

# Developing Concepts in Caring Science Based on a Lifeworld Perspective

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**Abstract:** *Concept development is a significant form of inquiry to expand and develop the knowledge base in caring science. The authors' aim in this article is to illuminate the possibility of working with concept development, based on a life world perspective, especially Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language, wherein phenomenological, semiological, and pragmatic dimensions are included. The theoretical discussion shows that it is possible to create methodological principles for concept development based on epistemological foundations that are consistent with ontological assumptions in caring science.*

**Keywords:** *concept development, phenomenology, lifeworld, caring science*

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## Introduction

The nursing profession is based on approved experiences and scientific knowledge. Historically, medicine was the first and only scientific paradigm for nurses' work. Since the middle of the 20th century, however, different scientific perspectives, such as psychology, sociology, and other social sciences, influenced the knowledge base in the nursing profession. These scientific perspectives could not fully describe and explain the phenomena of caring. Consequently, since the late 1970s, the discipline of caring science has been evolving (Eriksson, 2001). Theories in caring science are developed from the perspective of caring and also from the patients' perspectives (Dahlberg, Segesten, Nyström, Suserud, & Fagerberg, 2003). Therefore, theories in caring science can be used in the nursing profession and also in other health care professions (cf. Svenson, 1997). To develop an autonomous discipline, however, basic research is needed. The ambition for basic research in caring science is to create theoretical foundations describing and explaining the meaning of caring and the conditions for caring. Methodological considerations that have been described regarding concept development for nursing research can be related to the same issue within caring science.

According to Morse (1995), the theoretical basis is the foundation for nursing research and practice, and the most urgent need for methodological development exists in the area of conceptual inquiry. Concept development is, according to Rodgers (2000a), a significant form of inquiry to expand and develop the knowledge basis of nursing. Individual knowledge and approved experiences in caring remain implicit in practice and need to be theorized to become common knowledge. If phenomena regarding aspects of caring can be conceptualized, the concepts can function as tools, illuminating practice and helping the researcher to study practice from the scientific caring perspective. Concept development is also regarded as necessary for the development of a common professional language as a reliable foundation for professional care givers' and nurses' work (cf. Eriksson, 1997; Gift, 1997; Meleis, 1997; Morse, 1995). In this article, the term *concept development* is used to encompass the entire conceptual process (cf. Gift, 1997; Meleis, 1997).

The importance of theory and concept development has been elucidated in several nursing conferences in Scandinavia during the past 5 years (Hamrin, Lorensen, & Östlinder, 2001; Svensk sjuksköterskeförening [SSF], 2001), which shows that there is an ambition in the Nordic countries to develop concepts and theories within caring science and not only use theories from other scientific disciplines.

Concept development is scientific work based on assumptions in philosophical ideas about concepts, described as processes of human thoughts, as related to an empirical reality, to language, and to social contexts (cf. Rodgers, 2000a). The philosophical mainstream for concept development is analytical philosophy, as logic positivism, derived from, for example, Locke (1975), Frege (1976), Hempel (1972), and, earlier, Wittgenstein (cited in Flor, 1987), and as "ordinary language" philosophy derived from later Wittgenstein (1978) and Ryle (1963). Another philosophical perspective for this issue is pragmatism derived from Pierce (1932). Several models (cf. Eriksson, 1997; Rodgers, 2000b; Schwartz-Barcott & Kim, 2000; Walker & Avant, 1994) for concept development have been used in nursing and caring science. The models are based on different philosophical perspectives and sometimes also on different perspectives in the same model. To choose models for concept development, the researcher has to be aware of the model's philosophical underpinnings. In other words, the assumptions on ontological, epistemological and methodological levels must be consistent (Kirkevold, 2001).

## Ontological assumptions

The perspective for research in caring science is derived from assumptions about the meaning of the consensus concepts; human being, health, suffering, environment, and caring (Eriksson, 2001; cf. Meleis, 1997). The argumentation in the discussion is here based on the following ontological assumptions regarding the human being: the human being is holistic and multidimensional, and is regarded as forming a bodily, mental, and spiritual whole (cf. Dahlberg et al., 2003; Eriksson, 2001). There is an assumption that mutual interplay prevails between these dimensions within the individual and between people and

the world. People are considered to be both active and creative and are not to be perceived as simply passive victims of external circumstances.

In earlier analytical philosophy, the human being is described in a dualistic way by separating mind and body, and a human's inner and external reality (Rodgers, 2000a; Stolt & Dahlberg, 1998). In this philosophical perspective, a concept is regarded either as a mental image, ideas derived from Descartes, Kant, and Locke, or as corresponding to an external physical reality according to Frege and the earlier Wittgenstein (Rodgers, 2000a). According to Frege (1976), a sign can be related to a meaning and a reference, so Frege distinguished between a sign's meaning and its reference in the world. The earlier Wittgenstein (cited in Flor, 1987) developed a picture theory, explaining that every sign directly corresponded to a physical object. Concepts are regarded as universal and unchangeable over time. The dualism in the earlier analytical philosophy is incongruent with the holistic view on human being, however. Consequently, the philosophical perspective cannot function as epistemological underpinnings for concept development in caring science.

In later versions of analytical philosophy, the dualism between mind and body is not evident, as the human being is described not at an ontological level but as a disposition for actions. The human being is regarded as his or her actions, so the value of the human being can be related to these actions. This philosophical perspective is too narrow as an assumption in caring science, however, because caring sometimes concerns people who are unable to act. In this perspective, concepts are regarded as tools for actions and are used according to specific rules in a language game, and their meaning can change over time (Ryle, 1963; Wittgenstein, 1978).

In a lifeworld perspective, the philosophical idea concerning the lived body (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1999) is consistent with presented assumptions of the human being in caring science. The idea of the lived body describes a human being undergoing an experience. The body is regarded as an indivisible, ambiguous existence of the subject-object; a "fusion of soul and body" (p. 84), and, consequently, it cannot be regarded as the sum of its own parts. The body acts as a form of a whole and is perceived as a whole. The idea of the lived body solves some problems inherent in the dualistic idea from Descartes (cited in Grøn, 1987a) that there is a gap between mind and body. In a lifeworld perspective, the assumptions regarding the human being are points of departure for constituting the epistemological base of concept development.

Our aim in this article is to illuminate the possibility to work with concept development, epistemologically based on a lifeworld perspective, consistent with ontological assumptions in caring science.

## **A lifeworld perspective**

Here, a lifeworld perspective has a philosophical basis in commonalities found in, Husserl's (1970a, 1970b), Merleau-Ponty's (1962/1999, 1964), Heidegger's (1962), and Gadamer's (1980, 1998) philosophy (cf. Dahlberg, Drew, & Nyström, 2001). The philosophers provide an epistemological perspective with philosophical concepts such as; lifeworld, intentionality, and circularity.

The lifeworld is the world in which we live our daily lives in an ordinary, natural attitude. It is a world of meaning that individuals live both in and through. In their perceptions and actions, individuals take this for granted. In other words, the lifeworld exists prior to any reflections on it (Husserl, 1970a; Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1999). In the lifeworld, there exists prepredicative, prereflexive, pretheoretical, and theoretical knowledge (Husserl, 1970a). The lifeworld is both immanent and transcendent, which means that the idea of lifeworld is bridging the gap between the human's inner and outer world, consequently bridging the gap between realism and idealism. This gap has been considered in discussions about concept development, as described above. With a lifeworld perspective, a concept can be regarded as a mental image and, at the same time, as related to a phenomenon. Within a lifeworld perspective, there are material and immaterial phenomena. Therefore, this perspective is convenient for developing concepts about immaterial phenomena regarding caring, for example health and rest. Immaterial phenomena can be compared with what Morse (2000) has called behavioral concepts, as opposed to concrete phenomena.

Intentionality is an epistemological theory, focusing on the ordinary, natural way of experiencing the world. According to this theory, consciousness is always directed toward something, which means that intentionality includes both the conscious act and the phenomena that become apparent (Husserl, 1970b). This epistemological idea also confirms that concepts can be described both as mental images and as related to phenomena. Consciousness is directed partly toward objects in the world and partly toward the subject, in the form of self-reflection. Through the act of intentionality, people obtain knowledge about themselves and the world. Merleau-Ponty (1962/1999) emphasized that “consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body” (pp. 138-139). The act of intentionality is not ahistorical, because present time involves both experiences of the past and conceptions of the future. The idea that consciousness has directedness means that individuals can make active choices for actions and choose the objects of their perceptions, which is consistent with the assumptions of the human being described earlier.

Circularity implies that there is a mutual influence between different everyday occurrences in the lifeworld. Circularity between the aspect's subject-object in the lived body means ability for self-reflection. Circularity between the lived body and the lifeworld means that individuals cannot be isolated from the contexts of meaning in which they live, because they have access to the world within and through their bodies (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1999). If changes occur in the lived body, the lifeworld accordingly undergoes a change. There is also circularity between language, meaning, and experience. The ideas of lived body, lifeworld, intentionality, and circularity are underpinnings for Merleau-Ponty's (1964) philosophy of language, which can form an epistemological foundation of concept development.

### Philosophy of language and concept development

According to Kemp (1972), language has phenomenological, semiological, and pragmatic dimensions. These dimensions are included in Merleau-Ponty's (1964) philosophy of language.

#### *The phenomenological dimension*

A phenomenological dimension of language concerns the language's meaning in the lifeworld. In the lifeworld, people, among other forms of experiences, have experiences of prereflective knowledge, for example, bodily knowledge. The knowledge has not been reflected on but is still knowledge. From a phenomenological perspective, it is the language emerging in the world, from the lived experiences, and not the world emerging in the language. When a person catches a term, it associates with an experience of a phenomenon. A meaning of the experience appears by means of intuition, so there is circularity between language, experience of a phenomenon, and meaning (Figure 1).

According to Husserl (1970b), words function as signs: “They can be said to point to something” (p. 279), which means something. Every expression comprises two aspects: the physical sign and a meaning. Therefore, in communicating speech, the expressions function as indicators for the speakers' meaning, wearing experiences. Expressions also play a great part in a human's interior mental life, in inner monologue, where expressions have the same meaning as in a dialogue

(Husserl, 1970b). Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty (1964) has described the circularity between language, meaning, and experiences: “There is a ‘linguagely’ meaning of language which effects the mediation between my as yet unspoken intention and words, and in such a way that my spoken words surprise me myself and teach me my thoughts” (p. 88). The unspoken intention, the experience, can be richer than the available language. Therefore, there is a gap between the experience and the signification. When the experiences are dressed in words, they are confirmed by the intellect.

According to Merleau-Ponty (1964), the phenomenological project of language is to find a coherent whole of convergent linguistic gestures. This can be related to Husserl's (1970b) ideas of a philosophical phenomenological analysis,

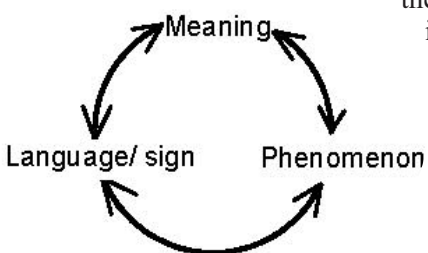


Figure 1.  
*The Phenomenological dimension of language*

wherein the aim is to seek the essence in the meaning and constituents of the meaning. The essence is the meaning structure of the phenomenon. The meaning structure is what necessarily belongs to the phenomenon so that it can be a phenomenon of a certain type (Giorgi, 1985). In other words, the essence is a mental image, one aspect of the concept.

According to Husserl (1970b), several terms can be related to the same meaning, and the same term can have different meanings. Husserl's ideas are in line with Frege's (1976) ideas about the relation between terms, meaning, and reference, whereby the same meaning can have several terms. Unlike Frege, Husserl discussed the relation between phenomenon (referent), meaning, and term within a lifeworld perspective, which means that phenomena (the reference) can be immaterial. Husserl's ideas also differ from the earlier ones of Wittgenstein (cited in Flor, 1987), who asserted that only one term belongs directly to one specific physical object (Flor, 1987). Consequently, the correspondence theory of truth is not the foundation for lifeworld research.

It is possible to transform the ideas about circularity and searching for essence into method theory for concept development. When a concept is poorly developed and poorly understood, the purpose of concept development is to describe the meaning of the phenomenon. (cf. Morse, Hupcey, Mitcham, & Lenz, 1997). Giorgi (1997) and Dahlberg (Dahlberg, Drew, et al., 2001) have developed useful methodological principles for analysis of essences that can also be used for concept development. With a descriptive phenomenological research approach, it is possible to analyze the meaning structure of a phenomenon. The purpose of such an approach is to describe the significance of phenomena that are taken for granted but have not yet been theorized on. The approach has been developed from the theory of intentionality and from a lifeworld perspective. Three criteria must be met: (a) the results are descriptions, (b) the research process is implemented with a restrained preunderstanding of the phenomena, and (c) the scientific work implies searching for essence (Dahlberg, Drew, et al., 2001; Giorgi, 1997). For the research process to be able to meet these criteria, the procedure must be built on specific methodological principles represented by the concepts: openness, intersubjectivity, immediacy, uniqueness, and meaning (Dahlberg, Drew, et al., 2001).

The phenomenon of rest is one example of a health-related phenomenon's being in the process of concept development. With a descriptive phenomenological approach, from people's experiences of rest, it has been possible to transform the term *rest* to the concept of rest by describing the essence of the meaning, and a general structure of the phenomenon of rest has been described (Asp, 2002). The essence is described at a scientific level, which means that the essence is general knowledge applicable in other contexts but can vary in different cultures. The essence is not described at a universal level, which is the intention with philosophical work (cf. Giorgi, 1997; Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

In conclusion, the phenomenological dimension of language has implications for concept development with departure from descriptions of people's lived experiences of the phenomenon, which the researcher analyzes and transforms into a concept by searching for essence and meaning constituents. This research process can be performed in different contexts and in different cultures. By comparing and contrasting concepts across cultures, the researcher can refine the concept further. The process of concept development goes from phenomenon to concept.

### *The semiological dimension*

The semiological dimension of language, Merleau-Ponty (1964) has developed from two aspects in Saussure's (cited in Grøn, 1987b) philosophical ideas. The first aspect is the ordinary speech (*parole*), individual and temporary, emerging in the concrete situation of communication. The other aspect is the common language (*langue*), the sum of people's vocabulary in the language fellowship. Unlike Saussure, Merleau-Ponty regarded that there is a motion of dialectic in which these two aspects communicate, so that the language develops the speech and the speech develops the language (Figure 2).

Old meanings in the language disappear, and new meanings emerge, as a result of the historical process. This yields two phenomenological consequences. First, it is necessary to study the meaning in the development of the language and regard the language as in a state of dynamic balance. For example, it can become inflated in some expressions, and they can lose their meanings. Therefore, it is interesting to elucidate such semiological weakness and gaps by studying the speech and its meaning. In that way, linguistic expressions can gain new meanings. Second, because speech just is a cross-section of the lan-



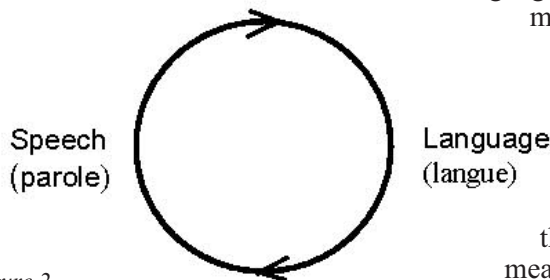


Figure 2..  
The semiological dimension

guage, it can never comprise a complete system of meanings in the situation of conversation but instead constantly undergoes changes (Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

The idea of language as a common language in a language fellowship can be compared with a discipline's language, which consists of the concepts used by members of the discipline. A gap between the meaning of the discipline's language and the meaning in ordinary speech can occur. For example, the concept of rest usually means bed rest or physical rest within the nursing discipline, described in literature and in nurses' professional language fellowship (Asp, 2002; Mornhinweg & Voignier, 1996), but when people are asked about the meaning of rest, they speak about bodily, mental, and spiritual aspects of rest. In this case, the aim of concept development is to transform the discipline's concept of rest to a holistic meaning in line with the meaning of the term in ordinary speech.

The semiological dimension of language has implications for concept development as critical analysis between the meaning structures of the phenomenon derived from speech and the meaning of the concept in the language of the discipline. The semiological dimension of language also has implications for studies aimed at comparing the concept with other competing concepts in this or other disciplines, and clarifying vague concepts. These studies are necessary for further clarification of the concept. Metasynthesis, described by Noblit and Hare (1988), and critically appraising the literature, described by Morse (2000), are examples of research methods that are congruent with the purpose of concept development in this dimension.

In line with Merleau-Ponty's (1964) ideas about how language changes over time, concepts are not defined once and for all; rather, they evolve and change over time as new knowledge develops within programs of research. Historical changes in the meaning of a concept can be analyzed, resulting in a better understanding of the concept, its prerequisites, and its outcomes.

In conclusion, the semiological dimension of language describes the circularity between language and speech, and acknowledges that language undergoes historical changes. This has implications for concept development on a meta-analytical level aimed at further concept clarifications and refinement.

### *The pragmatic dimension*

The pragmatic dimension in Merleau-Ponty's (1964) philosophy of language is that linguistic gestures are regarded as being useful for some purpose: "Organized signs have their immanent meaning, which does not arise from the 'I think' but from the 'am able to' " (p. 88). This idea can be compared to Husserl's (1970a) idea about the circularity between the lifeworld and science (Figure 3).

Scientific work emanates from the lifeworld, and it is in the lifeworld that scientific knowledge is to be tested and used (Husserl, 1970a). According to Heidegger (1971), something exists for consciousness if there is a word for the thing: "the relation of word to thing. This relation is not, however, a connection between the thing that is on one side and the word that is on the other. The word itself is the relation which in each instance retains the thing within itself in such a manner that it 'is' a thing" (p. 66). Every interpretation begins with a preconcept that confirms, contradicts, and reorganizes in interplay with the "things" (Gadamer, 1980). According to Heidegger (1971), there is a dialectic relationship between interpretation and understanding,

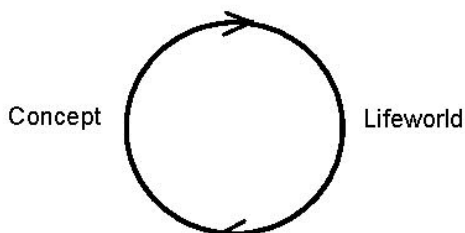


Figure 3. The pragmatic dimension of language

working through language. Gadamer (1998) described this interpretation process as a fusion of horizons. In this field of experiences, there is a truth about the object and the interpreter. In the fusion of horizons, new meanings for the interpreter's concepts are created. Gadamer (1998) described the process of interpretation as three integrated acts: understanding, explana-

tion, and application. The act of understanding demands a fundamental suspension of the interpreter's prejudice. In the act of explanation, the interpreter reflects on what has come up in the act of understanding. In the act of application, general knowledge can be understood and be made concrete in a new way, in the specific situation (Gadamer, 1998).

These ideas from Merleau-Ponty (1964, 1962/1999), Husserl (1970a, 1970b), Heidegger (1962), and Gadamer (1980, 1998) form epistemological underpinnings for methodological considerations of concept development. According to Giorgi (1992), basic research can be developed by description, and interpretation is for praxis. In applied research, the researcher is guided by interpretative strategies rather than descriptive methods. Interventions studies, in which the concept can help the caregiver to recognize the phenomenon in practice and documentation, and be used for quality assurance, are useful studies for concept development in this dimension. The concept might be manifested in various forms in different contexts, but the essence or constituents can remain recognizable. Here, variations of the concept can be described. Applying and using the concept in different clinical settings means further concept development (cf. Gift, 1997, and Morse, 1995, who make similar statements regarding concept development).

In conclusion, the pragmatic dimension of the philosophy of language means that language's justification is settled by its usefulness. It is through use that words are incorporated as a habit into the lived body. This has implications for concept development. Through their use for interpretation, in praxis, concepts can be validated and undergo further refinement to be ready for application as reliable foundations for professional caregivers' work.

## Discussion

The methodological principles for concept development can be concluded in the model shown in Figure 4.

Understanding is a dialectic process between language and experiences in the lifeworld. This process is implicit in the model of concept development, a process constantly focused on studying meaning. The model has three entrances. Where to begin depends on how mature the concept under study is. When a concept is poorly developed, the research process goes from phenomenon to concept. The process can continue with further concept clarification by contrasting and comparing the concept with other descriptions of the same concept or competitive concepts. The third aspect in the process is application and refinement. This means that

the concept is applied and used in praxis for further refinement. The process of concept development can be performed in different cultures to reach further refinement. The model illustrates a fundamental assumption, that there is a circularity between phenomena and concepts, and it is possible to continue the developing process in any direction. As concept clarification activities continue, it will be essential to ensure that empirical and theoretical developments proceed and are integrated with one another and with practice.

In the model, one methodological aspect is searching for essence. This can be compared to Rodgers's (2000a) entity theories perspective of concept development, but there are differences. The problems described with the entity perspective are the dualistic view between a human's inner world and the outer world, the point of view that the concepts do not undergo changes over time, and the correspondence theory of truth (Rodgers, 2000a). As the theoretical discussion has shown, these problems do not exist within a lifeworld perspective. A lifeworld perspective for concept development, including what Rodgers (2000a) has called dispositional theories for concept development, is what we are striving for. Concept development is focused on how concepts are used. However, the critique of dispositional theories is that the relation between concept and knowledge is weak. Within a lifeworld perspective, this relation is evident, as described in the circularity between sign, meaning, and phenomenon. Consequently, concept development based on a lifeworld perspective bridges the gap between the two philosophies behind entity theories and dispositional theories of concept development without bringing the critique regarding these two philosophical perspectives.

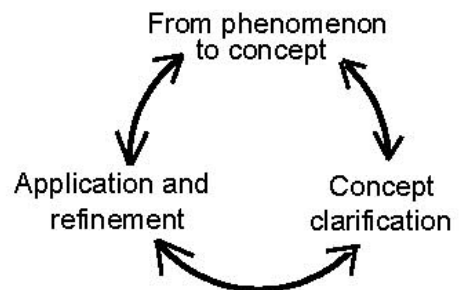


Figure 4: The process of concept development

Merleau-Ponty's (1964) philosophy of language comprises aspects that, according to Rodgers (2000a), have to do with concepts:

There is a consensus that concepts are cognitive in nature and that they are comprised of attributes abstracted from reality, expressed in some form and utilized for some common purpose. Consequently, concepts are more than words or mental image alone. In addition, an emphasis on use alone is not sufficient to capture the complex nature of concepts. (p. 33)

The process for concept development presented here has similarities with Morse's (1995) model for developing concepts, in that it uses qualitative methods for developing new concepts from people's experiences and tests concepts in practice, as one aspect of concept development. However, Morse did not describe the epistemological foundation on which the model is built. The discussion here has elucidated that it is possible to create methodological principles for concept development based on epistemological foundations that are congruent with ontological assumptions in caring science.

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