

Golden Paper, a Chain and a Bag: A Phenomenology of Queer Things in a Special Needs Education Unit

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Abstract

Children naturally play with things in both expected and unexpected ways. A stick, a spoon, or a chain of pearls may each seem to contain a goldmine of possibilities for the individual child. Every child encounters an object according to their own predilections and abilities. Some children, due to severe and multiple disabilities, are restricted in their possibilities to approach certain things. In this paper, we explore the existential meaning of “queer things” as a way to understand how two children with disabilities reach out to objects in an educational space, where they relate to themselves, to things, as well as to others.

Keywords: *Severe and Multiple Disabilities; Queer Phenomenology; Special Education; Things*

Introduction

Twelve-year-old Sara is in the seventh grade in the special needs education unit. She is the size of any twelve-year old, lying on her back in furniture that looks like the fusion of a baby’s bed and a playpen. Teaching assistant Hilde walks slowly towards Sara, greets her, puts on Sara’s corset, climbs into the furniture, and asks Sara to sit up, supporting her student firmly as she raises her upper body. Hilde steps out of the furniture, lifts her student with her, sits down on an office-chair with Sara in her lap, and together they roll towards a wooden resonance box¹ placed on the floor nearby. Carefully, Hilde lays Sara down on the resonance box. Hilde then finds her place with her back against the wall,

grasps securely under Sara's armpits, and raises her up and lifts her firmly onto her own sitting body. Sara slides down in Hilde's lap.

Hilde places a low table with two plastic boxes filled with toys and various plastics in front of Sara. Sara raises her upper body, but slides quickly back into Hilde's lap. "Oh, Sara. You are tired today. Yes, you are. You are a tired girl today. We have plenty of time. No need to rush, Sara." Hilde is talking in a low voice and slowly, sitting steadily, supporting Sara's body. The minutes go by when Sara suddenly straightens up, reaches out and chooses a well-worn, thick, gold colored plastic sheet which is used to cover a box of assorted chocolates.

Hilde stands up, lifts Sara close to the wall and withdraws. Sara is sitting by herself, legs crossed like a tailor, back leaning steadily against the wall. She rubs the golden sheet in her hands it crackles. Sara starts breathing forcefully, rhythmically, in through her mouth, out through her nose, head slanted.

Phenomenologically speaking, the lived things of Sara's world—such as the office-chair, wooden box, and golden paper—belong to the existential ground that structures her everyday experiences. Lived things, along with lived self and others, lived bodies, lived spaces and lived time are “existentials” or fundamental themes that are discoverable in the lifeworld of every human being (van Manen, 2014). As such, the existentials are suitable themes to guide investigations of human phenomena. In this article, we explore the existential of lived things or “materiality” (van Manen, 2014) as it is given in the educational everyday life of two students with severe and multiple disabilities. Our research asked, “what is the meaning of things that are put to use in practical pedagogical work in special needs education units?” We were especially interested in looking at instances where things are used by the children in unexpected ways. This focus on the unexpected led us to the work of queer phenomenologist Sara Ahmed.

Ahmed (2006) describes things as anchoring points that shape the bodies that reach for them. For her, *queer* things are things that have lost their place. As such, queer things present new spaces and possibilities for the persons having them near. Citing Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ahmed describes how queer things shape and are shaped by purposeful bodies, which includes bodies labelled as having disabilities. Merleau-Ponty (2014) challenges the notion of disability as being a simple binary state of having or not having an ability. Rather, disability exists on a continuum where it is experienced in relation to how the lived body is embedded in its involvement with things, relations, other bodies, spaces and time. For Ahmed (2006), using a thing in a way that deviates from what is expected queers or makes queer both the thing and its user. In this, she introduces an alternative way of thinking about how humans turn to some things over others. The term “queer” is sometimes associated with sexual or gender orientation, where humans are defined by whom they are attracted to and towards whom they orient. In academic discourse, queer theory represents a shift away from binary logic and normative identities. For our study, we use the term queer as an insight cultivator and analytical support, aiming to approach a new understanding of the meaning of things in special needs education.

The work of Ahmed is related to that of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger also investigated phenomenologically how humans are involved with things. Breaking out of a Cartesian understanding—where a “thing” is understood as separate from its “user”—Heidegger described our everyday involvements with things as a matter of existence. He showed that our situated use of things is prior to our perception of things, and that “in everyday terms, we understand ourselves and our existence by way of the activities we pursue and the things we take care of”

(Heidegger, 1988, p. 159). Therefore, “to *exist* then means, among other things, *to be as comporting with beings [sich verhaltendes Sein bei Seiendem]*” (Heidegger, 1988, p. 157, italics in original). To be involved with things is an existential matter, as is being in relation to self and to others.

In his exposition of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1962), Dreyfus (1991) claims that the things of everyday life are not available or close until there is a human subject present. Further, the availability of things depends on actions related to certain physical orientations. In Ahmed’s (2006) words, “spatial relations between subjects and others are produced through actions, which make some things available to be reached” (p. 52). In her understanding, things—available or not—are orientation devices. Things let bodies extend in ways that can create new livable spaces for humans to inhabit. Things can also keep bodies in expected places in everyday life.

For Heidegger (1962), the perceived but unused thing does not offer the perceiver knowledge about its function. This perceptual mode of access is addressed by Heidegger stating that, “No matter how sharply we just *look [Nur-noch-hinsehen]* at the ‘outward appearance’ [*Aussehen*]” of Things in whatever form this takes, we cannot discover anything ready-to-hand” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 98, italics in original). We may only discover a thing’s possibilities when we use it:

The less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is-as equipment (Heidegger, 1962, p. 98).

Through involvement with things that are available, “*Dasein* takes a stand on itself” (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 61) and includes its subjectivity in the relation between thing and user. This relation, where the subject’s point of departure meets the capacities given in the thing can be understood as occupation, that is, as a mode of being busy or occupied with existence. According to Ahmed (2006), occupation is to inhabit space, to make use of things in this space, and to work and have an identity through the actions one performs.

When a person uses a thing, its capacities may begin to be revealed. As Ahmed (2006) points out: “The wheel can roll, the desk can hold a computer, the pen can write, the jug can pour ... [yet] the capacity is not so much ‘in’ the tool, but depends on how the tool is taken up or ‘put to use’” (p. 46). The revelation of a thing’s functions is also a recognition that it is as always part of a larger equipmental nexus, where each piece of equipment points to others. For example, the writing table points to other tools such as paper, inkwell and pencils, where every item belongs to an equipmental nexus for the writer (Ahmed, 2006). In the equipment context, a thing is defined by what it is used for and how it points to other things (Dreyfus, 1991).

Usefulness of equipment is not only instrumental (Ahmed, 2006). A thing’s capacity also depends on how it is apprehended as open towards the future of its user. When user and thing meet, the user turns and orients to the thing as a person with meanings, predilections and previous experiences. As a thing is recognized by an un-instrumental “can”—the wheel can roll and the pen can write—the person using it is the one who reveals its capacities. Even if the thing is a carrier of cultural expectations regarding how it ought to be used, the user can still approach it in unexpected ways. In the end, what a thing can do depends in part on how it is approached and how it encourages or restrains the user’s extension into the world. Taking up and using an object is a matter of the oriented user who perceives and approaches it in a certain way, by liking

it, admiring it, hating it, being frightened by it, etc.

Human bodies are oriented to some things over others; this orientation may depend on where they are located, what is near or visible, what values inhabit institutions as collective or public spaces, etc. By describing how a human being turns to some things over others, Ahmed (2006) emphasizes the relationality between body and its surrounding nexus of things. Even though human orientation to objects is normative in the sense that attention is expected to be directed towards what is considered “straight” or “normal” use, attention can also be directed towards what may be considered “queer” or unexpected use. Here new possibilities may unfold.

Method

In this study, we explore possible meanings of things in the world of children with severe and multiple disabilities. We adopt Max van Manen’s (2014) “phenomenology of practice” which he describes as “the practice of phenomenological research and writing that reflects *on* and *in* practice, and prepares for practice” (p. 15, italics in original). In line with Husserl’s and Heidegger’s student Patočka, we agree that practice “lies at the proto-foundation of thought, of consciousness, of the being of human being” (van Manen, 2014, p. 15). In the everyday life of students with severe and multiple disabilities in special needs education, student’s expressions are often gestural, i.e., without words or symbolic signs. Van Manen (2014) recommends close observations when the researcher wants generate experiential material involving “young children or very ill people, [because] it is often difficult to generate written descriptions or to engage in conversational interviewing” (p. 318). We followed van Manen’s recommendation in our research design.

Through participating in practical-pedagogical tasks in a special needs unit, the researcher (first author, Evensen) had opportunity to observe communications, both verbal and gestural, between students and teachers and among the students. As part of the observation, the researcher also became involved with the students, such as giving them nutrition through gastric feeding tubes, washing hands in a sink together with the students, and singing, lifting, dressing or providing a lap to sit on together. Such close involvement with the children recognizes that,

the best way to enter a person’s lifeworld is to participate in it. For example, to gain access to the experience of young children, it may be important to play with them, talk with them, puppeteer, paint, draw, or follow them into their play spaces and into the things they do while remaining attentively aware of the way it is for children. (van Manen, 2014, p. 318)

The researcher’s involvement in everyday life activities also allowed the establishment of rapport between the researcher and the students. Finally, the researcher’s contact with students with severe and multiple disabilities ensures that the phenomenological observation was carried on in an ordinary, everyday setting for the students, where they were less interrupted by the researcher’s presence and able to carry on their daily activities to a large extent. Phenomenological observation orients to the students’ lived experiences rather than their medical, diagnostic prescription. In the course of observation and embodied involvements, the researcher was continuously aware of maintaining ethical, acceptable involvement that the students were comfortable with.

The first author also interviewed the students' teachers. Reviewing the transcripts, the authors became aware of how the nuanced and wordless meanings of the students' embodied involvements that had been observed in the Special Needs Education Unit could easily be covered over by the wordiness of the teachers' descriptions in their interview. Nonetheless, in this article, we choose to include a few interview excerpts with two teachers. In this regard, we have tried to hone the teacher's interview reflections to attend as closely as possible to the two students' perspectives. A phenomenological study on the two students' (Sara's and Oskar's) experiences with queer things can shed light on our understanding of disability as continuous lived realities rather than stagnant diagnosis or labels. In an educational field where the what-ness of diagnoses tends to prevail, the everyday how-ness emerging in the unit of Sara and Oskar depends on the way students and teachers are bodily close to each other.

Creating Possibilities Together

Sara, who we met in the opening, has been a student in the same special needs education unit for six years. Special needs educator Anna describes how Sara's early preference for crackly things opened the initial communicative and relational possibility between Sara and her. She describes that when Sara arrived from another country in Grade 2:

She used to curl up like a little ball all the time. But when we approached her with things that would crackle when touched, we discovered that we made contact.

Anna points to the importance of acknowledging Sara's subjective experiences with things of a certain kind in order to make contact with her. When approached with things that crackle, Sara no longer "curled up" in herself but reached out. Six years after their first cautious meeting, observe what happens between Sara and her teaching assistant, Hilde:

Hilde places a low table with two plastic boxes filled with toys and various plastics in front of Sara. Sara raises her upper body but slides quickly back into Hilde's lap. "Oh, Sara, you are tired today. Yes, you are. You are a tired girl today. We have plenty of time. No need to rush, Sara." Hilde talks slowly in a low voice. She sits steadily and supports Sara's body. The minutes go by when Sara suddenly straightens up, reaches out, and chooses a well-worn, thick, and gold-colored plastic sheet which is used to cover a box of assorted chocolates.

Hilde stands up, lifts Sara close to the wall and withdraws. Sara is sitting by herself, legs crossed like a tailor, back leaning steadily against the wall. She rubs the golden sheet in her hands as it crackles. Sara starts breathing forcefully, rhythmically in through her mouth, out through her nose, with her head slanted.

Availability for Sara is a matter of others bringing things within her reach. Sara's multiple disabilities limit severely her possibilities to move, to reach, and to choose things. She chooses the golden paper and rejects other available toys and plastics when her moving body is supported patiently by Hilde. In the moment captured above, Hilde's considerate help seems to frame Sara's physical possibilities to move and to choose toys. When Hilde supports her outreach, Sara

can grasp the paper, rub it, and make it crackle. Relating to Sara through body-to-body contact when sitting behind her, slowly talking in a low voice, Hilde recognizes and realizes Sara's temptation to reach out toward the golden paper, as a seemingly unusual toy.

Hilde lends her body to Sara and contributes to Sara's success in reaching for and apprehending the paper. Yet, Hilde is not leading the situation, as Sara's acceptance of her body getting close needs to happen prior to Sara choosing and grabbing the golden paper. When this close contact happens, both Sara and Hilde are touched and influenced by the expressions of the other's body. Merleau-Ponty (2014) emphasized that when we are in a reciprocal engagement with the other's body, which is after all both similar to and different from our own, we may establish an understanding of the other being qualitatively different but of equal value. This realization applies when we address the issue of disability. As Hilde's experience reveals in her physical contact with Sara, there appears a sense of reciprocity with Sara's body: in this moment, their bodies are equal. Sara's body may be no more perceived as able or dis-able. Merleau-Ponty writes: "Illness, like childhood or like the 'primitive state' is a complete form of existence, and the procedures that it employs in order to replace the normal functions that have been destroyed are themselves pathological phenomena" (2014, p. 110). Sara's disability does not disappear in this inter-corporeal, intersubjective reciprocity. Yet it is important to notice that all human experiences are shaped along a continuum of things, spaces, relations, bodies and time. In such a continuum, all bodies carry possibilities for attending to and co-responding with things through competent movement and pleasure, as well as through pain and shortcoming.

The golden paper, well worn, with a stiff core and a smooth surface, is available to Sara in the space co-created by bodies engaged together in understanding. The nearness of Hilde's voice, her low and slow utterings, and saying Sara's name over and over again, all assure Sara that she may take the time she needs. Embracing her student with the now familiar warmth and agile strength of her body and voice, Hilde expands the play possibilities for Sara, by making the boxes of things more readily available to Sara's reach. Sara contributes to the situation by sliding down in Hilde's lap and staying there for a while, before suddenly raising her upper body, reaching out for the paper and from there playing with it in her own way. The situation is a shared situation, where Sara accepts the close, embodied contact and support offered by Hilde, and Sara is freed to extend her being in the everyday life of her school. The thing as a thing—the golden paper as pleasurable, sensual play—comes into sight.

Me, You, It, We

Special needs educator Maria emphasizes how characteristics of certain things can form a point of departure when she introduces new things to ten-year-old Oskar:

He likes to touch certain things, different consistencies. He is not very fond of soft things; he likes things that are hard, a bit crackling, so I try to find different nuances of those. He likes it either this way or that way, those nuances in the middle, he just doesn't find them interesting; they are more like "touch them a bit and then I'm done".

Then, some things are interesting to him all the time. Plastic bags of different consistencies, he likes any kind of plastic bag actually, but those that are a bit thicker, they give another sound that is more exciting. What I try to do is to

use his favourites as a point of departure. Then I find variations to it, and sometimes I try something completely new that can turn out either this way or that way.

Oskar has some favourite things. He prefers hard and crackly things over the soft and quiet. Oskar's preferences of things guide Maria as she seeks new openings for Oskar to expand his possibilities of exploration. Maria describes how one thing may point to other related things, and leverages this understanding to introduce new but similar, therefore somewhat familiar, objects into Oskar's world. Sometimes she tries offering him an entirely novel toy or object. If the experiment stumbles, Maria may swap out the new thing, or change what can be changed to correspond the way Oskar might put the thing to use. For example, if the thing is a sticky, yellow rubber chicken, she may manage to change it into the green dragon teddy with a glossy nose. Perhaps sitting restrains how Oskar can use the dragon teddy, and Maria puts an oblique pillow to support him. Perhaps Oskar is hungry, thirsty, or tired and thereby unable to attend to the dragon. Or perhaps he needs to be by himself for a while, or he needs to have his teacher physically close to him, supporting and responding to his play with things. There is always an underlining unpredictability in how students, teachers and things relate in the ever-changing everyday life in school.

The significance of embodied closeness as enveloping possibilities of relations between Oskar, Maria and the things in their presence is further explored in the following observation:

Oskar sits on the floor and Maria supports his back. Oskar drivels and smiles to his reflection smiling back at him in the mirror on the wall.

Oskar topples forward and seizes a Christmas chain of shiny, red plastic pearls. He shakes his arm, everything from his shoulder and down to his closed fist moves. Maria stretches towards a big, blue IKEA bag made of thick, woven plastics. She places it under Oskar's leg, and he starts to move his knee eagerly back and forth. The more the bag crackles, the wider Oskar smiles. He lifts his head, searching for the look of his teacher in the mirror. He catches her glance and smiles to her. She smiles back at him.

As in the anecdote of Sara, where Sara and Hilde co-created a space where Sara could extend her body, Oskar turns towards the Christmas chain in a situation created by him and Maria. As the chain grabs his attention, Oskar topples towards it. As he makes use of the chain in a way that suits his possibilities to reach out, he extends his body. When Maria gives Oskar the IKEA bag, the same thing happens: Oskar moves his leg and creates a crackling sound. The blue plastic reflects light and shadow when he moves his knee back and forth. From here, Oskar's engagement with things take an important turn.

Oskar lifts his head, his eyes search for the look of the other, Maria, in the mirror. Oskar reaches out towards Maria and catches her eye. In the mirrored glance, he sees her seeing him and confirming his experience of the shiny red chain and the crackling blue bag. He smiles to her with her smiling back as response. In this mirrored and mirroring exchange, Oskar may confirm what Maria already seems to know: that Oskar is a person which whom she has established a relationship with, and that Oskar is fully worth and capable. In the pedagogical context, things like IKEA bags may become queer, that is, they are taken up in unexpected ways. Importantly, queered things may offer new possibilities of extended movement for students with disability,

and become relational hubs of nurturing mutual recognition and acknowledgement between the teacher and the student: with this thing, there is a me, a you, and a we.

The Interreflectivity of a Mirror and the Withdrawal of the Other

Reflecting on the differences between the story of Oskar, the red chain and the blue bag, and the story of Sara and the golden paper, a few other observations may be made. The presence of a mirror is not queered in either instance, and appears as relationally significant. As Maria sits behind Oskar, both of them facing the mirror, Maria provides the possibility of extending the meanings of the things Oskar uses. Reflecting his mimicry, his gaze and her reply, the mirror makes their shared world immediately available to both in a surprisingly intimate and respectful way. Maria's experience of Oskar's experience is reflected back to him. As Oskar lifts his head, he finds his teacher's glance and smiles to her in the mirror. In the mutual mirrored meeting of two pairs of eyes, they acknowledge each other as persons who have something to express to one another, and as persons both worthy of being attended to. They share attention, and in this attention the expressions of the other are continuously reflected. In the mirror, both Oskar and Maria are seen and apprehended by other as mutually contributing partners.

When Sara rubs the golden paper in her hand and starts breathing rhythmically, Hilde withdraws. Sara continues moving. She rubs paper with her hands, draws air in through nose, lets out through mouth, and slants her head. Sara is attuned towards to playing with the thing in her hand with herself. Sara rubs the paper and creates a rhythmic expression by breathing in a new way. Sara creates unconventional ways to play with the thing in light of the constraints and potentials given by her physical being. Her experience may offer us some different understandings of disability. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, to understand disability one has to abandon striving towards a given normality. Rather, differences should be understood through "grasping their sense, that is in treating them as modalities and variations of the subject's total being" (2014, p. 110). When Hilde withdraws from Sara, the two stories diverge in terms of how things, persons and pedagogy are interwoven. Hilde supports Sara on her way to play with the golden paper. Sara turns to her play rather than reaching out. Her attention is directed towards the thing she has in her possession, and Hilde leaves unanswered the question of what may have happened if she had continued being close to Sara, either as interactional possibility or as a breakdown.

Both episodes suggest that the students and teachers reciprocally discover each other as unique human beings as they interact with the things around them. Their bodies co-create spaces equipped with things that carry a certain kind of openness. Through embodied contact, none of them—not Sara, Oskar, Hilde nor Maria—are untouched by what is expressed by the relational other. Their bodies are close to and in constant relation with each other, in their thing-filled surroundings; queered and unqueered things leave imprints to their body and relationships.

Concluding Comments

Unlike things that are charged with specific expectations about proper usage, queer things provide an invitation to new openings and allow the students as subjects to show their preferences and to communicate with and through their world. What may be considered queer is

relational and contingent. Children seem to be attracted to explore and play with queer things, that is, things that provide for novel openness in intention or utility. These open actions may seem more ordinary than extraordinary in the life of most children. From Sara's and Oskar's stories, we see that things that provide open, multi-sensory possibilities allowed our two students to play with them in their own way. The paper, chain and bag are things that created new possibilities to reach out towards others. Along these lines, Maria described "pedagogical things sold in toy stores", such as sorting cubes or play-kitchens, as things that may restrain a student's possibilities to reach out. These things were of little interest to our two students. Relations between children's ways of being in the world and those ways suggested by pre-defined things can break down in different ways, for example, if the thing demands specific motor capabilities beyond the child's reach or ability, or by insisting that the child imagine a particular world of which they have had little or no experience.

As Ahmed (2006) points out, things present double-edged swords. Some things measure competence and capacities, and thus define persons as able or unable. Things can communicate that the world is a place in which being active implies possibilities of understanding, of choosing preferred sensual impressions or as possibilities of including and to be included in relations. Things can also communicate that the world is a place where being active implies shortcoming, pain and relational rejections. Things that tend to communicate openness consolidate all human movement as potential rather than as deviation. Using queer things, possibilities unfold. Sara's rubbing of the golden paper turn her actions towards herself and her subjective possibilities. Oskar's rattling with the chain and his kicking of the bag involves him in reaching out and relating to others, creating reciprocity if these others are sensitive and responsive.

Pedagogical decisions about which things to bring or not bring into an educational context are ethical decisions. This is most especially so where students are severely constrained in their possibilities for movement. If Sara and Oskar had the possibility to move freely in spaces we could reckon that they would seek things corresponding to their subjective way of being, as the toddler seeks the wooden ladle in the kitchen drawer. While the toddler might experience constraint due to the ladle being out of reach due to the kitchen drawer having a child-safe hook for the child's safety, Sara and Oskar experience a broad range of internal and external constraints directly connected to their bodies: spasticity and epilepsy as well as their assistive devices restrain Sara's and Oskar's embodied freedom, and in this, a particular vulnerability in relation between student, teacher and things evolves.

Students and staff are positioned to co-create spaces where queer things invite students to physically reach out, and allow new values of childhood and disability to unfold. When staff-members bring queer things into special needs education as result of reflection, they carry out practical acts bearing pedagogical meaning. Hilde and Maria sought confirmation in their pedagogical decision-making by relating to what the students express rather to what is communicated in the prevailing medical perspective on disability. The golden paper, the chain and the bag are things that allowed our two students to experience ability in a world otherwise dominated by things for medical purposes. These medical things tend to constrain embodied freedom and are used with therapeutic ambitions directed towards future participation and active contribution in education. Sara and Oskar appear more clearly as active subjects when the teachers allowed their way of using the paper, chain and bag to form the foreground, and the medical approach to disability provided the supporting but contrasting background. In such a world, things that have lost their place or have arrived in places other than where they were originally expected or intended, are in the right place after all.

Notes

1. The resonance box is used to amplify sounds created by a moving body or by things touching it. It is made of wood measures approximately 2x2 meters and two centimetres high.

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