeworld approach as a tradition.

A research tradition is not only embedded in history, but it is also embedded in a regional lifeworld (Bengtsson, 2006a, 2010). The lifeworld, in its general sense, is everything that is possible to experience and

do for a particular individual, but in daily practice the world is limited to regions of the entire lifeworld. Examples of regional worlds are the life in the family, the life of the working place and the life of leisure time. Each regional world is a world of particular things and persons situated at a particular place and organised from the perspective of its activities. In each regional world, people develop a particular identity and language, and often a particular style of comportment and dressing. However, the individuals are not only influenced by the regional world in which they are living, but the world is also relative to the individuals' understanding and ability. The world is neither more nor less than it is for the individuals who live in it. The borders of a regional world are thus better characterized as horizons that can be displaced than objective borders.

A research tradition can be understood as a regional world. People who work together at the same place within the same research approach constitute a particular regional world. They all participate in the same seminars and courses, and read and discuss the same literature. Through doing this they develop a particular understanding of research and of doing research. They acquire a way of experiencing, thinking and acting that is integrated with their embodied existence. Together with this comes a corresponding language and identity. However, all researchers within a tradition are not identical. It is common for researchers within the same tradition to have a somewhat different understanding of concepts and theories as well as different abilities in relation to conducting research. They also work with different research questions and have different needs in relation to the tradition.

Bengtsson published a new book about the lifeworld approach in 1999, which was also published in a revised second edition in 2005. This text is entitled *Med livsvärlden som grund: bidrag till utvecklandet av en livsvärldsfenomenologisk ansats i pedagogisk forskning* [With the lifeworld as ground: Contributions to the development of a lifeworld phenomenological approach in educational research] (Bengtsson, 1999). The book consists of a collection of essays from a doctoral course in 1996 and includes a chapter that formulated the theoretical outlook of the approach as well as six chapters that described different empirical studies. The book contains chapters by Jan Bengtsson, Febe Friberg, Inger Berndtsson, Nadja Carlsson, Silwa Claesson, Joakim Öhlén and Eva Johansson. Also of relevance for the development of the research tradition was the publication of the book *Fenomenologiska utflykter: människa och vetenskap ur ett livsvärldsperspektiv* [Phenomenological excursions: Human being and science from a lifeworld perspective] in the preceding year (Bengtsson, 1998).

This book was an anthology of earlier published and unpublished writings by Bengtsson.

Just before the turn of the millennium, the first doctoral theses in the tradition of the lifeworld approach were completed and defended publicly. In Gothenburg, Silwa Claesson published the first thesis in the tradition. Her thesis was a study concerning teachers' use of scientific knowledge – or more exactly, research on pupils' conceptions of teachers' use of scientific knowledge – in their teaching (Claesson, 1999). In the same year, Eva Johansson published her thesis on small children's morality (Johansson, 1999). She researched moral values and norms in relationships between the children. Kennert Orlenius also defended his thesis concerning pre-school teachers who participated in an educational programme in order to become teachers in the compulsory school system (Orlenius, 1999). His focus in the study was the understanding that emerges in the encounter between the pre-school teachers' earlier professional experiences and the content of the educational programme. In 2001, Inger Berndtsson published a study about life changes for people who have suffered severe vision impairment or blindness (Berndtsson, 2001). The study's main focus was on understanding the kind of learning that this type of life-change necessitated. In 2005, Ingrid Grundén published a thesis about life changes after a spinal cord injury. The two central questions of the study concerned how the relationship between the body and its environment is re-established after such an accident and how the persons learn to live with a radically changed body (Grundén, 2005). Cecilia Nielsen's 2005 thesis was about people between 8 and 53 years old who experience reading and writing difficulties. Her interest was in understanding how people with this kind of difficulty experience their difficulty and what they do to overcome this difficulty (Nielsen, 2005). Six years later, another thesis about reading and writing difficulties was published. Nadja Carlsson studied difficulties that occurred for adult students at school and in daily life and the consequences of these difficulties (Carlsson, 2011). In the following year, Ulla André defended her thesis about self-awareness and self-knowledge in professions. The object of her study was to discover if and in what sense self-awareness and self-knowledge influence professionals' work (André, 2012). Currently, seven doctoral students are writing their theses within the lifeworld approach.

When the new Department of Caring Education was opened at the Faculty of Education the first doctoral theses in the department all belonged to the tradition of the lifeworld approach. Joakim Öhlén defended his thesis on palliative caring in 2000. His study focused on the meaning of alleviation of suffering when living with life-threatening cancer (Öhlén, 2000). In the

following year Febe Friberg published a thesis about patient teaching in a medical ward. She was particularly interested in the didactical relationship between patients and nurses (Friberg, 2001).

Like many other doctoral students in education at this time, Karin Dahlberg wrote a thesis in the phenomenographic tradition and integrated lifeworld phenomenology as the grounding for this thesis (Dahlberg, 1992). She participated in the early seminars and courses in phenomenology at the Department of Education. As part of the new Department of Caring Education, Karin supervised doctoral students who wrote their theses from a lifeworld perspective. Subsequently, with the Linnaeus University in Växjö as a base, she has supervised more than 30 doctoral students from different Nordic countries. She published a book in 2001 entitled *Reflective lifeworld research* (Dahlberg, Drew, & Nyström, 2001) that focuses on lifeworld research for the caring sciences. A revised edition of this book was published in 2008 (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nyström, 2008). This research approach has several features in common with the lifeworld approach, but could, in short, be said to have a more epistemological outlook. In this way, Dahlberg gave the lifeworld approach a new direction and founded a lifeworld oriented research centre in Växjö. She recently published a book about health and caring entitled *Hälsa och vårdande i teori och praxis* [Health and caring in theory and practice] (Dahlberg & Segesten, 2010), in which she sums up her lifeworld phenomenological research.

Bengtsson has also published in the caring sciences. Together with two Norwegian colleagues, Gunn Engelsrud and Kristin Heggen, he served as the Guest Editor of a Special Issue of the journal *Norsk Tidsskrift for Sykepleieforskning* [Norwegian Journal of Nursing Science] (2004) that focused on lifeworld phenomenology and health sciences. The Special Issue contained articles by the Norwegian researchers Finn Nortvedt, Sissel Lisa Storli and Solveig Hauge as well as an introduction by Bengtsson, Engelsrud and Heggen. Bengtsson also published a book on the lifeworld approach for the caring sciences in Norway with contributions on different topics from seven Norwegian scholars (Bengtsson, 2006b). The title of the book was *Å forske i sykdoms- og pleieerfaringer: livsverdensfenomenologiske bidrag* [Researching experiences of illness and caring: Lifeworld phenomenological contributions] and included contributions by Jan Bengtsson, Kristin Heggen, Sissel Lisa Storli, Bengt Karlsson, Målfrid Råheim, Eva Gjengedal, Ragnar Fjelland and Kari Kvigne.

The lifeworld approach has also been used in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Gothenburg. Maria Hinnerson-Berglund published a thesis in 2004 on the lifeworld of people living at the

Nuuk Fiord in Greenland 4000 years ago with a particular interest in their aesthetics (Hinnerson-Berglund, 2004).

Up to this point, this article has mainly discussed the tradition of the lifeworld approach in Gothenburg. However, the tradition has also spread outside of Gothenburg, to various parts of Sweden as well as to other Nordic countries. The tradition was spread by means of publications, lectures, courses and workshops run by researchers working in the tradition. Jan Bengtsson has lectured at more than one hundred different departments, at some of them several times over many years, and has offered 13 doctoral courses at different departments. When a tradition is spread geographically something happens to the tradition. In a new place, it constitutes a new regional world, and two regional worlds are not the same. Even in heavily controlled systems such as a national curriculum, schools vary in their practice. However, if they are regional worlds of the same tradition, they also need to have something in common, otherwise they would not belong to the same tradition. It is thus necessary to have tolerance for variations in a tradition that is spread geographically, but there also need to be clear limitations to this tolerance. Traditions need to learn to live with this ambiguity of tolerance.

The Luleå University of Technology displayed an early interest in the lifeworld approach and has produced many doctoral theses using this approach, making this regional world the most important centre of the lifeworld tradition outside of Gothenburg. Eva Alerby has been the leading person in this environment. Eva Alerby was also the first person to publish a thesis in this tradition. Her thesis was about young people's (between 7 and 16 years old) thoughts about the environment based on their own experiences and was publicly defended in 1998 (Alerby, 1998). In the following year, Maj-Lis Hörnqvist published a thesis on pupils' experience of competence in their schoolwork by studying experiences of success and failure by pupils in the 8th school year (Hörnqvist, 1999). In 2000, Kerstin Öhring published a thesis about the relationship between student nurses' and nurses' teaching and learning during the clinical education at a hospital ward with a particular focus on the teacher (Öhring, 2000). The next thesis was published in 2004 by Cecilia Ferm in music education. She wrote about the interaction between teachers and pupils in music lessons in years 4-6. Her main interest was in understanding the kind of experiences achieved by the interaction (Ferm, 2004). In 2007, Krister Hertting published a thesis in education about learning and performance of leadership in football for children (Hertting, 2007). Catrine Kostenius published her thesis in health promotion in 2008. Her thesis focused on schoolchildren's own experiences of health and wellbeing (Kostenius, 2008). In 2009, Ulrika

Bergmark published a thesis in education about teachers' and pupils' experiences of ethical situations and of their work to promote an ethical attitude in a secondary school (Bergmark, 2009). Niclas Ekberg published his thesis in education in 2012. This thesis focused on teachers' experiences of working with social media in the classroom (Ekberg, 2012). Four doctoral students in the Department of Arts, Communication and Education are currently writing their theses within the lifeworld tradition. Under the leadership of Eva Alerby, the lifeworld tradition is vibrant and active in Luleå. In addition to producing theses, the Department also runs courses and research projects within the tradition.

Two theses in early childhood education with a lifeworld approach have been published in Norway. The first of them was produced by Gunvor Løkken at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim. She researched the social style of one and two year old toddlers in their interaction with each other in the pre-school (Løkken, 2000). The second thesis was published by Anne Greve in 2007 at the Department of Special Needs Education, University of Oslo. Her thesis focused on friendship between small children in pre-school (Greve, 2007).

One thesis in education using a lifeworld approach has been published at the University of Umeå. In 2001, Monika Vinterek published a thesis on pupils' experiences of being in age heterogeneous classes at the Department of Swedish and Subjects of Social Science in Teacher Education (Vinterek, 2001).

At the University of Stockholm, Bozena Hautaniemi defended a thesis in education using the lifeworld approach in 2004. She researched severely disabled children (between the ages of nine months and five years) without language and speech in order to understand these children's particular way of understanding and relating to the world (Hautaniemi, 2004).

The lifeworld approach has also found fruitful soil in the School of Learning and Communication at University College in Jönköping. In 2007, Martin Hugo published a thesis about teachers' and pupils' experiences from an individual programme for school-tired young people (Hugo, 2007). In 2011, Mikael Segolsson presented a theoretical thesis on learning. Using the notion of formation (*Bildung*) as a frame of reference, he analysed learning as an on-going interaction between interpretation and dialogue resulting in embodied knowledge (Segolsson, 2011).

At the Malmö Academy of Music, Anna Houmann published a thesis in 2010 on music teachers' working conditions. The thesis focused on music teachers'

experiences of discretionary power in their professional lives (Houman, 2010).

This presentation of the tradition of the lifeworld approach has focused mainly on doctoral theses within the tradition. However, it should be noted that publications in the tradition are not limited to these kind of writings. Many researchers in the tradition have published extensively in books and journals as well as other forums, and have been successful in the academic world. At this point in time, 13 of the 27 persons who produced doctoral theses in the tradition are full professors, while one individual is an associate professor. The academic success of these researchers could be seen as a sign of success of the lifeworld approach. At the very least, it suggests that the approach has attracted excellent researchers. Of

course, the success could also be due to the research approach. However, the successes can probably be ascribed to a combination of the nature of the approach and the talent of the person. It is also important to note that other conditions relating to academic work may well have played a role in these successes.

This Special Edition could be seen as an updated version of the lifeworld approach. It contains one article about the basic principles of the research approach and two articles based on doctoral students' on-going research. In this sense, these articles are the latest the approach has to offer.

### Referencing Format

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### About the Author



Jan Bengtsson, who held the post of Professor in the Department of Pedagogical, Curricular and Professional Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, passed away on 31 August. Throughout his long illness, which was bravely borne, Jan continued to be academically active but very sadly never lived to see the publication of this paper which is part of a Special Edition of which he was Guest Editor.

Professor Bengtsson previously studied at the University of Vienna (Austria), the University of Freiburg (Germany), Ruhr-University in Bochum (Germany), and the University of Grenoble (France).

During his lengthy career, Jan had been a Visiting Scholar at several institutions such as the Husserl-Archives in Louvain (Belgium), the University of Grenoble (France), the University of Århus (Denmark), the University of California at Berkeley (USA), the National Institute of Educational Research in Paris (France) and the University of Queensland (Brisbane, Australia). He had also been a Visiting Professor at the Universities of Helsinki (Finland) and Oslo (Norway) as well as the University of Agder in Norway.

Over the years, Jan founded several scientific organizations in the Nordic countries such as the Centre of Lifeworld Phenomenological Research (University of Gothenburg) and the Nordic Society for Philosophy of Education.

Jan's research areas were diverse, and included the fields of teaching, teachers and learning, school architecture, history of scientific research, the philosophy of education, and phenomenology.

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