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Research paper

## Considering the concepts of the lived body and the lifeworld as tools for better understanding the meaning of assistive technology in everyday life

*Prendre en compte les concepts de corps vécu et de monde vécu, et en faire des outils pour mieux comprendre la signification des technologies d'assistance dans la vie quotidienne*

Inger C. Berndtsson

Department of Education and Special Education, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

### ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*

Received 20 December 2017

Accepted 17 January 2018

Available online xxx

*Keywords:*

Assistive technology

Lifeworld phenomenology

Embodied experience

Visual disability

Long cane

Orientation and mobility

### ABSTRACT

The lives of individuals with physical or perceptual impairments are often filled with various objects that support daily activities and are generally referred to as *assistive technologies*. These are usually understood as objects relating to individuals' functional capabilities. In this article, assistive technology is instead interpreted and explored in its subjective and social meaning by drawing on continental philosophy within a framework of lifeworld phenomenology and hermeneutics, putting forward existence, embodiment and the sociality of the lifeworld. The long cane as used by visually impaired and blind people is discussed as an example, based on results from two earlier empirical studies. Three themes or dimensions stood out in the analysis: one relating to intersubjectivity and the social world, another relating to embodiment and the lived space, and one in which the long cane is interpreted as a tool for building a new world. These dimensions have been discussed individually in philosophical terms to some degree. However, here they are intertwined and analysed based on empirical research on individuals in

E-mail address: [inger.berndtsson@ped.gu.se](mailto:inger.berndtsson@ped.gu.se)

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alter.2018.01.001>

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Please cite this article in press as: Berndtsson, I.C. Considering the concepts of the lived body and the lifeworld as tools for better understanding the meaning of assistive technology in everyday life. ALTER, European Journal of Disability Research (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alter.2018.01.001>

the process of learning or using the long cane in everyday life, which gives new meaning to the researched subject.

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## R É S U M É

### Mots clés :

Technologie d'assistance  
Phénoménologie du monde vécu  
Expérience incarnée  
Handicap visuel  
Canne  
Orientation et mobilité

La vie des personnes ayant des déficiences physiques ou sensorielles est souvent remplie de divers objets qui soutiennent leurs activités quotidiennes, et qui sont désignés par le terme « technologies d'assistance ». Celles-ci sont habituellement définies comme des objets qui concernent les capacités fonctionnelles des individus. Dans cet article, au contraire, nous analysons et explorons la signification subjective et sociale de ces technologies d'assistance. Pour cela, nous situons notre réflexion dans une perspective philosophique, en nous basant sur un cadre théorique issu de la phénoménologie et de l'herméneutique du monde vécu, qui met l'accent sur l'existence, l'incarnation et la socialité du monde vécu. En nous basant sur les résultats de deux études empiriques précédentes, nous discutons l'exemple de la canne utilisée par les personnes malvoyantes ou aveugles. Trois thèmes ou dimensions ressortent de l'analyse : l'un relatif à l'intersubjectivité et au monde social, un autre relatif à l'incarnation et à l'espace vécu, et enfin un dernier relatif à la manière dont la canne devient un outil de construction d'un nouveau monde. Ces dimensions ont été discutées individuellement en termes philosophiques jusqu'à un certain point. Or, elles apparaissent ici entrelacées. Nous les analysons sur base d'une recherche empirique avec des personnes apprenant ou utilisant une canne dans leur vie quotidienne, ce qui donne un nouveau sens au sujet enquêté.

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## 1. Introduction

This article addresses the meaning of assistive technology in peoples' lives, but not as they usually are referred to – as objects focusing on individuals' functional capability and activity performance in everyday life. To explore subjective and social meaning making linked to assistive devices, I draw on continental philosophy, with a focus on phenomenological hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1960/1989; Heidegger, 1927/2013) and phenomenology of existence; most explicitly Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012), the sociality of the lifeworld (Schutz, 1932/1967), and the practical dimensions of our being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1927/2013). Central aspects of these philosophies and theories are used as a platform to present and underpin how assistive technology will be interpreted within a frame of lifeworld phenomenology, set out from the embodied experience (Bengtsson, 2013b) of visually impaired or blind individuals.

When people are faced with functional limitations in everyday life, they tend to become increasingly occupied with devices that are often completely new to them. These devices, often referred to as assistive technologies, are traditionally defined as 'any item, piece of equipment or product system whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized that is used to increase, maintain or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities' (Cook & Miller Polgar, 2008:5). It is obvious that this definition mostly reflects a view that is exclusively concerned with the functional capabilities of the individual's body, and which therefore excludes the more lived aspects of the human being and body. The present article challenges and broadens this standard definition within the

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