

Travelogue from the 22nd International Human Science Research Conference August 13-16, Stockholm, Sweden

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Stockholm in August

Stockholm is probably one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Certainly, it is among the most beautiful capitals. It is also very tidy, orderly and serious. Only the constant screaming from the adrenaline pumping amusements in the tivoli in *Djurgården* disturbs the impression of a cool and calm place. High above *Gamla Stan* and the rest of the city lies the Ersta Sköndal University College, which hosted the 22nd International Human Science Research Conference from August 13-16 this year. The university college is dedicated to studies in the fields of social work, nursing and health care, theology and church music, all with a diaconal orientation based on the Christian faith. The view from the university college is spectacular. Sitting drinking a glass of wine, while engaged in friendly conversation on the patio of the college café, makes one feel very good – almost invulnerable.

Vulnerability was the theme for this year's Human Science conference. Human Science researchers attending these conferences mainly define themselves as phenomenologists or hermenuticists, but it is also possible to meet an occasional discourse analyst, and perhaps even a social constructionist. People come from many different fields, some psychologists, some social workers, some engaged in nursing and caring sciences. About 200 delegates attended the conference, most of them addressing the theme of vulnerability, but other themes were also frequently tackled.

Keynote speakers

In what follows I report my impressions from the sessions I attended. First the keynotes: Professor Thomas Lindstein from Stockholm University and Ersta Sköndal University College was the first keynote speaker. Lindstein talked about his research on children and vulnerability. His research is mainly carried out by collecting children's own narratives, i.e. narratives from children that are at risk, coming from vulnerable families. Lindstein's talk concluded that it is impossible to find general patterns concerning children and vulnerability. Different children react to and deal with similar problems and vulnerabilities in very different ways. We should give up the impossible task of extracting general patterns, Lindstein argued, but unfortunately, no clear alternative emerged. What scientific alternative can be formulated to the search for generalities and universals? This is, in my view, a pressing question for much qualitative research, and I left Lindstein's talk with this question in mind.

Steinar Kvale was the second keynote speaker. Kvale posed the question *Dialogical Interview Research – Emancipatory or Oppressive?* Some of the points in Kvale’s talk can be found in an earlier edition of this newsletter (Dialogue as oppression and interview research, vol. 32, pp. 9-18, www.psy.au.dk/ckm). In contrast to the standard emphasis on dialogue as emancipatory, Kvale’s starting point was the call for dialogue in management and education, where it is usually the stronger part in a power relation that voices the need for dialogue. New power techniques in a therapeutic consumer society are subjectification and intimization, and both of these are connected with much dialogical interview research, often in quite unreflective ways. My guess is that about 90% of the audience present at Kvale’s talk have conducted dialogical interview research. After applauding Kvale’s talk, they were quite silent, and their silence should probably be interpreted as an expression of confusion – cognitive dissonance, perhaps. The person next to me tried to eliminate her cognitive dissonance by pointing out to me that her own dialogical interview research wasn’t oppressive, and couldn’t be the target of Kvale’s criticisms, because she had a very sincere and close relationship with her interviewees that eliminated any asymmetrical power relations. In my view, this is an affirmation of Kvale’s point rather than a falsification.

Keynote number three was Karin Dahlberg. Dahlberg is professor of Health Sciences at Växjö University. The topic of her talk was *The essence of essences in human science research*. The idea of essence taken up was that of Husserl. Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy involves a search for essences. Essences in Husserlian philosophy are aspects of objects as intended, i.e. objects grasped in their intentional character. Being human means seeing essences in the lifeworld, and the task of phenomenology, and phenomenological psychology, is to describe essences and abstain from interpretation and explanation. Dahlberg laid out the Husserlian philosophy of essence in great detail and with clear competence, and one sentence stuck in my mind afterwards. The phenomenological imperative to “Go back to things themselves!” was interpreted by Dahlberg as meaning “*Do not make definite that which is indefinite!*” In my opinion, researchers often make the mistake of making definite what is indefinite. Establishing categories, finding universals and generalities (*pace* Lindstein’s talk) is often seen as the essence (!) of research. But what if the world itself is a place of indefiniteness, becoming, change and unknowability? Then capturing the world scientifically means distorting it. Perhaps only non-scientific practices can enable us to grasp the indefinite aspects of the world, e.g. artistic, religious, or ethical practices? Or perhaps we need new forms of science that accept what science-scholar Andrew Pickering has called “an ontology of becoming”? – according to which the world contains indefiniteness?

Next keynote speaker was Astrid Norberg, professor of nursing at Umeå University. She gave a moving talk on *consolation*. Consolation is what we need when there is no solution. Problems demand solutions, but “mysteries”, as Norberg said, alluding to the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, demand consolation. The talk was quite concrete reporting consolation-narratives from people in tragic circumstances, but it was also an exercise in existential philosophy (not to be confused with existentialism).

A completely different talk was given by Robin Kearns – also a keynote speaker. Kearns is associate professor of geography in Auckland. What can a geographer contribute to human science? Well, if one is as perceptive as Kearns then the answer is: a lot. Kearns’s springboard was an

analysis of “place” as prior to, and experienced before, “space”. We have a place-in-the-world, as he said, inspired by Heidegger. And then he laid out what could be called a phenomenological geography providing numerous examples from his home country. Geography does not have to be about space and statistics, for it can also be, and perhaps *should* be, about our experience of place.

Amedeo Giorgi, professor of psychology at Saybrook in San Francisco, was keynote speaker on Saturday morning – the morning after the conference dinner. But it was well worth the effort to attend his talk. Giorgi is probably the most important figure in the development of a phenomenological approach to psychology, and in his talk – *Vulnerabilities concerning knowledge of subjectivities* – he analyzed the phenomenon of subjectivity. He reviewed several approaches to subjectivity across the human sciences and argued that most of them either reduce subjectivity or exaggerate its importance. He cited behaviourism as an example of the elimination of subjectivity, and deconstructionism as a reduction of subjectivity to social-cultural correlates. Various attempts to reduce subjectivity to an inference, an epiphenomenon and a reified measure were also criticised. Social constructionism and Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology were brought forth as exaggerations of subjectivity. The former posits a reality created by subjectivities, while the latter operates with a subject free of worldly influences. Giorgi finally argued that a proper approach to subjectivity could be found in the non-transcendental parts of Husserl’s phenomenology, and also in Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the lived body.

The final keynote speaker was Eva Jeppson Grassman, professor of social work at Stockholm University. She has studied vulnerable groups and argued that these must be conceptualized, not as passive victims, but as actors, engaged in their own identity-projects.

Presentations

Two interesting phenomenological papers were presented Thursday, the first day with individual paper presentations. Peter Ashworth, professor of educational research at Sheffield Hallam University, and his wife Ann Ashworth reported on their work with persons suffering Alzheimer’s disease. They used the phenomenological conception of the lifeworld as a way to grasp the experiences of these persons. It was argued that persons with Alzheimer’s disease *do* have a lifeworld, they are conscious actors. The phenomenological *epoché* – bracketing our preformed beliefs about the world – is particularly useful and morally relevant when dealing with Alzheimer patients. We should bracket the question of the realness of their experiences, and instead try to understand their situation, the Ashworths argued. Steen Halling, a psychologist from Seattle University, followed suit with a phenomenological study of psychotherapists’ experiences of despair. Halling and co-workers have previously studied hopelessness as a fundamental human experience, and this new work follows up on that. Halling works with what he calls “dialogal phenomenology”, and the importance of not-knowing in the research process was stressed. Most of the time, Halling explained, we don’t know much! Such honesty is a virtue that many could learn from.

Scott Churchill from the psychology department at the University of Dallas then introduced us to basic concepts from Martin Heidegger's phenomenology. 'Circumspective concern', 'bodying forth', 'the they self', 'thrownness' and 'being-towards-death' were all employed in an attempt to understand the way of being-in-the-world of people with bulimia. This might seem far-fetched, but in fact, Heidegger had a deep interest in the body, which is presented in the recently published *Zollikon Seminars* (Northwestern University Press, 2001), a series of lectures and conversations conducted in the home of Swiss existential psychiatrist Medard Boss. Churchill elucidated Heidegger's difficult but important thinking, and gave us a glimpse of the lives of bulimics. My own presentation on *Vulnerability, ethics and social constructionism* was next. I discussed the neglect of vulnerability found in the Western culture, particularly in ethical thought, and also in the social constructionist approach. I learned a lot from the discussion that followed.

Hidekazu Sasaki from Center for Education and Research of Lifelong Learning in Utsunomiya University, Japan, talked about *Individuals, society and self-realization*, with a critical argument addressing the role of self-realization in Japan. Self-realization was imported into Japan and developed in a nationalistic fashion around 1900 - years before Maslow and humanistic psychology - with the works of Thomas Hill Green, a British absolute idealist from the latter part of the 19th century. Some Japanese philosophers claimed that the state had its own personality to be realised. Sasaki's talk was a fascinating account of what happens when concepts become globalised. Ulrike Popp-Baier, associate professor in psychology of religion at the University of Amsterdam, talked about *Illness narratives and religiosity*. She demonstrated the extent to which religious orientations structure illness-narratives and influence the way we perceive illness and health. Popp-Baier's work makes obvious the need for interdisciplinarity in such fields as health science, psychology and religion.

A few other presentations should be mentioned: Helena Dahlberg from the department of History of Ideas and Theory of Science in Gothenburg analysed the debate between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty that took place after World War II. She found that their political disagreements were largely a result of their different ontologies. According to Merleau-Ponty, Sartre's conception of radical freedom based on his dualistic ontology of être-en-soi and être-pour-soi caused him political problems. Paul Løvland, an engineer from Norway, then talked about *Explanation, interpretation and natural science*. He argued that human sciences could preferably use what he called "psychoenergetic" explanation of human action, such as that developed in Freud's metapsychology. According to Løvland, this could make us overcome the explanation-understanding dichotomy, and here he also drew on Ricoeur. Kevin Krycka, psychologist from Seattle University, reported his research on *Mystics, Saints and Alien Abductees*. Krycka is interested in a psychological understanding of "other others", i.e. people who claim to have very different experiences from the rest of us, for example experiences of having been abducted by alien spacecrafts. Krycka's presentation was very entertaining, and it demonstrated the advantages of careful concrete descriptions of particular cases. His cases were Thomas Merton, an American writer and monk, Dag Hammarskjöld the Swedish statesman, and Joy Vendetti, an American woman who claims to have been abducted by aliens.

Finally, it seems appropriate to end my presentation of presentations with Yasuhiko Matsumoto, from the faculty of science and technology at the Tokyo University of Science in Japan. Matsumoto

showed up dressed like a Samurai with a sword and everything. The theme of his talk was Japanese Swashbuckler (Danish: “pralhals”) as depicted in traditional swordfight movies. He showed extracts from Japanese swashbuckler movies from the 1920s and compared them with an American one: The mark of Zorro from 1920 starring Douglas Fairbanks. The difference was clear. The American Zorro was a cheerful hero, agile and able to outsmart the police chasing him. The Japanese swashbuckler Bantsuma, in contrast, was a tragic hero, claustrophobically surrounded by the police, and he finally had to surrender. Matsumoto connected his micro-analyses of sword fighting scenes with macro-differences between Japanese and American societies in a very convincing way. In my view, psychologists can learn a lot from cultural and literary studies where researchers such as Matsumoto are often able to connect the abstract and the concrete, the micro and the macro, in fruitful ways. I learned a lot about Japan with Matsumoto’s help, just from watching a Samurai fight with his sword for five minutes.

In conclusion, the conference in Stockholm was a success, and the interdisciplinary nature of the Human Science conferences is probably their greatest asset. The world is not divided up in accordance with our quite arbitrary academic departments, and most psychological research will probably be enriched by learning from other disciplines.