Abstract

Purpose – The authors discuss the lifeworld as a research concept for the field of information behaviour, which serves to problematise the concept of unit of analysis. In so doing, the authors demonstrate how the lifeworld can be adopted as a unit of analysis in information behaviour research, that is, how research can be based in the lifeworld rather than merely looking at the lifeworld. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors first situate our discussion in the current of information behaviour scholarship. The authors then introduce the concepts of lifeworld and unit of analysis and consider how they intersect. Next, to show the importance of the lifeworld, the authors present two recent studies in which the lifeworld emerged. Finally, the authors discuss how lifeworld-based research can be conducted more conscientiously.

Findings – Though many research approaches deal with lived experience in one way or another, they tend not to fully grasp these experiences. As opposed to units of analysis such as individual, social group, person-in-situation, etc., using lifeworld as a unit of analysis allows phenomena to be researched holistically and without reductionism.

Research limitations/implications – The authors limit the discussion to the concept of the lifeworld as developed by Husserl, the concept’s originator. The lifeworld has been discussed and extended by other authors since, but this work is not considered here. The viewpoint is offered as a supplementary perspective, meant to be enriching to our field of study, rather than divisive.

Originality/value – This is the first time the concept of the lifeworld has been fully explicated in information science. As the authors discuss, two recent information behaviour studies that “discovered” the lifeworld through their analysis. Future studies that attend to the lifeworld from the start have the capacity to build on this work and extend the horizons of information science.

Keywords Research methods, Information behaviour, Critique, Phenomenology, Practice theory, Lifeworld

Research in human information behaviour, in aspiring to account for everything that concerns both humans and information, seems to strive toward holism like a bean sprout to the sun. With roots in the system-centred positivism of the early twentieth century, the research field of human information behaviour has grown in an effort to attend more deeply to information-related phenomena. Accordingly, naturalistic and context-sensitive methodologies have burgeoned, and researchers continue to seek means for studying information-related processes as close to life as possible (Fidel, 2012). Proliferation notwithstanding, most of the research in human information behaviour still employs surveys and statistics rather than more naturalistic interview techniques or observations (Case and Given, 2016). This suggests the need for a broader recognition and understanding of context-sensitive methodologies and their continued development within the field.

In this current, Talja and Nyce (2015) contend that practice theory offers the most holistic framework for understanding information processes available, and that research in the
information-needs and activity-theory paradigms can be understood within the umbrella of practice theory:

In practice theory, knowledgeability and expertise are context embedded, embodied, intuitive, opportunity based, and self-sustained in the sense they are based on acting in situations whose specific characteristics are and become part of the practice as its unfolds (Talja and Nyce, 2015, p. 64).

To be sure, research operationalizing practice theory has deepened our understanding of information phenomena (see Pilerot et al., 2017). However, it seems that practice-based approaches also are subject (albeit to a lesser degree) to a too limited conceptualization of information in information science. As discussed by Ocepek (2018), this may be due to outdated notions of what aspects of existence can be informational and a bias toward the outwardly observable. In the words of Talja and Nyce (2015, p. 64), “From the practice lens, meanings, experiences, and sensemaking are secondary compared to understanding and observing situated action”. As such, the approach remains subject to Budd’s (2005) critique of earlier attempts toward holism in information behaviour research, particularly that they do not account for the dialogic and in-the-world nature of human consciousness. In agreement with Budd, we assert that studying a complete account of any human phenomenon cannot relegate “meanings, experiences, and sensemaking” to a secondary position of inquiry because these processes are primarily constitutive of understanding any situated action.

Another recent proposal for accounting for contextual factors in information behaviour comes from Gaston (2017), who articulates a methodological marriage of Sense-Making Methodology and discourse analysis. Gaston argues that even ostensibly social constructionist research within information science has under-acknowledged the dialogical and interpretative construction of reality, and she contends that her method acknowledges this. Chiefly, Gaston is concerned with foregrounding cultural variation in effort to challenge the dominance of the North American cultural paradigm, and its presumed universality, in information science. This is important in terms of the construct validity of information science findings, but also in terms of the efficacy of information science research. As Gaston argues:

Thus far little research has examined the relationship between information behavior and quality of life, or the potential for information behavior research to improve the quality of life for people with less effective information practices (Gaston, 2017, p. 23).

Though Gaston’s methodology seeks to foreground sensemaking (contrary to practice theory), it remains subject to the “problematic situation” (Talja and Nyce, 2015) approach characteristic of cognitivist information needs, seeking and use research, which is too limited to contend with emerging issues of growing importance to information science, such as experiential information (Pollak, 2015), embodied information (Cox et al., 2017) and leisure information (Hartel et al., 2016).

In seeking to overcome this, we recognise that Sense-Making Methodology has roots in phenomenological philosophy, and we trace that philosophy back in order to articulate grounding for a complete, context-sensitive account of human information behaviour.

Hepworth et al. (2014) describe how the phenomenological approach to information behaviour “encourages a holistic, participative, context-specific approach for investigating people’s information experience and shown how they underpin the move towards an increasingly participative approach for developing information solutions” (Hepworth et al., 2014, p. 1049). They offer a panoramic overview of the import of phenomenology to information behaviour, but they do not go into detail on aspects of phenomenology. Cibangu and Hepworth (2016) make up for this limitation, offering a detailed discussion of three phenomenological concepts: intentionality, intersubjectivity and reduction.

Lifeworld is another crucial phenomenological concept, one that remains to be discussed in depth in our field. Thus, in this paper, we articulate the phenomenological concept of the
lifeworld for information science. We contend that meanings, experiences and sensemaking can be accounted for by adopting the lifeworld as the point of departure in research with human participants. We present a guide for lifeworld-based research in information science by putting the concept of the lifeworld in tension with the traditional social science standby of unit of analysis. We first define the concept of lifeworld and explicate some of the other key concepts associated with it. We then discuss two recent doctoral dissertations in information behaviour that have uncovered the lifeworld in their results. We suggest that the findings of these studies can be built upon by future work that attends explicitly to the lifeworld from the start. In this spirit, we provide an overview of methodologies that are avowedly based in the lifeworld. We close with a consideration of the unique insights such an orientation can afford.

The lifeworld

The lifeworld (Lebenswelt in German, which is also used by some Anglophone scholars) was first introduced to information science by scholars such as Chatman (1996, 1999) and Wilson (1999). Chatman’s discussion of the lifeworld is filtered through the sociological literature, while Wilson draws on the work of social phenomenologist Alfred Schutz. There is by now a wealth of literature in the field building on these and similar works, including Burnett and Jaeger’s (Burnett and Jaeger, 2008; Jaeger and Burnett, 2010) information worlds, Savolainen’s (2008) everyday life information seeking and Dourish’s (2009) context-aware computing. Moreover, other work in information behaviour has built on the conceptualizations of the lifeworld developed by Habermas (1985), Henri Lefebvre (1984) and Dorothy Smith (1987). This work is abundant; however, as Ocepek (2018) discusses, it suffers certain conceptual limitations. In our estimation, this comes in part from attempting to bootstrap the lifeworld into a scientific concept, rather than conducting research based in the lifeworld.

We suggest that the contributions of this line of research can be deepened through a stronger philosophical foundation, which involves surfacing and explicating the lifeworld as a phenomenological concept. For this reason, we go back to the beginning: to the work of philosopher Husserl (1913/1982), who first proposed the concept. To bolster this discussion, we also weave in the work of more recent commentators.

Husserl (1913/1982) defined the lifeworld as the world in which we humans find ourselves living, immediately experienced as a “given”, prior to any philosophising or conceptualising. The lifeworld is the world of daily life, in which all elements are taken as real in themselves, not based on cognitive judgment:

Throughout one’s waking life, one is concerned with projects, things, other human beings, ourselves as inner-worldly beings, in such a way that none of these levels of experience seems to be isolated but is always found in contexts which expand spatially and temporally (Stewart and Mickunas, 1990, p. 45).

In the lifeworld, there is no subject/object division; rather, experience is multimodal and embodied (Sokolowski, 2000). Put differently, the lifeworld is inhabited from one’s first-person perspective, rather than observed from a third-person perspective; lifeworld-based research should be attuned to this lived perspective. Thus, a lifeworld orientation seeks to discern the essential elements of the lived world as experienced, rather than the essences of a separate, theoretical, Platonic realm (Stewart and Mickunas, 1990, pp. 46-47).

Phenomenological methodologist Max van Manen (1990) describes the lifeworld in terms of four essential themes “which probably pervade the lifeworlds of all human beings, regardless of their historical, cultural or social situatedness” (p. 101):

- lived space, or the sense of being spatially related to other entities (which may or may not correspond to physical space);
- lived body, or the sense of having and being in corporeal form (which may or may not correspond to biology);
• lived time, or the sense of unfolding temporally (which may or may not correspond to chronology); and
• lived human relation, or the sense of relating or communing with others (which may or may not correspond to sociology).

Although the lifeworld is the realm of everyday being, Husserl (1913/1982) proposed that humans can relate to the world with different attitudes; he is best known for conceptualising the “natural attitude”, which is the everyday way humans relate to the world prior to any abstraction. The lifeworld and the people and things that make up daily life are the realm of the natural attitude.

The concept of the natural attitude implies the possibility of other ways existing in the world, but Husserl did not name them. Roger Scruton (2014), however, provides a framework in this regard in proposing his theory of cognitive dualism, “according to which the world can be understood in two incommensurable ways, the way of science, and the way of interpersonal understanding” (Scruton, 2014, p. 34). Scruton’s conception of the lifeworld is such that humans can have multiple ways of understanding the one reality that all of us live in. The “way of science”, or what we term “the scientific attitude”, is the way of relating to the world that involves conceptualization, analysis and abstraction.

So the lifeworld is the realm of the natural attitude, but what to call the realm of the scientific attitude? To our knowledge, no commentator has formally proposed an analogue to the lifeworld, resorting instead to burdensome locutions like “the world of the scientific attitude” or “the world as theorized”. For felicity and facility of expression, we propose to call the realm of the scientific attitude the scienceworld, which offers visual and sonic euphony as a parallel to the lifeworld. Thus, as the lifeworld is the realm of the natural attitude, the scienceworld is the realm of the scientific attitude.

Roger Scruton (2014) demonstrates these two attitudes that constitute human cognitive dualism using the example of music. In hearing a piece of music, our capacity to perceive a melody involves more than the perception of sounds (as in the scientific attitude or scienceworld); it is our ability to hear those sounds through our lived experience (as in the natural attitude or lifeworld) that allows us to hear music. Whereas the scienceworld affords predictions and takes an explanatory stance, the lifeworld offers descriptions and takes an interpretative stance. This is summarised in Table I.

In the view of Husserl (1913/1982) as well as the other scholars cited in this section, academic enquiry tends to operate with the scientific attitude, investigating phenomena after they have already been conceptualised, categorised and theorized to some extent. The field of information behaviour is no exception, as Gaston (2017), Talja and Nyce (2015), Ocepek (2018) and others have shown. Husserl (1913/1982) considered this a limitation and sought to develop a mode of inquiry that could expose insights made within the lifeworld but that are lost to the scienceworld. He proposed that a researcher could adopt a phenomenological attitude in order to access the lifeworld in order to reconstruct a new scienceworld from it. In this way, the phenomenological attitude mediates between the natural and scientific attitudes, the lifeworld and the scienceworld (Figure 1).

The phenomenological attitude is the basis of phenomenology, which “attempts to explicate the meanings [of experiences] as we live them in our everyday existence, our

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lifeworld” (van Manen, 1990, p. 11). It does this by going to the things themselves, as the
maxim runs, which “means to do full justice to the everyday experience, to the lived
experience” (Dahlberg et al., 2001, p. 44). Results from lifeworld-based inquiry can enrich –
and sometimes challenge – those derived from scienceworld-based methods. According to
Sokolowski (2000, p. 147), the natural and social sciences have traditionally considered the
lifeworld as imaginary/subjective and the scienceworld as real/objective, but in actuality all
scientific enquiry has the lifeworld as its primordial basis, and returning to the lifeworld can
reveal new insights or redirect undue assumptions. This is particularly the case because
phenomenology recognises the contingent and partial nature of all interpretations:
“Meaning is never finally complete but is always expandable, limited only by our readiness
to enlarge our understanding” (Dahlberg et al., 2001, p. 59).

Phenomenological, lifeworld-based research is often described as research on lived
human experiences. This is because the lifeworld speaks through lived experience (van
Manen, 1990, p. 46). Lived experience is an aspect of the lifeworld – part of the lifeworld that
has undergone reduction (for a succinct discussion of reduction as relevant to information
science, see Cibangu and Hepworth, 2016). That is, lived experience can be identified when a
question is asked of the lifeworld, when we direct ourselves toward a phenomenon of the
world, singling it out for reflection:

The notion of “lived experience,” as used in the works of Dilthey, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and their
contemporary exponents, announces the intent to explore directly the originary or prereflective
dimensions of human existence: life as we live it. The etymology of the English term experience does not
include the meaning of “lived” – it derives from the Latin experientia, meaning “trial, proof, experiment,
experience.” But the German word for experience, Erlebnis, already contains the word Leben, “life” or
“to live.” The verb erleben literally means “living through something,” so lived experience is this active
and passive living through experience. Lived experience names the ordinary and the extraordinary, the
quotidian and the exotic, the routine and the surprising, the dull and the ecstatic moments and aspects
of experience as we live through them in our human existence (van Manen, 2014, p. 39).

Units of analysis and the lifeworld
In social science research, the unit of analysis is the main entity under study (Babbie, 2012). As
Babbie describes, typical units of analysis include individuals (the most common), groups,
social organisations and social artefacts. A virtuous research question will probe a single unit
of analysis (e.g. the individual or the group, but not both; the group, or the activities within the
group, but not both). Adopting a unit of analysis is a way to reduce a phenomenon to a number
of elements, selected a priori, so as to render it able to be empirically studied. Babbie points out
that the concept of unit of analysis is “is relevant to all forms of social research, although its
implications are clearest in the case of nomothetic, quantitative studies” (p. 97).

The unit of analysis defines the level of abstraction about which the researcher hopes to
say something; findings derived from probing a unit of analysis can only apply to that unit
of analysis. Based on this, Babbie (2012, pp. 103-105) points out two unit-of-analysis-related
fallacies that social science research is susceptible to:

1. the ecological fallacy, which is when a researcher suggests that discovering something
about a group says something about the individuals within the group; and

Figure 1.
The phenomenological
attitude as a mediator
between the natural
and scientific attitudes

Natural attitude ↔ Phenomenological attitude ↔ Scientific attitude
(2) the reductionism fallacy, in which the researcher begins with the assumption that only an overly limited set of elements are relevant to a phenomenon (e.g. assuming that only biological factors impinge on social processes).

In other words, the applicability of natural- and social-scientific findings is limited, based on scienceworld conceptualizations.

In trying to overcome the limitations regarding context-sensitivity of earlier information behaviour research, Gaston (2017) essentially proposes the same person-in-situation unit of analysis that Talja and Nyce (2015) regard as overly limited. As Talja and Nyce argue, such a unit of analysis succumbs to the cognitivist conceptualization of information and views information seeking as a straightforward task, contrary to reality. Thus, Talja and Nyce propose “practice” as the unit of analysis. As conceptualised within practice theory, this allows for a more multidimensional view of the phenomenon, but insofar as it is conceptualised a priori, it may still be limited. Evidence for this is provided by philosopher Mark Drabek (2014), who presents a study of the marginalisation of social groups on the basis of an implicit nomothetic practice theory which takes practices as real entities rather than nominal ones.

In light of this discussion, we propose that the lifeworld can be adopted as the “unit of analysis” in interpretative information science research. At first blush, the lifeworld seems to fly in the face of the notion of unit of analysis as it is traditionally understood. With the lifeworld, the elements of a phenomenon considered relevant are determined a posteriori rather than a priori. As described by Dahlberg et al. (2001, p. 47): “Phenomenology seeks to avoid reductionism and to grasp and describe the world in the way it is experienced by humans”.

In providing a counter to the notion of unit of analysis, though, the lifeworld seems to overcome the fallacies described by Babbie (2012). Because phenomenology does not, a priori, distinguish individuals from groups or activities from things, its findings offer insights that can apply to any level of abstraction and any unit of analysis, in the manner of analytic generalisation (Yin, 2010), and thus it is not susceptible to the ecological fallacy. Further, phenomenology does not limit its scope of enquiry to a predetermined set of elements, and thus it is not susceptible to the reductionism fallacy. Now, a phenomenologist certainly comes to their work with a background situation (to include their interests, knowledge, network, etc.) that guides their enquiry, but this enquiry is not exclusively and rigidly bounded. Rather, a phenomenologist strives to be open to whatever may emerge in a given experience. A phenomenological researcher is open to discovery and hopes to be surprised. Martin Heidegger (1927/2010), Husserl’s student, spoke of this with the metaphor of light shining in a forest clearing; in such a clearing, anything at all might appear, becoming unconcealed.

Adopting the lifeworld or lived experience as a unit of analysis is, in a way, to not use any unit of analysis at all. This is because a lifeworld-based approach remains open to what may appear. While this notion may raise the eyebrows of many researchers, even those within the more interpretive paradigms (e.g. Gaston, 2017; Talja and Nyce, 2015), we argue that it should be seen for the unique advantages it allows.

Unconcealing the lifeworld in information behaviour research
You might go for a walk in the forest with a clear goal: to cover a certain number of miles, say, or to find a certain kind of animal or mushroom. If you are laser focussed on one thing, you might miss out on everything else. But if you are open and attendant, you can see more than you expected to find. As Heidegger (1927/2010) said, only when we are openly engaged can the world can become unconcealed to us. As mentioned above, the metaphor of unconcealment, or clearing, is apt for showing the difference between the lifeworld and the typical understanding of unit of analysis. In like manner, it seems to us that, in the information behaviour literature, the phenomenological lifeworld is itself becoming unconcealed.
In this section, we explore two recent studies in information behaviour that were not self-evidently phenomenological in nature, but in which the concept of the lifeworld surfaced as an important finding. Both are recent doctoral dissertations in our field, those of Liz Poirier (2012) and Angela Pollak (2015). These examples show that the phenomenological lifeworld is of interest to information behaviour, even if it is little-known, and how research in this direction links up to the broader literature in information behaviour. To build on the findings from these two studies (and certainly others), there is a need to investigate the lifeworld more directly – to conduct research based in the lifeworld.

**Slow information and information balance (Poirier, 2012)**

In her doctoral dissertation presented at City University London, Slow Information in Theory and Practice: A Qualitative Exploration into Implications of a Slow Perspective of Human Information Behaviour, Liz Poirier (2012) sought to apply the principles from the Slow Movement to information behaviour. The Slow Movement, which began in the 1980s with Slow Food, has come about because of an apparent dissatisfaction with the experienced pace of modern life. Slow entails taking enjoyment in activities themselves, making conscious choices, establishing balance and acting as a rational consumer. Applying this to information behaviour, time becomes a critical consideration. Faster is not necessarily better.

One of the outcomes of Poirier’s (2012) dissertation was the Information Balance Model, which recognises that information has a pervasive and experiential influence on everyday life: We live in an information culture. Importantly, this view shows that information can be experiential[1] and is not necessarily task-based. Within the information culture, an individual carries out various activities – selecting, ignoring, processing, creating, exploring, formulating, reflecting, etc. – and there is a complex interplay among these activities without necessary start and end points and without rigid temporal structure. Amidst these activities, information is experienced (input) and communicated (output). A temporal buffer zone is maintained between inputs and outputs to allow these activities to occur without interference from the information culture; at this zone, coping behaviours like filtering and withdrawal are employed. As Poirier and Robinson (2014a) remark in a paper resulting from this dissertation:

> The premise of the [model] is that an individual strives, consciously or unconsciously, to attain informational balance [between inputs and outputs] on a daily basis; the more this is done consciously, the more it may be said that Slow principles are adopted (Poirier and Robinson, 2014a, p. 703).

In the information balance model, we see attention to the lifeworld of people as they go about their lives. Interestingly, this sensitivity arose in the study’s findings even though the methods were not designed with the lifeworld in mind (Poirier and Robinson, 2014b).

**Boundary-spanning, experiential information (Pollak, 2015)**

A similar emergence of the lifeworld is found in the doctoral dissertation of Angela Pollak (2015), Words to Live By: How Experience Shapes Our Information World at Work, Play, and in Everyday Life, which was presented at the University of Western Ontario and received the Eugene Garfield Doctoral Dissertation Award from the Association for Library and Information Science Education. This study used participatory visual methods and semi-structured interviewing to explore the everyday life information behaviour of rural Ontarians. Pollak’s results corroborated extant theory in information behaviour, such as the preference for informal information sources, while also evidencing new information behaviours that span the boundaries of work, play and ordinary life. These behaviours had been hidden to previous researchers who conceptualised these domains a priori.
One key finding from Pollak’s (2015) work is the concept of experiential information, which emerged from her empirical material rather than being imposed by an a priori theoretical framework. In her words:

Experiential information is sensation, emotion, fact, skill, knowledge, or understanding acquired or otherwise derived from interactive participation in a social or solitary context, or occurring at some point thereafter as a result of contemplation and reflection (Pollak, 2015, pp. 255-256).

As Pollak describes, experiential information can have diverse input parameters, including sensorimotor, intellectual and affective. Thus, like Poirier’s (2012), Pollak’s (2015) work demonstrates an implicit sensitivity to the lifeworld in an information behaviour study.

The emerging lifeworld
In both these examples, concept of the lifeworld emerged in the analysis, though it was not explicitly sought. This emergence was accompanied by both authors noting the experiential nature of information in lived situations. We contend that, if these results are to be built upon, then future research should be oriented toward – based in – the lifeworld from the start, rather than by happenstance.

Conducting lifeworld-based research
Thus far we have argued for the propriety of researching the lifeworld in information behaviour as a step toward holism. In this section, we offer some guidance as to how such research can be done. In the words of van Manen (1990, p. 18), phenomenological research requires “subtlety and sensitivity” because to research the lifeworld is, inherently:

[... to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal (van Manen, 1990, p. 18).]

Like all research, this attempt begins with a question.

Phenomenological questioning
In the view of Dahlberg et al. (2001, p. 14), phenomenology gathers “scholars, practitioners, students, teachers, and citizens into persistent thinking and converging conversations around complex contemporary issues, including those of method [...]. Phenomenological studies are a beginning”. Thus phenomenological research itself is a form of questioning – responding to questions with questions. As van Manen (2014, p. 29) writes:

Phenomenology is primarily a philosophic method for questioning, not a method for answering or discovering or drawing determinate conclusions. But in this questioning there exist the possibilities and potentialities for experiencing openings, understandings, insights – producing cognitive and noncognitive or pathic perceptions of existentialities, giving us glances of the meaning of phenomena and events in their singularity.

This suggests that phenomenological research is “turtles all the way down”, as the trope goes, with findings that are nothing but further questions. If phenomenological questioning has no end, does it have a beginning? For van Manen (2014), phenomenological inquiry begins when we find ourselves reflecting on our experiences in a certain way – a way that calls us to question our preconceptions. For instance, science tells us that there is nothing remarkable about the sunrise – it happens predictably and regularly based on a concert of physical processes. All the same, we might find ourselves awestruck by a particular sunrise, and we might ask ourselves why. Is it the play of the light on the clouds? Is it because of the
fun things scheduled for later today? Is it because the weather’s finally gotten better? Indeed, “Even the most ordinary experience may bring us to a sense of wonder [...] And thus it may happen that an ordinary experience may suddenly appear quite extraordinary” (van Manen, 2014, p. 31).

What sorts of questions are phenomenological ones? That is, what can be asked of the lifeworld? In the view of van Manen (1990, p. 25), phenomenology can on one hand describe the quality of lived experiences, and on the other, describe the quality of being more generally. We suggest that phenomenology can seek to discern:

- essences (“What is the essential structure of a search experience?”), meanings (“What does it mean to have a religious experience – that is, how does the experience impinge on the rest of the person’s life?”); and
- ways of experiencing (“In what different ways do people experience ‘the real thing’ in museums”).

*Lifeworld-based methodologies*

In this section, we point to a few methodological traditions that were explicitly designed to engage with the lifeworld. Further on, we give some examples of published research in information behaviour that has adopted a lifeworld perspective.

By adopting a lifeworld approach, researchers position themselves using a certain lens: They adopt the phenomenological attitude in order to approach the lifeworld. As described above, the lifeworld acknowledges the whole of a person’s lived experiences, and accounts for being in the world as a social, cultural, sensual, intellectual, emotional being all-at-once. It appreciates and accepts that as humans, we are not compartmentalised into any one of these things, but are rather all of them at the same time. When adopting the lifeworld approach to conducting research, a researcher begins their journey with this view in mind. Once the appropriate research question is formed, the collection, analysis and synthesis of empirical material proceed with lifeworlds in mind. There is no single way to conduct a lifeworld-based study. There are, rather, many.

Phenomenological methods are often loosely structured, allowing room for discovery and change as the study unfolds. Van Manen (2014) suggests that phenomenological researchers think of “method” in terms of its Greek etymology, meaning “way” or “path”. Just as life paths are rarely truly uneventful, “phenomenological method is always a matter of attempts, bids, and hopeful risks. Within a phenomenological context, method is never just an engine that will unerringly produce insightful outcomes” (van Manen, 2014, p. 29).

Even so, there are a number of important concepts that have been developed in phenomenological philosophy over the past century that may provide some scaffolding for conducting and considering lifeworld-based research. These concepts include:

- Intentionality: “Consciousness is always consciousness of” is the best way to describe intentionality (Stewart and Mickunas, 1990). In other words, a person is never just “conscious” but rather being conscious is always directed at something. We live in a world where we are always aware of something.
- Intersubjectivity: the kind of intentionality that functions in our experience of other persons (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 146).
- Embodiment: we always exist in this world in bodily form and that we know the world only through our body.
- Unity of subject and object: the notion of intentionality shows us that separating subject and object is an abstraction not based on reality.
Researchers taking a lifeworld-based approach would do well to immerse themselves in the philosophical literature related to the concepts relevant to their research questions, as counselled by van Manen (2014).

In terms of concrete methods, van Manen (1990, 2014) offers a number of guidelines for conducting lifeworld-based research. A major part of this research is gathering empirical examples of the phenomenon in question. These examples can be gathered through interrogating one’s own experience, gathering written or interview-based experiences from others, observing people’s experiences, identifying literary experiences, and imagining possible experiences (van Manen, 2014). In order to ensure that the gathered examples come from the lifeworld rather than the scienceworld – experiences as lived rather than as conceptualised afterwards – it is important to allow participants to speak using their own words rather than those imposed by a researcher. Participants should be asked to describe concrete, specific experiences rather than “experience” in general, and they should be encouraged to describe the experience as they lived it, engaging all their senses. Participants should avoid generalisations, causal explanations, abstractions and interpretations, as these are aspects of the scienceworld (van Manen, 1990, 2014). Indeed, in lifeworld-based research, the interviewer is often tasked with continually bringing the discussion back to the concrete, lived experience.

To provide further guidance for the information researcher embarking on lifeworld-based studies, below we offer brief descriptions of three phenomenological methodologies. These provide only a glimpse of the possibilities; phenomenological thought is rich and has provoked any number of methodological formulations. In general, the methodologies available range from descriptive to interpretive. This axis stems from the originators of phenomenology: Husserl (1913/1982) maintained that description was the primordial faculty of human experience, while his student Heidegger (1927/2010) argued that all perception is interpretative. Since their time, other thinkers have placed themselves at varying points along this dimension. Those whose methodological orientation aligns more closely to the work of Husserl are often termed “descriptive” phenomenology, and those who align more toward the work of Heidegger, “interpretive”. Here we present three phenomenological methodologies: one that is descriptive (Giorgi, 1997), one that is middle-of-the-road (Dahlberg et al., 2001), and one that is interpretive (Smith et al., 2009). Table II summarises the key aspects of these methodologies. They are discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Based on a close reading of Husserl’s philosophy, Amadeo Giorgi (1997) constructed a phenomenological methodology for use in psychology. The basic steps of the method are: getting a descriptive account of a lived experience from a person, assuming the

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<td>Husserl</td>
<td>Bracketing, Meaning Units, search for “invariant psychological meaning” Reflection</td>
<td>Emphasis is on describing the nature of the experience, rather than interpreting it. Research into concrete, lived, subjective experiences, and their meanings for recipients of professional practice. Interprets phenomena of personal significance to the participant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifeworld Approach (Dahlberg et al., 2001)</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>Husserl, Gadamer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Heidegger, Schleiermacher, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Sartre</td>
<td>Idiographic focus, double hermeneutic, balancing analysis between individuals and group.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. Three lifeworld-based phenomenological methodologies, representing the span of descriptive and interpretive approaches.
phenomenological attitude toward that account, reading the entire description to ascertain it holistically, reading it again to distinguish meaningful units, transforming those meaningful units into more precise and explicit psychological expressions, and then finally constructing a general model of the psychological experience of the phenomenon by weaving together those expressions. More detail on this method can be found in Giorgi’s (1997) originating paper, and a broader discussion of this approach is given in a handbook chapter by Giorgi and Giorgi (2008). A similar approach is described by Sanders (2003).

Respecting Husserl’s view of the primacy of description but allowing for a certain measure of interpretation, Dahlberg et al. (2001) present what they call a reflective lifeworld approach. This methodology was designed in the realm of nursing for describing and understanding the meanings and phenomena of the human lifeworld. The first step of this methodology involves self-reflection and pre-understanding. Data gathering involves narrative description, interviewing, fieldwork and observation. This data is analysed in a way that allows for the discovery of meanings through the intermingling of description and interpretation. More detail can be found in the methodology’s introductory monograph (Dahlberg et al., 2001).

Going further in exploring the possibilities of interpretative phenomenology, Smith et al. (2009) articulate a methodology called interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which the authors describe as “phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic” (p. 4). In being phenomenological, it describes human experiences, drawing on a wealth of philosophical work regarding perception, intention, meaning-making, and modes of being. In being hermeneutic, it functions through interpretation; it presents a researchers’ interpretation of participants’ interpretations of the phenomenon under study. In being idiographic, it privileges the individual, and its theoretical findings emerge from the data rather than any pre-existing theory. IPA seeks to provide a coherent and holistic account of the phenomenon in question. Data is collected in the form of semi-structured interviews with a small group of individuals, and data analysis proceeds iteratively, moving back and forth from the individual to the group in deriving the essential themes of the experience in question. VanScoy and Evenstad (2015) provide an excellent overview of the IPA methodology as relevant to human information behaviour research.

Of these three methodologies, to our knowledge the only one that has been employed in information behaviour research is IPA. VanScoy and Evenstad (2015) provide some examples. In addition, recent examples include Gorichanaz’s (2017b) study of the experience of information during an ultramarathon and Latham’s (2013) studies of numinous encounters and perceptions of “the real thing” (Latham, 2015) in museums. Additionally, Gorichanaz (2017a) presents an automethodology that draws on IPA for the examination of one’s own information experiences.

What lifeworld research brings to information science
As described in the introduction, research in human information behaviour has long struggled with ways to study information experiences as they are lived, in their lived contexts. A striking benefit of phenomenological research in this regard is that notions such as experience and context do not need to be strictly defined at the outset; rather, they emerge through the course of the study.

A phenomenological, lifeworld-based approach to information science research complements other research approaches. For instance, a recent volume summarizing research in “information experience” (Bruce et al., 2014) presents findings from a number of studies that employ practice theory and phenomenography. These studies sought to characterize the lived experience of various information phenomena, but they were limited by being methodologically rooted in the sciencceworld. In such methodologies, experience and meaning are secondary to observed action (Talja and Nyce, 2015), so the extent to which
they can be used to develop sensitive, verisimilar accounts of lived experience is debatable. Lifeworld-based methodologies, on the other hand, are well-suited to achieve this. Moreover, considering findings from lifeworld-based and scienceworld-based methodologies in symphony may lead to deeper understandings still.

It is true that phenomenological findings are less precise and less measurable, and they hold no explanatory or predictive power. But, in exchange, phenomenological findings are more holistic, and may uncover facets of phenomena that previously went unseen. This is evidenced in the independent discovery of experiential information by both Poirier (2012) and Pollak (2015). The lifeworld approach is truly idiographic, and it can challenge long-held assumptions, leading the field in progress. As van Manen (2014) suggests, for instance, phenomenological findings can reveal ways of knowing beyond the cognitive and linguistic – such as emotional and intuitive knowledge – which should be of great interest to information science.

Note
1. It is worth noting that the concept of experiential information was identified by Bates (2006) as one of the fundamental forms of information in her framework, though neither Poirier (2012) nor Pollak (2015) reference Bates in their formulations of experiential information.

References


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