

Qualitative critical phenomenology

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Qualitative critical phenomenology

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Abstract

Since its inception, phenomenological philosophy has engaged with empirical data of lived experiences. Recently, phenomenological philosophy itself has branched out into performing systematic qualitative research, resulting in a heterogeneous field of qualitative phenomenological philosophy. By introducing and outlining the research approach of ‘Qualitative Critical Phenomenology’ (QCP), this paper shows how one may conduct systemic qualitative research to lived experiences with an explicit phenomenological philosophical aim. In building on insights from various approaches within critical phenomenology, we not only give a stepwise explication of how to do QCP, we also discuss how we reflectively engage with lived experience as a research object and how key phenomenological themes – i.e. varieties of pre-/reflectivity and the phenomenological reduction – matter for designing and conducting a QCP inquiry. As such, we contribute to discussions on critical phenomenology – i.e. why it matters – but also to debates on how qualitative critical phenomenology may provide a critical lens to prevailing socio-cultural norms and their constitutive force in co-shaping perception and experience.

Keywords Critical phenomenology · Qualitative empirical research · Pre-reflectivity · Phenomenological reduction · Contingent structures of experience.

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1 Introduction

Phenomenological philosophy attends to the self as being-in-the-world and investigates subjectivity and lived experience from a first-person perspective. This is commonly done with a focus on invariant structures that help shape our very ways of experiencing, thereby seeking to examine and reflect on conditions of possibility of experience. Further, while early phenomenological philosophy has engaged with empirical data from its inception, as in work by Simone de Beauvoir ([1949]2009) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty ([1945]2014), phenomenology as a philosophical endeavour has also been explicitly demarcated from empirical research while at the same time being described as having relevance and pertinence for some empirical studies (see, for example, Zahavi, 2007).

Over the last few decades, a small but growing number of researchers in phenomenological philosophy have branched out into performing systematic qualitative research, conducting and analysing interviews and observations *with* a phenomenological philosophical aim. In this article, we label this heterogeneous and rich field as that of qualitative phenomenological philosophy. Some researchers within this field attend to lived experience through the performance and analysis of interviews with a focus on invariant structures (Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2011; Petitmengin et al., 2009). Others argue that phenomenologically grounded qualitative research might be particularly apt to study first-person experiences with a focus on altered modes of being-in-the-world (Køster & Fernandez, 2021). Still others focus on lived experiences with an eye for altered modes of being-in-the-world and contingent yet constitutive structures of experiences such as socio-cultural understandings and norms about particular bodies (see, for example, Zeiler, 2018; De Boer et al, 2019; Dalibert, 2022; Slatman 2016; Yaron et al. 2018), and some such research may contribute to characterising and analysing also invariant structures, and invite discussions of their interrelation. We understand the latter approach as fitting well into and being part of feminist and other critical phenomenology, and we label this approach qualitative critical phenomenological philosophy, or as a succinct term, *Qualitative Critical Phenomenology (QCP)*.

The aim of this article is to show and discuss how we do Qualitative Critical Phenomenology (QCP). By building on insights from critical phenomenology, we will discuss what our understanding of lived experience is, how it differs from understandings of experience in some other strands of qualitative phenomenological research, and why it is crucial, as part of the methodological discussion, to make one's understanding of experience explicit in studies of experience (Sect. 2). Moreover, by discussing two phenomenological key themes, i.e. varieties of pre-/reflectivity and the phenomenological reduction, we outline how we engage with lived experience as a research object in our QCP approach (Sect. 3). In giving a stepwise explication of QCP, we show how these understandings of experiences and phenomenological investigations matter for designing and conducting a QCP inquiry: for designing research aim(s), formulating research questions, identifying relevant theoretical frameworks, preparing and conducting interviews, and in taking different steps in the analysis (Sect. 4) – all of which reflectively engage with the researchers' positioning within the study. In doing so, we contribute to ongoing discussions of whether

and how to engage with combinations of qualitative research and phenomenological philosophy in projects that have a philosophical, phenomenological aim (in contrast to qualitative research that uses phenomenology as a framework, but does not have a philosophical aim). We also contribute to discussions of how not only critical phenomenology, but also qualitative critical phenomenology may provide a critical lens on how prevailing socio-cultural assumptions and norms, within a particular socio-cultural context, can help shape perception and experience (Sect. 5).

Before elaborating on the meaning of lived experience in QCP, three notes of clarifications can be apt. First, despite the variations on emphasis, foci, and approaches just mentioned, qualitative phenomenological philosophy including Qualitative Critical Phenomenology always entails *more* than engaging with someone's first person perspective with a focus on what something, for example, feels like. This makes qualitative phenomenological philosophy *as* phenomenological philosophy different from some qualitative research that aptly engages with lived experiences, without asking phenomenologically philosophical questions.

Second, and relatedly, a QCP inquiry attends to altered modes of being in the world, structures of perception and experience as well as meaningful objects as these manifest themselves in experience. In doing so, we speak to the larger debate on the status of invariant/transcendental structures/existentials in (philosophical) phenomenological inquiries. In its extreme form, this debate seems to predominantly waver between a pro- and anti-transcendental position – asking whether it is productive, and even possible to attend to some kind of basic structures of human existence through an investigation of experience that are necessarily influenced by and shaped within a contingent context.¹ In our positioning, we agree with Anthony Fernandez' description of invariant/transcendental structures/existentials as comprising “the basic and constitutive features of human existence” and that each structure/existential can encompass several modes of being-in-the-world (2017: 3551). In doing so, Fernandez (ibid.) differentiates between existentials (also called invariant/transcendental structures), modes and prejudices, where an existential is the category to which certain modes and prejudices belong to. Affectivity, for example, can be understood as an existential that includes modes like melancholy, anger, or cheerfulness.

From within this understanding, we hold that modes and prejudices are how existentials/transcendental structures may appear to us. In other words, such structures can be described and analyzed within and through contingent modes of experience. Moreover, besides from referring to transcendental structures as accessible through the analysis of modes and socio-cultural and historical understandings and norms, we refer in QCP to some of these contingent modes and norms as also possibly functioning *as* constitutive yet contingent structures of experience. We can clarify this by critically appraising Fernandez' understanding of prejudices. By quoting Gadamer, Fernandez holds that prejudices are “biases of our openness to the world” and “simply conditions whereby we experience something - whereby what we encounter say something to us” (Gadamer, 2008: 9, quoted in Fernandez, 2017: 3556). However, we see the term prejudice as having unfortunate connotations, as at the same time

¹ An elaborate discussion of this debate is beyond the scope of this paper. See, for a discussion on the various positions in this debate: Heinämaa, 2022.

being too broad and too narrow for what we have in mind. It is too broad when it is understood as including the learning of how to see/the alteration in a child's very perception of a candle's flame after having touched it for the first time and burnt itself (Fernandez, 2017: 3557), as this would not allow a specific focus on socio-cultural, historical structures, and yet too narrow if leading people to think only of prejudices of a sexist, racist, ableist or ageist nature, or as implying that only these kinds of prejudices structurally influence the way we perceive and experience the everyday world. One could, of course, argue that the latter only is a matter of clearly spelling out the meaning of the term prejudice, but for sake of clarity we will use the terms modes, invariant and socio-cultural, contingent structures of experience within this article.

Finally, the article outlines and discusses the stepwise approach of QCP in some detail, including that of the qualitative dimension of the QCP. This is done with the aim of offering concrete examples to scholars trained in phenomenological philosophy rather than in qualitative research, and/but who have an interest in performing a QCP inquiry themselves.

2 Critical phenomenology and lived experiences

Critical phenomenology, as this term has come to be used in present-day discussions, does not yet refer to a strictly defined research field, and the meaning of 'critical' in critical phenomenology is a topic for ongoing discussion (see for example Marder, 2014; Ferrari et al. 2018; Guenther, 2013, 2020; Salamon, 2018; Weiss et al. 2020; Oksala, 2023; Zahavi & Loidolt, 2022; Magri & McQueen, 2023). We see critical phenomenology as an emerging field. However, from the start, we want to emphasize that as an emerging field, critical phenomenology has long historical roots, and come in a variety of forms.

In our use of the term critical phenomenology, in this article, we emphasise four features. First, while the term critical phenomenology has recently gained traction, the inquiries performed in this field are far from new. For a long time, scholars with combined backgrounds in (for example) feminist, queer, and critical race studies *and* phenomenological philosophy have offered analyses of lived experiences of oppression, marginalization, and invisibility, just to mention some examples. They have engaged in strands with labels such as feminist phenomenology, queer phenomenology and phenomenological approaches in the field of critical disability studies and critical philosophy of race and decolonial studies, to name some examples (see, for example, Weiss, et al. 2020; see also Abrams 2020; Ahmed, 2006; Al-Saji, 2014; De Beauvoir [1970]1996; Reynolds, 2018; Salamon, 2018; Slatman, 2014; Fanon 2008; Young, 1990). They have also engaged with strands such as feminist phenomenology and medicine (Zeiler and Käll, 2014), phenomenological psychiatry, and offered phenomenological inquiries focused on racialization and psychopathological effects of it, commonly engaging with the works of Frantz Fanon (see, for example, Magri & McQueen, 2023; Zahavi and Loidolt 2022; Gibson 2021).

Second, scholars in critical phenomenology have often attended to the role of the body for subjectivity and the subject's very ways of perceiving, experiencing and engaging with others and the world. The focus on the body, here, includes attention

to the role of the body as a particular kind of body with a certain age, ethnicity, race, ability, and of a particular sex. Many also engage with older phenomenological work such as that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Far from dismissing attention to embodiment as a structure of experience, such scholars have added inquiries that bring out how it is not enough to focus *only* on embodiment as an invariant structure of experience. While there is a rich variation in how such studies are done, we note that at least much of this work acknowledges and attends to the issue of “how contingent historical and social structures [...] shape our experience” as put by Guenther (2020: 12). Further, scholars working within these phenomenological strands have interrogated the “relation between body, social identity (involving race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age), and interpersonal experience,” as put by Magri and McQueen (2023: 3). In doing so, critical phenomenologists further develop insights of ‘classical’ phenomenology such as that of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty by showing that “bodily representation and the socio-historical meaning it carries are inseparable from social understanding and political experience” (Magri & McQueen, 2023: 3). In addition, feminist and other forms of critical phenomenology has examined coercive and marginalizing structures of institutions such as that of psychiatry, attended to the power of medical assessment, diagnosis, and treatment and its formative effects on embodied subjectivity, and to the role of unequal distribution of privilege in, for example, pandemic experience (see for example Stainer et al. 2022; Zahavi and Loidolt 2022; Zeiler and Käll, 2014).

We thus understand critical phenomenology *not* as a term for a novel field, but as a term for a heterogenous set of phenomenological research strands that share concerns with power and privilege *and* socio-cultural assumptions and norms within particular lifeworlds, as contingent yet constitutive structures of experience, as has been central to feminist phenomenology since the 1940s and 1950s. This also means that we allow for the use of the term critical phenomenology for older literature, before the present-day discussions, as a way to acknowledge the heterogenous and extensive preceding literature. Further, despite the richness in foci within feminist, critical race, critical disability (etc.), phenomenological work that can be described with the term of critical phenomenology in our use of this term share an interest in constitutive yet contingent structures that are (per definition) not strictly universal or operating in the same way in all contexts, yet make possible and help shape “the meaning and manner of our experience”, our “*ways of seeing*, and even ways of *making the world* that go unnoticed without a sustained practice of critical reflection,” as put by Guenther (Ibid.). While central, this is not an exclusive interest or foci. Quite to the contrary, we understand critical phenomenology as a heterogenous movement that invites and allows several kinds of critique, and this openness as central to critical phenomenology. This means for example that we do not operate with a set of strict criteria for what kinds of critique that needs to be present for something to be defined as critical phenomenology. And in this regard, we understand critical phenomenology as very much in line with older feminist phenomenology, that also – in our view – was open to different kinds of critical analysis: some offered accounts that disclosed how particular norms about bodies constituted subjectivity within a particular lifeworld, and only indirectly entailed a call for change, whereas other approaches were combined

with explicitly normative arguments about the need for changing such norms as constitutive yet contingent structures.

Third, we concur with Magri and McQueen's (2023: 4) description of a "close and [...] genealogical continuity" between critical and classical phenomenology. We do not use the term of critical phenomenology to sharply delimitate against forms of phenomenology that do not render the foci above as primary within the phenomenological inquiry. Again, in line with older feminist phenomenology, we welcome different kinds of critical analysis. We see critical phenomenology as keeping to the focus on subjectivity (and the constitutive interconnectedness between subjects and objects, and subjectivity and objectivity), and engaging with and inviting *different* forms of socio-cultural and political critique, and this as a strength of the field. Please note that this also makes us less concerned with sharp border controls or hierarchical descriptions of what "really" gets to qualify as critical phenomenology vs. some other branch of phenomenology. For example, this means that we acknowledge that also some of Husserl's analysis of mathematization offers an inquiry into contingent yet constitutive scientific and socio-historical structures that shaped and enabled a distinct mode of world-disclosing, and instead of seeing this as making critical phenomenology pointless or as in other ways rendering it less needed, we see this as a strength. Just as feminist phenomenologists in the past, such as Iris Marion Young, engaged with and built on the work of Merleau-Ponty, yet added a distinct focus on what she termed female existence, we see critical phenomenology as building on older phenomenological work and adding attention to power, privilege, and sociocultural understandings and norms about bodies as constitutive of experience.

Fourth, Guenther (2021) holds that as critical phenomenology approaches experiences as always originating in situated subjectivity, it understands experiences not in terms of "just anyone's reflection on anything" but as "*someone's* reflection on a particular situation that they did not create single-handedly, but in which they are implicated" (Guenther, 2021: 11). She underlines that a historical situation is "more complex" than "the first-person experience of any given consciousness," and that - for this reason - more is needed than the first-person perspective that is central to classical phenomenology. Socio-cultural and historical "archives" are needed: critical phenomenology needs to be informed and take its cue from "an archive of statements, events, and expressions that are not directly accessible in the first person, but only through the mediation of language, writing, images, documents, artefacts, and so forth" (ibid.). To study this archive should not be understood as a matter of studying "the world" in opposition to one's own experience, but a matter of "studying the world in which [one] exist[s] as (historical) Being-in-the-world" (Guenther, 2021: 12). We agree, but see two things as noteworthy here. As Guenther also emphasises, this is not to leave the first-person perspective, but to also engage with second-person and third-person accounts as co-constitutive and entangled with that first person perspective. In that sense, in QCP, we need to attend to how people's experiences and sense-making of a phenomenon are co-constituted within and through larger scientific, political and socio-cultural narratives, including within empirically oriented strands of phenomenology. And we need to attend to, as Slatman also argues, how people's experiences and meaning-making are co-constituted in intersubjective encounters, in conversations with partners, children, friends, but also in being inter-

viewed (2021: 11). Further, the idea of the need to study archives of this kind can (again) be traced back to earlier phenomenologists who engage with feminist, queer, critical race and critical disability theory, who have indeed argued that singular bodies and corresponding lived experiences are always already embedded and shaped within a lived context, and emphasised the need to attend to the bodily self as co-shaped by prevailing yet contingent social, cultural and material structures in the world (see, for example, Abrams 2020; Ahmed, 2006; Al-Saji, 2014; De Beauvoir [1970]1996; Slatman, 2014; Reynolds, 2018; Young, 1990).

We adhere to a pluralist understanding of critical phenomenology. This means (as will be further discussed in part 5 of this article) that we see this phenomenological approach as contributing with critical reflection on what might otherwise have been taken-for-granted aspects of experience (see for example Guenther, 2021; Marder, 2014). In addition, central to critical phenomenology, in our use of this term, are analyses of the relation between embodiment, understandings and norms about bodies (involving for example social categories such as gender, ethnicity, ability, and age) or illnesses (as shameful, taboo, contested etc.), lived experience with a particular time and place, within a particular historical lifeworld (compare for example Magri & McQueen, 2023), and/or analyses of how dynamics and dimensions of power can structure perception and experience (Ibid., see also Guenther, 2021).

In addition, and as will be seen in parts 3 and 5, below, we understand critique as including a critical engagement with the researchers' own taken-for-grantedness and her terms of formulating the very research questions as central. We also acknowledge the ameliorative ambition of critical phenomenology, when, for example, not only identifying and articulating aspects of the world as felt possibilities, but also envisioning the world differently. A QCP analysis can, but need not, involve all these dimensions of critique.

2.1 Experiences and expressions

To shed further light on the QCP's understanding of lived experiences as embedded and shaped within a context, and why this understanding matters for qualitative critical phenomenology, it is important to address the co-constitutive relationship between experiences and semiotic meaning-bearing expressions. This relationship has been much debated in feminist and critical theory, and debates have revolved around, for example, the question of whether and how experience may be understood as thoroughly discursive and whether this means that there can be no non-conceptual, pre-linguistic, embodied experience (Oksala, 2016: 36, 40–41; see also, for example, Kruks, 2001; Scott, 1991). In a basic sense, in the context of qualitative empirical research and arguably in philosophical theoretical research as well, one largely depends on a semiotic account of experiences by definition: in expressing, drawing out, examining, and analysing experiences, one depends on meaning-making features such as words, texts, gestures, facial and other bodily expressions, even on silences. We will label these, with an umbrella term, semiotic-bodily expressions. The above, however, is not to say that experience and language neatly coincide, nor that it is possible to "return" to a previous experience and narrate it - putting it into words, seeking to articulate it - as it was "originally" experienced. On the contrary, we will argue

for reasons associated with what we will frame as the dynamic relation between language and experience.

In QCP, we understand semiotic-bodily expressions as not only meaning-*making* entities, but always also as embedded in sociocultural contexts in which these expressions take shape, and in this sense, are already *made* (Ricoeur, 1991). Here, the concept of the hermeneutic “circle of understanding” is pivotal. This circle involves the ongoing, attentive, dialectical movement between part and whole, in this case, between a contextual fore-understanding of a phenomenon and the interpretation on the basis of that fore-understanding, after a (slightly) new meaning of that phenomenon arises that becomes part of the range of fore-understandings about that phenomenon. The understanding of expressions as dynamically both meaning-*making* and meaning-*made* entities, does not imply that language (or other expressions, such as facial expressions) necessarily coincide with experience. Instead we concur with Johanna Oksala, who writes that “it must be possible to experience something new, something that we simply cannot name, or to experience something in a new way. Such unanticipated events force us to change our linguistic practices, which would otherwise remain completely static” (2014: 391). Even though language is a central tool in expressing and co-shaping our experiences, some experiences can be put better or more easily into words than others, and some experience may indeed be utterly difficult to express. Experiences of being immersed in nature may qualify as such difficult-to-express-in-words experiences. In addition, experiences of severe forms of suffering and intense pain in which one is “held fast” in pain (Levinas [1974]1981: 52), and where the pain not only “resists” but also “destroys” language, and where all that is possible to express is the cry (Scarry, 1985: 4), can exemplify experiences that cannot be expressed or are most difficult to express in words. Yet other examples of experiences that can be difficult to express in words are those that do not have a sufficiently shared (cultural) vocabulary to express.

2.2 Shared Space of expressing experiences

The idea that the relation between language and experience is dynamic also matters, as we will see in the next sections, when it comes to how to understand the possibilities and limitations of interviews. Furthermore, in assuming that experiences as expressions are always co-constituted in a socio-cultural and historical context - dynamically meaning-making and meaning-made - we underline that this context also includes the interview itself. This is also the reason why studying experiences in qualitative phenomenological philosophy never can entail inquiring into some experience as it was “originally” experienced, as if we could travel back to that experience when it was (first) experienced: such “original” experiences are not accessible because experiences are not fixed in time, but always already transformed within and through expressing that experience to oneself and others, for example in an interview situation. While putting an experience into words can enrich it, it can also render it less colourful, and flatten it, and in any case, when studying experiences in qualitative critical phenomenology, we understand experience *as expression*, where what is experienced is *expressed* and by necessity and simultaneously *transformed in and through the expression*.

This reasoning can be further explicated via phenomenological understandings of expression as unfolding in the shared space between self and other, shaping both of them in relation to each other. As put by Lisa F. Käll, in her elaboration of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body as expression, expression is "essentially something that happens in a communicative space between self and other while at the same time giving raise to both" (Käll, 2009: 76). Käll developed this reasoning by engaging with Merleau-Ponty's discussion of seeing an angry man, where the anger is immediately present in, or as, an embodied expression: the anger, Merleau-Ponty describes, "blossoms on the surface of his pale or purple cheeks, his bloodshot eyes and wheezing voice" (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Käll, 2009: 76). Emphasising both embodiment and embeddedness, Käll calls attention to the formation of both self and other in the shared space where embodied expression unfolds: "it is *in* the world that the expression of anger takes place, and *how* the world surrounds and supports it is part and parcel of the *way* in which it is expressed" (Käll *ibid.*; italics added). Käll does not discuss qualitative phenomenological philosophy at all, but we see the above as informative also for the understanding of the interview situation and the discussion of experience as expressed and expression. What is narrated in an interview - what is expressed in an interview - is shaped through the very way this narration, this expression, unfolds in the shared space: by how the interviewee experiences narrating something to the interviewer and how the interviewer experiences and responds to that which is narrated, and how both help shape the shared situation of the interview, which, in turn, shapes and supports the way in which both can express themselves. As hopefully should be clear, this makes studying experience through qualitative critical phenomenology different from studying, for example, physical objects from a natural science perspective. In this regard, we agree with Simon Høffding and Kristian Martiny in holding that to study experience in qualitative phenomenology is not to study experience as an object-like entity such as a physical object that can be treated as "static 'data' subject to 'reliability' or 'reproducibility,'" nor is experience something that is hidden within one's mind and that can be re-enacted in an interview and "dug out" (2016: Sect. 2.2 and 4.2).²

However, to capture contextualised and contingent structures of experiences, critical phenomenologists - perhaps surprisingly - typically do not do their own systematic qualitative work. Rather, many feminist and other critical phenomenological studies draw on their own reflection of lived experiences and constitutive socio-cultural structures (Bartky, 1990; Beauvoir [1949]2009), use empirical case-studies or draw on the findings from other systematic empirical studies (e.g. Malmqvist and Zeiler, 2010; Beauvoir [1970]1996; Dolezal, 2016; Weiss 2014; Young, 1990) as a basis for their own philosophical reflection and interpretation. While acknowledging the value and importance of such work, we stress the added value of doing one's own systematic qualitative work within critical phenomenology.

² Another paper that makes similar claims is: Stanier, 2022.

3 The QCP approach: Basic starting points

When describing our approach to QCP, we will make use of and engage with a few central themes, namely that of pre-reflectivity, the phenomenological reduction, and herein, the importance of allowing for a dialectical movement (between parts and the whole, past and present, personal experiences and lived context) when conducting research.

3.1 Varieties of pre-reflection

In aiming to understand lived experiences, QCP attends to drawing out and understanding how these experiences are residing and constituted on both a reflective and a pre-reflective level. While we are aware of, and able to reflect on, certain aspects of our experiences, other aspects go unnoticed but can, as Zahavi (2011: 9) holds, “still be lived through subjectively.” Such meaningful pre-reflective experiences can be shaped by invariant structures of experience, for example in (implicitly) experiencing our body as the zero-point of action and perception in our everyday lives or when we (tacitly) experience a temporal flow of time when we are immersed in daily routines (see for example LeGrand, 2006). While pre-reflective experiences may entail invariant (bodily, temporal) structures and thus shape our being-in-the-world on a basic level, pre-reflective experiences may also be shaped by contingent structures such as ingrained cultural norms or hierarchies with which we are socialised, that can come to be sedimented in our ways of thinking, speaking and acting.

As both pre-reflective invariant and contingent structures of experience help shape our being-in-the-world, they are open to being made (also) reflective. That is, in actually living that anchorage, and through engagement with others and the world, we may become aware of how our ways of thinking, feeling, speaking, acting etc., are shaped pre-reflectively (Cai, 2013). This may not only happen in daily life, when an interaction makes us aware of something that we previously ‘just’ lived without reflectively noticing, but also, for example, in an interview situation wherein the interviewer ask questions about the interviewee’s norms, background or their bodily and temporal way of being-in-the-world that co-shape their experiences. While QCP underscores the importance of teasing out and interpreting such pre-reflective aspects of experience, it holds together two ideas. Firstly, by collecting and enabling rich narrations and by checking whether the interviewer properly understood the interviewee’s narrations, some such pre-reflective experiences can already come to be explicated and – in a basic sense – analysed during the interview. Secondly, this does *not* entail that QCP expects the interviewee to be able to voice and identify pre-reflective structures within the interview. We would even say that this sounds epistemologically strange. As before, we emphasise, together with Guenther, that contingent structures – while not strictly universal or operating in the same way in all contexts – can function in a way that make possible and help shape “the meaning and manner of our experience” (2021: 11), and that investigating these structures requires distance and can be enabled by more than the first-person perspective (2021: 11). To identify, in this case, *pre-reflective* contingent structures thus involves taking a step back – which is why seeking to identify, investigate, and understand pre-reflective

dimensions and structures is the task of the researcher, who conducts an in-depth analysis of all the interviews.

Regardless of at what point in the research trajectory the pre-reflective is drawn out and interpreted, it is important to address that pre-reflective experiences are not static entities. Besides from that pre-reflective experiences may become, at some point, reflective – and as such, change from going unnoticed to becoming noticed (Zahavi, 2011) – they may also change *as* pre-reflective experiences. As an example, we may live certain socio-cultural norms and as society gradually changes, we may come to change the way we live and think, without noticing this change, because it is part of the very social dynamics of which we are intrinsically a part. In this sense, in drawing out relevant pre-reflective aspects that help shape a certain experience, we do not necessarily examine these aspects as they were shaping the experience at the time it was experienced, but always also in and through the present narration of the past experience (Clowes and Gärtner 2020; Lysaker & Lysaker, 2008).

3.2 The Phenomenological reduction

Methodologically, in our view, critical phenomenology - including QCP - needs the phenomenological reduction. The fact that we are immersed in the world as human beings underlines the importance of the phenomenological attitude of the reduction, as it allows us to take a step back in order to ask inquisitive questions about our very ways of being-in-the-world, and seek to become aware of both the contingent and invariant structures that co-shape and help constitute experience. Here, we agree with Merleau-Ponty that the reduction is never complete. “The important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction,” Merleau-Ponty holds, and suggests that the best formulation of the reduction might be formulations in terms of a “‘wonder’ before the world” (2012: lxxvii). Furthermore, we also concur with Debra Bergoffen, who underlines both “the impossibility of ridding ourselves of all assumptions” and the related impossibility of recognising the limits of our vision, while emphasising a continuous commitment to epoché (2012: 283). Specifically, Bergoffen suggests “an alliance between the epoché’s attention to unexamined assumptions and the hermeneutical attentiveness to divergent voices,” where listening to such voices is central to the “phenomenological concept of the horizon as that porous boundary that situates us in the present and opens us toward the future” (Bergoffen, 2012: 283).

For QCP, the above means that while the situated engagement with a certain phenomenon seems to be a necessary step in designing research and is not an inherently good or bad thing, this approach allows and challenges researchers to critically engage with their engagement. In acknowledging the situatedness of researchers, QCP seeks to draw out, reflect on and problematize the very terms within which research objects are chosen, research questions are asked, and methodological approaches are taken. Here, a particular appearance of the phenomenological reduction is important. In acknowledging, together with Merleau-Ponty and Bergoffen (2012), that the phenomenological reduction is always incomplete – i.e. that we are always attuned to our historical situation and that this can never be fully bracketed – this reduction means that we should try to examine and take a reflective distance to our assumptions and

our situation, and reflect on structures that help shape and make possible our own perception and experience. In this regard, QCP challenges researchers to partially bracket the assumptions and normative stances that come with their situatedness, that is, to become aware of and draw out their research horizon, their specific vantage point towards the world through which their research engagements are formed and take shape. In doing so, researchers should strive to (be able to) reflect on the limiting range of their horizon and seek to try to (be able to) be open towards other possible perspectives on and engagements with the phenomenon under investigation - while acknowledging that this still never entails stepping out of one's situatedness. This phenomenological reduction, then, would help to identify and give an account of not only contingent but also (more or less) invariant structures of experience. That is, as an incomplete bracketing of our situation, the phenomenological reduction helps us to be open to other historized, socio-culturally shaped experiences, but also to invariant structures of experience – such as temporality, embodiment, affectivity, etc. – that on a basic level shape our very ways of experiencing. However, in QCP, while such invariant structures would come forth as shaping our very experiences, the QCP analysis will less often get us to the level of these structures as such. This is the case because these structures are conditions of our experiences, and as such, they typically manifest and show up in QCP analyses as part of concrete modes of being in the world.

4 A stepwise explication of QCP: Research Design, Interviewing, and analysis

Within the overall QCP approach, the ambition remains to attend to invariant and contingent yet constitutive structures of experience, as well as to modes of being-in-the-world. Below, we give a stepwise explication of QCP and engage with the terms of front-loading and retrospective phenomenology (Gallagher, 2010) to spell out the distinctive qualities of the QCP approach. In outlining the QCP approach, we will draw on a QCP research example: the ‘Sharing lives, sharing bodies’ (SLSB) project. This research project focused on couples’ relationally lived experiences of bodily changes in breast cancer, and implied conducting and analysing duo interviews with diagnosed women and their partners (De Boer et al, 2019). Despite the specificity of the project, the lessons learned about a QCP approach reach beyond this setting only.

4.1 Research Design: formulating the research questions

The QCP researcher begins with selecting a research object. In the SLSB project, this was the broad phenomenon of women’s experiences of breast cancer. After committing to a research object, the researcher starts formulating workable research questions. Here, the researcher identifies research lacunae in previous relevant research, for example by exploring the field of critical studies (be it critical phenomenology, critical medical humanities, anthropology, etc.). Such an exploration can be understood as a very basic kind of ‘front-loading’. However, whereas ‘frontloading’ is typically understood as using (retrospective interpretations of) concrete phenomenological

concepts in order to focus a study (Gallagher, 2010; Køster & Fernandez, 2021), the QCP explicitly acknowledges that any study already draws on the researcher's interpretations of past literature and on their own research – and perhaps personal – experiences in focusing one's research object and identifying accompanying research questions. Note that in doing so, the researcher aims to become reflectively aware of how their situation and previous experiences influence and shape the research design. This kind of incomplete reduction is not practiced for the purpose of eliminating this influence, but rather in order to critically engage with it – to investigate, for example, which past readings and interpretations have an influence on the research design and whether other interpretations and readings may also be worthwhile to engage with in designing the research. Here, QCP's research design process is dialectical: by drawing on research experience and by interpreting literature with a basic phenomenological interest in lived meaning-making, invariant structures, and contingent structures (that also may make possible and help shape the meaning and manner of our experience), the researcher's engagement with the research object becomes more focused, which then prompts a more specified engagement with the literature, after which the research object may become more focused again. The accompanying research question, then, asks about specific lived experiences and relatedly, about altered modes of being-in-the-world, contingent structures of perception and experience. And in this sense, the QCP is front-loaded with a phenomenological framework.

Furthermore, and to make use of the case of the SLSB project, reading critical literature during the project allowed us to identify the significance of (breast) cancer as a shared occurrence between patients and their partners. In attending to breast cancer as a 'we-experience', we asked the preliminary question of what this 'we' actually means for intimate couples who deal with this illness – i.e. how bodily changes in breast cancer are experienced and made sense of within and through an intimate (love) relationship. Besides reading relevant literature, this focus was also prompted by a previous research project. Here, partners of participating breast cancer patients would often attend the interview. As it became clear, these duo interviews significantly influenced and shaped the way in which participants narrate their illness experiences.

After selecting and formulating research questions, QCP approach starts with the concrete empirical design of the study: with a recruitment strategy and with preparing the interview.³

QCP typically works with semi-structured in-depth interviews, meaning that an open-ended thematic list is used as an interview guide. This aspect of QCP is pivotal, as this guide co-shapes when and how data saturation occurs, as well as the richness

³ The basic rule of thumb in QCP is that the sample should be 10–20 respondents, which allows for rich data while at the same time anticipating that respondents may drop out of the study. However, the number of respondents is ultimately dependent on data saturation during the interview process (Sandelowski, 1995). Such saturation depends on and is in dialogue with the formulation and broadness of the research questions, the extensiveness of the thematic interview list, the quality of the interviews and whether new topics are brought up by respondents. This means that for one QCP study, data saturation may already occur with 7 respondents, whereas in another study it only occurs with 25 respondents. Furthermore, at times, for practical reasons, a QCP study may comprise even fewer respondents, and this may still enable the conceptual development that is central to any QCP study (see, for example, Author in press).

of the interview, and consequently the quality of the subsequent analysis. Determining themes for the interview guide may consist of ‘front-loading’ certain phenomenological concepts (or existentials), such as intersubjectivity, temporality, embodiment, which function as “lenses for structuring and guiding the interview” and allow the interviewer to focus on “particular modal alterations” (Køster & Fernandez, 2021; see also Klinke & Fernandez, 2023). But developing a QCP thematic list is a much broader and multivariate endeavour. Relevant themes may also be identified based on the researcher’s own experience with the research object or by thinking along with past research. In the SLSB project, this meant that basic phenomenological themes, such as bodily and sensory dimensions of illness (Merleau-Ponty [1945]2014) or future-oriented experiences of illness (e.g. wishes/hopes/expectations; see: Steinbock, 2007) were front-loaded in the thematic list, as too were classical anthropological themes such as varieties of gift-giving (Mauss 1966). The latter theme was added as a way of addressing the potential significance, as commonly described in anthropology, of aspects of reciprocity and exchange within experiences of relationality. These basic themes were, however, not addressed as such, but always made concrete through thinking along with them on the basis of previous research experiences, by reading critical literature more broadly, and by applying and modifying them, and making them fit the interview situation and the respondent’s shared experience during the interview.

4.2 The phenomenological interview: its dimensions

A QCP interview shares several core features with other kinds of interviews in the field of qualitative research. As a meeting between two people – or three in the case of the SLSB project – it rests on a basic reciprocity in meaning-making and involves a dynamic co-shaping of experiences in the interview. As each participant brings in their own understandings and perspectives, both the interviewer and the interviewee are, as Høffding and Martiny (2016) put it, “constitutive of the knowledge generation process” (4). While the phenomenological reduction is indeed incomplete (Merleau-Ponty 2012), it is important for the interviewer to try to become aware of what kind of understandings and perspectives they bring to the interview situation in order to be able to critically reflect on it – something wherein journalling before and after the interview took place may be helpful. As such, the point of the phenomenological reduction is not to bracket the interviewer’s socio-cultural and historical situation, but to become aware of how that situatedness shapes one’s own engagement in the interview – how it shapes the way the interview unfolds, how it shapes the very experience of narrating experiences in the interview, and whether and how the interviewer asks follow up questions. Neither is it the point of the phenomenological reduction to bracket the interviewees’ socio-cultural and historical situation, but rather the opposite. The interview should be geared towards listening and drawing out that situatedness and attend to this situatedness, to be aware of it, and use it when formulating follow-up questions.

Furthermore and related to the aspect of reduction in the QCP interview, the interview requires creating a welcoming atmosphere and a general openness to the interviewee, combined with a clear communication of the aim of the interview and

its scope. Becoming reflectively aware of one's own situatedness and perhaps even prejudices as well as those of the interviewee can help in creating a open, welcoming environment. Moreover, such an openness entails remembering that the interview is a meeting with another person, who sometimes needs encouragement to be able to share her story – for example in the form of discursive signs of interest, nodding or tonal affirmations. In this way, the interview as a co-generating knowledge encounter is preferably understood as a semi-structured conversation, more than a neutral observation space (compare, for example, Varela & Shear, 1999). QCP understands this conversational interview as having its own dynamics, where the interviewer asks open-ended questions, the interviewee responds, and the interviewer asks follow-up questions or in other ways modifies the next question based on what the interviewee just said. Such an interaction does not necessarily follow the structure of the thematic interview guide, but jumps back and forth between different topics, depending on what the interviewee feels comfortable with and chooses to narrate. Even more, the interviewer explicitly makes space for being surprised. Through the interviewees' reflections on their own experiences and through formulating follow-up questions, new topics or new aspects about the phenomena may come to fore. In any case, the interviewee is encouraged to bring up new topics that are relevant for the research. This co-shaping of the (unfolding of the) interview thus requires awareness of the role of both discursive and non-discursive knowledge that give cues about the current and potential interview situation. One way of navigating this conversational interview is to first ask the interviewee a broad, open question, for example 'can you tell me about your illness history?'. While letting the interviewee speak on their own terms, the researcher makes notes about issues that they want to address later. In asking about such issues later, the interviewer not only implicitly acknowledges that they are being attentive to the interviewee's story, thereby recognising the significance of the story, but in doing so, the interviewer also attempts to exhibit 'good timing', i.e. reading the conversation and the non-discursive cues, so that the theme that the interviewer wants to address 'flows' naturally from the previously discussed themes.

This means that the QCP researcher can add follow-up questions during the interview, based on what has been said in the interview or in previous interviews, thereby adjusting existing interview themes. In the SLSB project, the theme of 'bodily and sensory dimensions of illness', for example, came to encompass the sub-theme of sexual experiences and activities (a.o. inspired by the works of Emilee et al., 2010), which was initially addressed in the interview by asking about intimacy at large (cuddling, kissing, touching, etc.), upon which some interviewees chose to talk about sensory dimensions and intercourse. And in addressing how these intimate and sexual practices take shape within and through the respondent's particular socio-cultural and normative context, the QCP researcher takes stock of how certain – perhaps even invariant – structures (in this case 'embodiment') are lived through as a contextualised mode of being-in-the-world. By centralising situated practices, moreover, QCP makes it possible to describe and investigate how contingent socio-cultural understandings and norms about particular bodies may function as structures of experience that are, not universal by definition, but nevertheless may make possible and help shape the meaning and manner of experience.

A QCP interview, in our view, has the dual goal of being interested in the concrete lived, contextualised experience of the interviewees *and* structures of experience, be these contingent or invariant. This is *not* to say that QCP is interested in introspection, i.e. why a certain someone experiences something in a particular way (for a discussion of these topics, see Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008; Høffding & Martiny, 2016). Rather, the QCP's value rests in its ability to hold together the actual individual's lived experience in the here and now *and* structures of experience. Throughout the QCP interview, the focus is kept on concrete, lived situations and activities in which the studied phenomenon is relevant/lived through/etc. Such questions not only allow the interviewee to give 'rich' and 'dense' narrations, i.e. narrations that are detailed, but also to collect narrations of experiences within a particular sociocultural and historical world. In doing so, groundwork is done for subsequently teasing out and investigating modes of being-in-the-world and structures that are constitutive for – i.e. that help shape the meaning and manner of – the interviewees' experience. This latter work, however, will take place in the analysis.

The ambition to attend to both reflective and pre-reflective experiences is already present in the interview. However, as we soon develop in more detail, it is in the analysis of a large set of interviews that aspects of experiences, which may be taken for granted in everyday narrations, can come to stand out as that which helps shape the very way that someone experiences herself, others, things or the world. Such taken-for-granted, tacit and unnoticed dimensions are what we refer to as pre-reflective. As such, they are very difficult to note within and when conducting the interview, and we therefore share Høffding and Martiny's (2016) description of structural aspects of experience as something that can become particularly clear within the analysis of the interviews. This is, of course, not to say that a phenomenological interview in QCP would not address altered modes of being-in-the-world, attend to changes in how one experiences oneself and the world, and the very relation between self and world. On the contrary, the interviewer can ask questions that encourage the interviewee to narrate present and past experiences, including experiences of changes. Such questions can encourage reflections that capture or allow for subsequent analysis of how one experiences and finds oneself in the world, and this then invites attention to aspects of experience that are often pre-reflective.

4.3 Analysis

The analysis in QCP involves several steps. The first step is a basic thematic analysis. As part of this analysis, and in line with the previous emphasis on openness and surprise – of practising a phenomenological reduction as much as possible – QCP starts with a careful and open reading of the empirical material. After reading the material, patterns as well as differences across the data as a whole are identified. As such, a thematic analysis can be characterised as a “bottom up” approach – meaning that we engage in detailed coding that stays close to the data (sometimes even on the level of line by line coding), without immediately trying to fit it into any kind of pre-existing

framework or analytic preconceived ideas.⁴ Examples of such thematic codes in the SLSB project were ‘partners assisting patients: household’, ‘disagreement/conflict’, ‘intimacy: kissing’. While this step of the QCP analysis is closely data-driven, it still acknowledges that the researchers cannot step out of their situatedness and their theoretical or epistemological starting points (compare Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this sense, a thematic analysis is not a mere description, but already an interpretation.

When all relevant data has been coded, different codes are clustered together in a way that creates sub-themes and themes. In the SLSB-project, for example, the codes that all deal with bodily intimacy – i.e. kissing, cuddling, stroking, etc. – were clustered together. Within this analytic work, we again paid attention both to patterns across the data and to lived experiences that did not fit a particular pattern, i.e. to that which was different, and that through this very difference could shed light on the patterns identified. For instance, whereas many of the partner-interviewees in the SLSB project talk about the differences regarding their breast cancer experiences, there was one couple that mainly talked about their experiences as being in sync with each other. In specifically attending to and coding their experiences, the analysis was not only able to tease out a diverse range of experiences, but also to draw out the boundaries of (and reflect on) more common experiences in the data.

The second analytic step implies (re-)turning to phenomenological literature in light of the identified themes in the first step of the analysis. This step has two purposes: it allows for the creation of a reflective distance after the close reading and it allows for a critical cross-engagement with existing phenomenological literature and the coded data. In this sense, returning to the phenomenological literature can enable the phenomenological reduction, where the researcher asks questions about the constitution of narrated lived experiences, taking a step back from the specific narrations, asking about structures that make them possible and help shape them. Further, reading relevant phenomenological works enables us to become aware of the ways in which we have read and interpreted the data, to the ways in which we attributed meaning to them – what kind of narrations caught our attention, which code names we gave them, how we grouped them together, and whether there are other possible ways of coding and interpreting the data. Choosing what kind of literature to engage with in this analysis step is dependent on what we refer to as empirically- and epistemically-informed skills. In this step, the coded data guides us in choosing relevant literature to read – which in turn could open up new pathways of coding and interpreting the data. In the SLSB project, for example, the coded data about ambiguities in relational meaning-making in breast cancer – wherein most couples adhere to both being separate, distinct and distant as well as similar, connected and proximate to one another - let us to engage with the specific Nancian literature about sharing (*partage*), in which such singularities and commonalities in relationally are discussed extensively (Nancy, 1990). Such a data-driven, empirically informed choice can, however, only take place when being acquainted with the extensive corpus of phenomenological literature and about which part of this corpus may be relevant for the QCP project.

⁴ Even though the QCP research design as a whole is front-loaded in the sense that the particular research project starts from within a phenomenological framework, this analytical step is not in itself tied to a particular theoretical framework (see, for example, Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019).

As such, researchers may take their reading broadly to maintain and nurture their openness to the richness of the phenomenological literature.

With the relevant phenomenological literature (identified in step 2) in mind, the third step in the analysis is to go back to the coded database (i.e. the interviews with the clustered codes attached to them as in step 1) and re-read and re-code the interviews. This re-coding is geared towards a further grouping together of (some of) the codes and themes (as identified in step 1) into more phenomenological heavy themes that are relevant for the QCP study. In line with the critical phenomenological aspect in QCP, such themes attend to various modes of being-in-the-world and to the significance of invariant or contingent structures within people's lived experiences. In the SLSB project, this meant that we eventually identified four different ways of couples' sharing an embodied life in the context of breast cancer. This kind of grouping was inspired by the principle of sameness and difference between self and other as elaborated on by Nancy (1990). By recoding interviews, we saw that there are different ratios (i.e. proportion of sameness to difference) and different modes of relating to one another (i.e. identifications/dissimilarities; proximity/distance; etc.) in the actual practice of couples' relating to one another. In the themes of 'being different together', 'being there for you: caregiving and caretaking', 'relating to you: intimacy and sexuality', and in 'being like you: synchronising life and body', we explore these ratios and modes. For example, 'being different together' is more about difference than sameness and 'being like you' is more about sameness than difference. And 'relating to you' is predominantly about the mode of bodily proximity and distance while 'being different together' and 'being like you' are about the mode of identification and dissimilarity. Within and through this phenomenological grouping of the codes, we are able to show how couples continuously define the manifold lines that both separate and connect them in response to breast cancer. We show, moreover, that all these relational lines take shape within a certain socio-cultural and historical structures: e.g. gendered norms about caretaking and caregiving, gendered socializations with coping with illness, or persistent stigmas around sexuality. Even more, as these contingent structures are intrinsically woven into the fabric of the various modes of couples' relating to one another in breast cancer, it may be argued that they cannot be thought apart from the meaning of relationality as such.

In step four of the analysis process, we identify for each phenomenological thematic group certain quotes that may be discussed or interpreted more elaborately. Here, we begin by identifying exemplary, common quotes, and then describe how they vary in their details. For instance, in the SLSB project, we begin by describing the theme of 'being different together' by sketching out how many of couples described that they have different kinds of experiences of having breast cancer and getting treatment; differences that pertain to the fact that the disease physically affects only one of the partners, and to responses to diagnosis and treatment. After sketching out common patterns within the thematically grouped data, QCP research gives specific attention to quotes that are detailed and 'dense' narrations, and as such function as a kind of elaboration on the identified, common patterns. However, QCP also attends to (detailed) quotes that are the odd ones out or are ambiguous - that as 'boundary experiences' also speak to the common patterns. Within the theme of 'being different together' in the SLSB project, this means that we elaborated on one

couples' ability to relate to each other's differences *without* demanding a strong sense of identification with one another.⁵

Note that this detailed interpretation of the selected quotes is explicitly theoretically informed, as it engages with relevant phenomenological concepts (that are identified in step 2). A QCP interpretation therefore takes the shape of thinking-with phenomenological theories and concepts while engaging with the empirical material. For example, in the 'being there for you' theme in the SLSB project, it is discussed that the scenes of assistance described between partners bring to mind not only Nancy's notion of sharing (1990), of what it means to be a 'we', but also Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'I can' ([1945]2014), albeit in a thoroughly relational manner: as a 'we can'. By using and thinking along with these phenomenological notions while engaging with the data, we are able to tease out the intricacies of sharing breast cancer experiences as intimately connected to couples' dealings with her embodied incapacities.

In the last step of the analysis phase, the QCP researcher specifically attends to the conceptual aim of the project. Within this step, the researcher explicitly speaks back to and adds to the phenomenological theoretical literature on the basis of their phenomenologically informed empirical interpretations (see Authors, 2020). Here, the dialectical movement within QCP research comes to the fore again. While the critical, phenomenological literature helps to interpret the empirical material, the phenomenologically/critically interpreted empirical material helps to interpret, speak back to and stay in conversation with the phenomenological and other critical literature. We can already identify this literature-empirical conversation in the above-mentioned example of how we interpreted the SLSB data, namely in that Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'I can' is put in dialogue with Nancy's notion of 'sharing' in the interpretation of the empirical data of couples' care routines in breast cancer. In a basic sense, the phenomenological interview implies the bracketing of any causal explanations or theories about the phenomenon that is being studied and a subsequent openness to the interviewee's narrations. Moreover, such a dialogue may also take place in the discussion section of a QCP paper – wherein one takes stock of how the interpreted empirical data shows us different perspectives on phenomenological concepts and theories, how they are interrelated or not, and even how such concepts and interrelations may be understood otherwise. In relation to the SLSB project, this means that as all of the couples relate to one another in their breast cancer experiences, that we may argue that such relationality may assert to what we call an invariant structure of experience, and to what Nancy (2000) would call an ontological structure of existence, a 'being-with'. Our study, then, adds to Nancy's understanding of being-with by showing that such an ontological/invariant structure involves different modes of relating to one another in breast cancer (e.g. bodily proximity/distance; identification/dissimilarity) within and through (more or less) intentional practices: caring routines, touching, walks, talks, fights or kisses. Furthermore, we also show that such practised modes of relationality not only take shape within and through the particular breast cancer context, but are also thoroughly embedded within larger socio-cultural and

⁵ Note that in keeping with the principle of openness in QCP research, QCP research allows and encourages discussion of more than one possible interpretation of selected (and quoted) expressions of experiences.

historical structures involving, for example, gendered norms about care or particular socialisations with coping – an inside that is largely taken for granted within Nancy’s notions of ‘sharing’. On the basis of our phenomenologically interpreted data, then, we stay in conversation with Nancy by stating that our existential condition of ‘being a we’ is not given at once, but may be understood as something that we have to *do together with others in this socio-cultural world*; that ‘being-a-we’ is an intersubjective and contextualised verb instead of a pronoun.

5 What is critical about qualitative critical phenomenology?

After outlining our QCP approach, the question remains of what is exactly critical about qualitative critical phenomenology. In answering this question, we engage with Guenther’s outline of six kinds of critique in critical phenomenology (Guenther, 2021), as well as the understanding of critique in critical phenomenology in the work of, among others, Magri and McQueen (2023).⁶

As QCP is concerned with invariant and contingent structures of perception and experience, and with modes of being-in-the-world, as well as meaningful objects as these manifest themselves in experience, we do not dismiss the critical levels that are already part and parcel of much classical phenomenology. We concur with the understanding of critique as a basic ‘art of questioning, moved by crisis’, where scholars ask questions about that which seems unquestionable or that which is taken for granted until something happens that disrupts this unquestionability or taken-for-grantedness (Guenther, 2021, p. 8, see also Weiss et al. 2020). We also share the understanding of phenomenology as engaging in ‘critique as transcendental inquiry’ – that is, as engaging in critical systematic conceptual inquiry, with the aim of clarifying concepts and their limitations, *including* the very conditions for perceiving and thinking (Guenther, 2021: 8, 9; see also, for example, Marder, 2014).

As stated already in the beginning of this article, we see critical phenomenology as a heterogenous movement that invites and allows several kinds of critique, and this openness as positive. At the same time, we understand what Guenter terms as critique as the “study of particular lifeworld that is “historically grounded” yet attends to contingent and constitutive structures that may make possible and help shape the meaning and manner of our experience as such, and that of ‘critique as (situated and interested) analysis of power’ (2021: 10. 13) as particularly interesting to our QCP studies.

In contrast to ethnographic or other qualitative research that is not situated within a phenomenological philosophy framework nor has philosophical aims, QCP is indeed concerned with structures of experience and modes of being-in-the-world. QCP is *not* merely about ‘dense’ descriptions of lived experiences, of “what something’s like” (Guenther, 2021: 12), but it always also involves an analysis of altered modes of being-in-the-world or structures of perception and experience as they manifest them-

⁶ In doing so, we give general examples of how QCP research may be considered critical, which also holds for the SLSB project as discussed in Sect. 4. Outlining in detail how this project is critical is beyond the scope of this paper.

selves in these lived experiences. QCP is, in this sense, about the phenomenological *constitution*, and not only the empirical *descriptions* of experience. Moreover, in conducting this analysis of constitution and by following the QCP analysis steps (see Sect. 4), this kind of research acknowledges the socio-cultural and historical situation of the self and invites analytical engagement with first-, second- and third-person perspectives – without disregarding the centrality of the first-person perspective.

The critical part of QCP at this level is concerned with, for example, sociocultural assumptions and norms about bodies and other socio-culturally shared dimensions at the level of particular lifeworlds such as, for example, socio-cultural dimensions of specific illnesses, at specific times and places – where the QCP analysis both help to identify these assumptions, norms and understandings within the specific sociocultural, historical and material context, and, importantly, allow for the analysis of how they help shape and make possible experiences.⁷ In this way, the QCP allows us not only to understand how certain phenomena are lived through, but to also understand them better, to examine how they are constituted in experience, and, in addition, how one may be differently positioned in relation to these assumptions, norms and understandings, how these may be differently manifest, constitutive and constituted, in different persons’ – different interviewees’ – experiences. In this way, QCP allows for an understanding of more perspectives and complexities – arguably more perspectives than purely philosophical phenomenological analysis and reflections would reveal. Further, it is critical in the sense of investigating the relation between embodiment, understandings and norms about bodies (involving, for example, socially informed categories such as gender, ethnicity, ability, and age), lived experience with a particular time and place (compare for example Magri & McQueen, 2023). It is also critical in the sense of investigating the relation between embodiment, understandings and norms about particular illnesses as shameful, taboo or contested, and lived experience of these, within a particular time and place (see, for example, Zeiler et al., 2023).

And this level of critique can be combined with the next kind of critique in Guenther’s outline: that of critique as a situated and interested analysis of power. Here, QCP again contributes to critical phenomenology. It offers tools that allow for the analysis of subtle dimensions of powers, that can easily be missed without qualitative research, and examines them, again, with a phenomenological philosophy aim. This can attain to teasing out and analysing, for instance, power structures between two people, but also how shared norms of hierarchy within representations and stereotypes influence and shape experiences, and, indeed, how the power of medical assessments, diagnoses, and treatments or lack thereof can help shape embodied subjectivity. Please note the broad understanding of CP and QCP that we work with: we want to underline that QCP not only contributes to studies that implicitly or explicitly attend to power dynamics, even if they often attend to how power dynamics or dimensions help structure perception and experience. Far from it: it is *also* apt for studies concerned with socio-cultural contingent structures of perception and experi-

⁷ The new diagnosis of post Covid-19 condition can exemplify this point: in the beginning of the pandemic, this diagnosis was initially contested in many contexts. If such a shared socio-cultural questioning come to be repeatedly expressed and enacted, and taken up by the subject, it can come to function as a socio-culturally prevailing yet contingent structure of experience.

ence, such as various assumptions and norms about bodies and for studies of lived experiences of illnesses that are attentive to how perception and experience is shaped through socio-cultural assumptions and understandings or uncertainties about that illness – as discussed above – and for analyses of “*how* cultural values, norms, and representations find their way into individual consciousness and societal life” (Magri & McQueen, 2023: 22). In QCP, such an analysis of the *how* would be an integrated part of the inquiry of *how*, for example, such values, norms, representations are manifest in the experiences of interviewees and their modes of being-in-the-world.

Guenther outlines two more levels of critique in critical phenomenology. The first, i.e. “critique as problematization” entails problematising “the very terms with which one formulates a question” (and hence a more far-reaching endeavour than asking questions in the first level of critique), and “a practice of re-thinking one’s own key terms” (2021: 17). We see QCP as adding also to this level of critical analysis. It can contribute as a powerful problematisation of injustices, mistreatments, misrepresentations, and disquieting through a systematic empirical description and analysis of structures thereof, that show – with detailed, poignant, and actually lived examples – how some existing horizons of im/possibilities and in/capabilities are problematic. The final level of critique in critical phenomenology that Guenther brings forth is that of a “critique as a praxis of freedom” (2021: 15, 17), a critique that is concerned with “restructuring the world” of meaning, relations, and possibilities, and “(re)opening, expanding, and amplifying horizons of possibility that might have otherwise seemed closed or non-existent” (2021: 19). Again, QCP is apt to contribute to this level: it entails a critique that not only problematises, but also aims to open up discussions of what a different horizon of possibilities could look like. Indeed, QCP, we argue, is especially equipped to do so, because it systematically can spell out aspects of the world as felt possibilities and meanings – including how the self-experiences the world as being closed down or meaningless – through the combined qualitative critical phenomenology inquiry. And an apt understanding of the lived present, including retaining pasts and foreseen futures, is needed for thinking differently and envisioning how to open up horizons of possibilities.

Finally, and to reiterate: a QCP analysis need not involve all these dimensions of critique. It does need to engage some of them, however. And with QCP, this critique is systematically, empirically grounded and philosophically engaged with the very meaning and manner of perception, experience, thinking and feeling. The QCP inquiry can thus be seen both as a contribution to and development beyond the early phenomenological philosophy that did engage with empirical data (as in work by Simone de Beauvoir ([1949]2009) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty ([1945]2014), but without performing systematic qualitative research as part of qualitative phenomenology philosophy, *and* a contribution to discussions of why and how philosophical inquiry has much to gain not only from qualitative phenomenological philosophy but also from qualitative critical phenomenology. With the QCP approach, we hope to further the field of qualitative phenomenological philosophy research.

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Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate Ethical clearance for the ‘Sharing lives, sharing bodies’ (SLSB) – project was obtained for this study from the university hospital’s ethical review board where this research took place (file number 13-4-086)

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