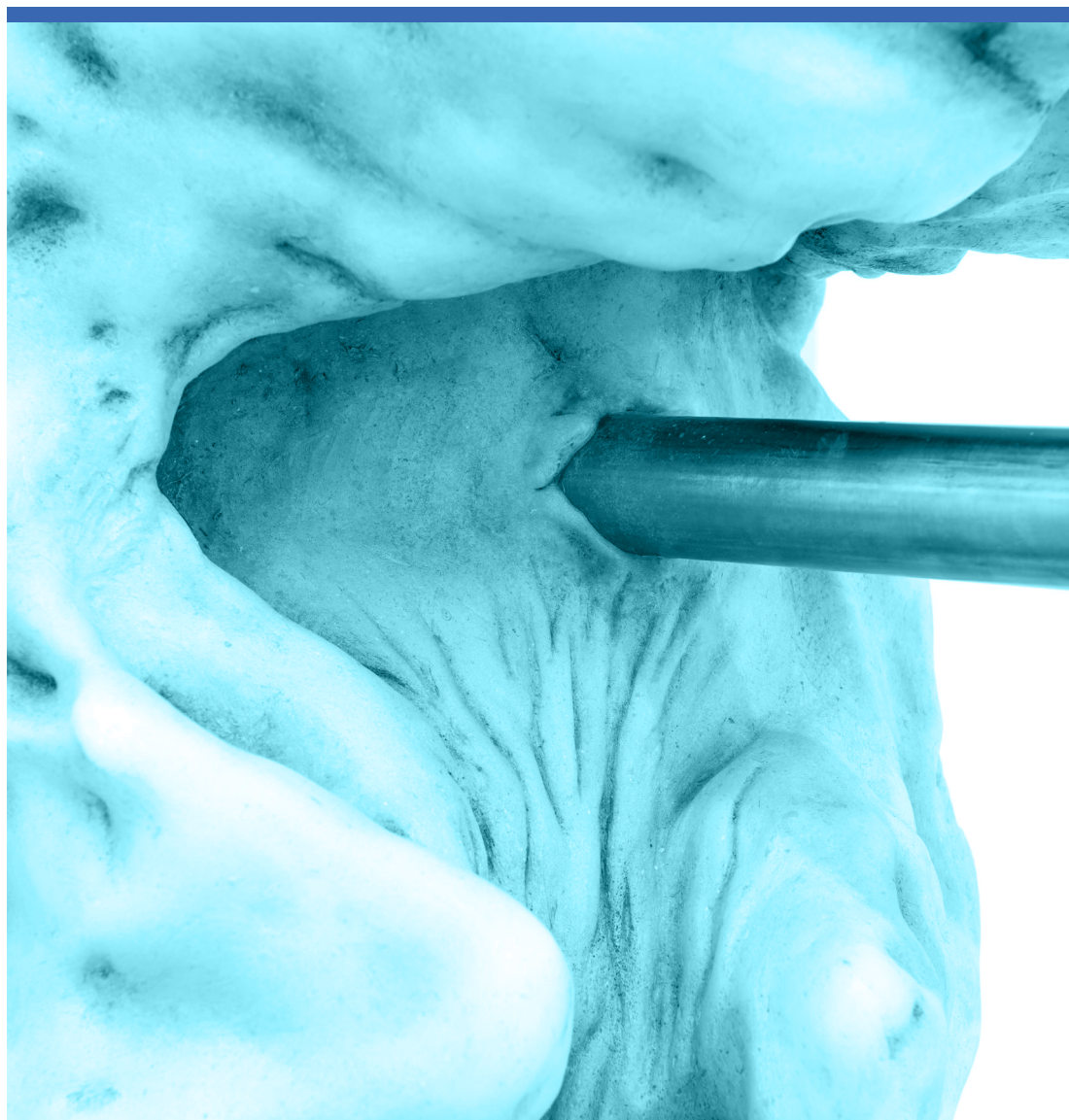


Ana Koncul

Senses and Other Sensibilities: The Meaning of Embodied Difference in Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired





Ana Koncul

Senses and Other Sensibilities

The Meaning of Embodied Difference in Fencing for the
Blind and Visually Impaired

A PhD dissertation in
Culture Studies

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to Melanija K. and Melanija Š, whose lives inspired this project.

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Abstract

Fencing for the blind and visually impaired is an emerging sub-discipline of fencing that creates the conditions for interaction between embodied endowments and worldly affordances. With the rules of fencing slightly adjusted to the needs of the participants who are blindfolded - regardless of their sightedness - the discipline requires its participants engage in combat relying on other than visual cues.

In the pursuit of understanding the difference embodied differences makes, as well as how embodied difference, or more precisely, perceptual differences, affect our meaning making processes, this project explores the lived experiences of people engaged in the discipline of fencing for the blind and visually impaired. The project specifically focuses on the different ways in which fencers perceive their ability and agency, as well as the ways in which they make sense of their surroundings with regards to their embodied differences.

To this end, the project explores the important role habits and habituation play in meaning making processes, the kinds of environmental affordances fencers employ, as well as the different ways in which they employ them. The project specifically focuses on echolocation as an embodied skill and further explores what the phenomenology of echolocation brings to the debate on embodied difference. In addition, the project explores the important role of pre-conceptual, affective and visceral experiences in meaning making processes. Furthermore, the study investigates how autoethnography and the expansion of methodological frameworks to include sensory methodologies enriches the understanding of affective experiences that are difficult, if not impossible, to capture by means of analysing narrative accounts and observation.

Sensory and embodied differences affect the ways in which we make sense of the world. People engaged in the discipline of fencing for the blind and visually impaired inhabit different perceptual worlds that are abundant with affordances and resources for meaning making; this is in contrast to what discourses that view disability as a deficiency traditionally posit. Finally, the findings suggest that so long as fencers use affordances

and their bodies in ways that are spontaneous to them, rather than in ways reserved for the sighted world, their becoming-in-the-world is truly without impediment.

Keywords:

affect, affordances, autoethnography, embodied difference, fencing for the blind and visually impaired, habituation, lived experience

Sammendrag

Fekting for blinde og synshemmede er en voksende underdisiplin av fekting som krever et uvanlig samspill mellom legemliggjorte (embodied) evner og omgivelsesmessige handlingsmuligheter (affordances). Med reglene noe justert for behovene til deltakerne, som uavhengig av synshemmelse har bind for øynene, krever disiplinen at deltakerne som slåss mot hverandre stoler på annet enn visuelle inntrykk.

I jakten på å forstå hvilken forskjell legemliggjorte evner gjør, samt hvordan legemliggjorte, eller mer nøyaktig, perseptuelle forskjeller påvirker vår forståelsesprosess, utforsker dette prosjektet levde erfaringer hos personer som deltar i disiplinen fekting for blinde og synshemmede. Mer bestemt fokuserer prosjektet på de forskjellige måtene fekterne oppfatter sine ferdigheter og handlingsrom (agency), samt på hvilke måter de forstår omgivelsene med hensyn til sine legemliggjorte forskjeller.

For dette formålet utforsker prosjektet den viktige rollen vaner og tilvenning har i forståelsesprosessen, hvilke typer omgivelsesmessige handlingsmuligheter fektere bruker, samt de forskjellige måtene de brukes på. Prosjektet fokuserer spesifikt på ekkolokalisering som en interessant legemliggjort ferdighet og utforsker videre hva fenomenologi av ekkolokalisering tilfører debattene om legemliggjorte ferdigheter. I tillegg utforsker prosjektet de viktige rollene til prekonseptuelle, affektive og viscerale erfaringer i forståelsesprosessen. Videre utforsker studien hvordan autoetnografi og en utvidelse av metodologiske rammeverk til å inkludere sensoriske metoder beriker forståelsen av affektive opplevelser som ville vært vanskelig, om ikke umulige, å fange gjennom analyse av fortalte hendelser eller observasjoner.

Sensoriske og legemliggjorte forskjeller påvirker måten vi skape mening av verden. Personer som driver med disiplinen fekting for blinde og synshemmede besitter forskjellige perseptuelle verdener som inneholder rikelig med handlingsmuligheter og ressurser for forståelse, i kontrast til diskurser som antar at funksjonshemming er en mangel. Til slutt antyder funnene at så lenge fektere bruker handlingsmulighetene og

kroppene sin på en måte som er spontan for dem heller enn på måter som er forbeholdt en synet verden, er deres tilhørighet i verden uten hindring.

Nøkkelord:

Påvirke, handlingsmuligheter, autoetnografi, legemliggjort forskjell, fekting for blinde og synshemmede, tilvenning, levd erfaring

List of papers

Article 1

Koncul, Ana (2016) 'The Construction of Limitations: Cultural Marginalization of Altered Embodiment.' *Bigger than Bones*, ed. Jenkins, Haley. Oxford: Inter-disciplinary Press

Article 2

Koncul, Ana and Jenny Slatman (Under review). 'Rehab/ituation from a Phenomenological Perspective: The Case of Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired.' *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*.

Article 3

Koncul, Ana. (Under review). 'The Difference Embodied Difference Makes: Echolocation in Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired.' *Body and Society*.

Article 4

Koncul, Ana. (Under review). 'Fencing Blindfolded: Extending Meaning Through Sound, Floor and Blade.' *Qualitative Research in Health, Exercise and Sport*.

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1 Introduction

The second half of the 20th century saw increased interest in studies of embodied difference. The white-male-middle class-able-body, which had served as the default reference model for centuries, left scholarly studies with impoverished insight into the rich variety of lived experiences. It also had dangerous political consequences. In response, the emancipatory and critical frameworks of interdisciplinary studies of race, class, and gender, as well as in the growing body of research within new materialisms, dis/ability, crip, queer and trans* and affect studies, attempt to overcome both the Cartesian separation of mind and body (and other related notorious dualisms operative within the humanities), as well as the implications this division has had on the ways in which lived experiences and their social realities are thought. Some of the examples of these attempts and responses are reflected in the introduction of a number of concepts such as natureculture (Haraway 2003) and spacetimemattering (Barad 2007), or in reappropriation and resignification of concepts such as crip and queer. This means that the reimagination of embodied difference requires different vocabularies, less stigmatising than those belonging to, for example, the medical model of disability, yet less sterile than some of the awkward (or even patronising) bureaucratic ones. This requires not only thinking through and with different, if not new, concepts and inventories; but crucially, a rethinking and adjustment of both methodological and theoretical frameworks, especially in terms of emphasising the shortcomings of canonical, traditional approaches.

This study explores the meaning of embodied difference in the context of fencing for the blind and visually impaired. Fencing for the blind and visually impaired is a relatively recent sub-discipline of traditional fencing that is gaining popularity across the world. It is an interesting discipline for the exploration of the meaning of embodied differences, as it calls for an unusual employment of embodied endowments and worldly affordances. Bodily difference affects epistemic difference, and in order to understand the meaning of embodied difference for people engaged in this martial art, I will explore how fencers

make sense of their environment, what kind of worldly affordances they use, how they create different kinds of fits and misfits with their surroundings, how fencers' capacities change through worldly experiences, as well as how people habituate their bodies. Furthermore, I seek to understand the role of affective aspects of the experiences of people engaged in fencing for the blind and visually impaired, as well as how they are becoming-in-the-world. In a sense, this study attempts to engage with the question Victoria Pitts-Taylor poses in her book 'The Brain's Body: Neuroscience and Corporeal Politics' - *what difference embodied difference makes* - and to provide a phenomenological contribution for what she describes as a benign theory of cognitive variation (Pitts-Taylor 2016). In order to tackle the aforementioned question, this study explores fencers' embodied bodies' capacities to change through the use of affordances that are spontaneous to them instead of those reserved for the sighted world, through the use of echolocation, habituation, and through different fencing experiences. In particular, this article seeks to understand various ways in which embodied difference affects the fencers' meaning making processes and thus changes their lived experience.

1.1 Signposts

In the second chapter ('Accounting for the research process') I account for my thinking, research, and writing process. I write about the process as sort of a *journey* that has taken me to unexpected places - theoretically, methodologically and geographically. I take as a point of departure the exciting yet somewhat self-referential studies in the semiotics of embodiment that are marked by a different style of thinking and writing. This style is characteristic of the Eastern European academic tradition that I come from, such as Serbian and Estonian, and I have brought it to Norway at the very beginning of my research fellowship. In this chapter I explore my decision to include the first article in this dissertation, which might seem to be an odd choice. This article serves a reminder of the importance of approaches that I myself consider 'failed' (Harrowell et al. 2018), to a certain degree. This points to the complex nature of my project. The second article marks my transition to what could be described as a more *Western* style of research and writing.

This article was written in 2016 during my research stay at the Department of Health, Ethics and Society, Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences at Maastricht University, where I worked closely with my co-mentor professor Jenny Slatman. The article reflects my engagement with the phenomenology of health, illness, disability, and medical humanities more generally. In the attempt to understand how others ‘get a grip’ on their lives, I myself got a firmer grip and found a clearer focus for my project. This and the following two articles (‘The Difference Embodied Difference Makes: Echolocation in Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired’ and ‘Fencing Blindfolded: Extending Meaning Through Sound, Floor and Blade’) are based in empirical research and draw on different methodological and theoretical backgrounds. Once I had written this article, the need to explore pre-reflective and affective aspects of fencers’ experiences became clear. I pursued these issues the following year (2017) during my stay at the department of Media, Communication and Culture Studies at Goldsmiths in London, under supervision of professor Lisa Blackman. This is where I became really passionate about my project and became constantly aware of the ways in which people make sense of the world – even beyond the university campus and fencing halls. Finally, upon my return to Norway and after critically reflecting on the methods and theories that supported my analysis, I chose to write an autoethnographic account. In the second chapter I account for this research process, and also summarise the four articles central to this dissertation by explaining how the ideas, theories, and methods of one article gave rise to the next, and how they all relate to each other.

The third chapter (‘Understanding embodiment’) presents the background of specific theoretical works that I have utilised in each of the four articles. I depart from providing insight into my understanding of bodies as contingent, porous, and negotiable, and discuss various relevant aspects of disability studies, which I consider an important resource for understanding the meaning of embodied difference. Furthermore, I provide insights into affect theory, and argue that our visceral intensities and capacities to affect and be affected constitute much of what is considered embodied experience. In addition, this chapter demonstrates how semiotics theory and models contribute to the

understanding of embodied difference and complements disability studies, affect theory and phenomenology.

The fourth chapter, entitled 'Phenomenology as epistemology, theory, method and methodology', presents one of the most significant theoretical influences for this project. In this chapter I discuss the complexity of phenomenology and its employment as not just as theory, but also as epistemology, method, and methodology. I describe the specificities of phenomenological approaches that are relevant for my work, as well as the issues and limitations that have surfaced in the application of certain phenomenological concepts throughout my research process. I especially focus on the importance of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body and its limitations. I furthermore discuss embodied mind, embodied senses and embodied meaning making, and how these concepts are constitutive for my work.

The fifth chapter outlines the methods I employed by describing the study focus and design, how I reached conceptual density, and identify the potential applicability and transfer value of my study.

Chapter six is titled 'The Construction of Limitations: Cultural Marginalisation of Altered Embodiment', which I refer to as 'the first article' throughout my dissertation.

The seventh chapter is an article co-authored by professor Jenny Slatman, 'Rehab/ituation from a Phenomenological Perspective: the Case of Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired'.

The eighth chapter presents the third article, 'The Difference Embodied Difference Makes: Echolocation in Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired'.

In the ninth chapter I present the fourth article, titled 'Fencing Blindfolded: Extending Meaning Through Sound, Floor and Blade'.

The tenth chapter presents concluding remarks, and reflections on the research questions in light of my findings. In addition, this chapter provides a general overview of

the important contributions my work has made to academic discourse, its practical applications, as well as recommendations for future work.

I proceed in the second chapter by summarising the four articles and by describing the research process I employed.

2 Accounting for the research process

It would be presumptuous to say that centuries, or rather, millennia long anthropocentrism has given human bodies their due. From thirty or forty thousand years old statues found across almost all cultures to state of arts technologies that render our genomes visible, embodiment continues to provoke our curiosity. Artistic and scientific endeavours have been motivated by *philosophical* questions concerning human bodies as much as practical ones. Many have taken up these philosophical questions, and I, too, was drawn towards pondering over them. This pondering eventually gave rise to a couple of somewhat more focused research questions. Finally, four years ago, these questions started to shape (an academically structured) research project, the one that will result in this dissertation.

The journey of this research has taken me to unexpected places - geographically, theoretically, and methodologically. Departing from my initial interest in embodied difference, as well as the relationship between the body's materiality and its cultural, social and discursive constructions, I narrowed my focus to the meaning of embodied difference for people engaged in the sport of fencing. I am personally familiar with this practice, and I was curious to learn how others experience their embodied differences and how they endow them with meaning.

Going into the field to meet fencers, I was not sure what I would find. I determined to exercise a patient and attentive interest in whatever might surface, and let the emergent data lead me. This openness gave rise to much confusion and disorientation - feelings I later thought and wrote about as part of this research. Openness, confusion and disorientation came to shape not only to my epistemological lenses, but my choice of theory, methodologies and methods. With the guidance and scrutiny of a dedicated phenomenologist, I practiced a rigorous suspension of my personal preconceptions, expectations and theoretical baggage.

In this chapter, I will summarise the four articles central to this dissertation. I will describe how my research, thinking and writing processes unfolded, how the articles relate to each other, and how each gave rise to another.

At the outset of this research project, I narrowed my focus to include the sub-discipline of fencing for the blind and visually impaired. I will explain the reasons for this in more detail in the fifth chapter, titled 'Challenges and limitations of a phenomenological approach to understanding the meaning of embodied difference and means of amending the limitations'.

The first text in this dissertation, 'The Construction of Limitations: Cultural Marginalisation of Altered Embodiment' is a book chapter rather than an article, and was published in the collection 'Bigger than Bones' (Jenkins 2016). This chapter serves as a problematic point of departure for my thinking about embodied difference in the context of fencing for the blind and visually impaired. It was written at the very beginning of my academic journey, and in hindsight, it displays several misunderstandings and problematic preconceptions about embodied differences. As I began to learn the nuances of fencers' lived experiences and the complexities of, for example, disability studies, I initially decided *not* to include this chapter in my dissertation. However, after re-reading it (with a bit of shock and disbelief) three years later, I feel that its inclusion provides valuable insight into the development of my thinking and research process. Although it could be labelled a 'failed' effort, such troubled research should be taken into account as well – see Harrowell et al. (2018). More importantly, I hope it serves as a clear reminder of the deeply ethical and complex nature of this project, however unusual it is for such an intervention to appear in a purified academic account. In pursuit of a more open and accountable approach to research and academic work, I include this chapter. Below I provide its summary - with critical reflections.

In pursuit of understanding the meaning of embodied difference within this specific context, and in the second article entitled 'Rehab/ituation from a Phenomenological Perspective: the Case of Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired', co-written with professor Jenny Slatman, I have analysed how *ability* and *agency* are expressed both

bodily (through fencing) and in respondents' narratives of lived experiences. We found that fencing contributes to *rehab/ituation*, or rather, to the rearrangement of one's body schema according to personal embodied endowments and worldly affordances.

The findings from the second article motivated me to explore the role of *habits* and *habituation* in fencers' meaning making processes. In addition to habits and habituation, in the third article, 'The Difference Embodied Difference Makes: Echolocation in Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired', I investigate the ways that fencers make sense of their embodiment and how they use *affordances* from the environment, focusing on the role of *echolocation* and *affects*.

Finally, in the fourth article, 'Fencing Blindfolded: Extending Meaning Through Sound, Floor and Blade', I pick up the notions of *affects*, *affordances* and *habits* and explore in depth how they are related to each other as well as their role in meaning making processes. This article raises the issue of how best to gain adequate insight into respondents' lived experiences through observation and narrative accounts. As a means to mitigate these limitations, I expanded my methodological framework to include sensory methodologies and autoethnography.

In what follows, I will describe how these theoretical and methodological expansions have enriched my understanding. In addition, I will explain how the book chapter and the three articles complement each other and help inform my understanding of how people engaged in fencing for the blind and visually impaired make sense of their embodied differences, as well as of their surroundings. I will do so by summarising the three articles in a way that emphasises the arguments central to my dissertation and that explore my research questions concerning embodied difference.

2.1 Article summary: The Construction of Limitations: Cultural Marginalisation of Altered Embodiment

The chapter 'The Construction of Limitations: Cultural Marginalisation of Altered Embodiment' represents my transition from more general study of the semiotics of

embodiment and subjectivity towards the exploration of embodied difference. This chapter explores the dynamics between the centre and periphery (or margins) of cultural and other semiotic systems, or put simply, how certain kinds of embodiments are marginalised through different practices, as well as how they become the centre of cultural or media attention. Put briefly, I employ the semiotic model of the semiosphere developed by Yuri Lotman (2005).

Instead of summarising this chapter further, I would like to use this space to critically reflect on a couple of claims I make below, as well as to highlight a few things I actually did well. It is important to do so, if briefly, as I amend these critical mistakes in the following three articles.

The article departs from the notion that all bodies are differently able: an important conceptual thread woven through each and all of the other articles. I mention prosthetically enhanced and left-handed bodies, which is problematic in a sense. This is because it appears to make these two particular kinds of embodied differences equal to bodies with impairments that have historically been seen as more problematic and subjected to radical forms of exclusion. However, the idea that embodied differences include every body's specific characteristics gave rise to thinking about this notion critically. It also gave rise to the need to explore the different ways in which even those people who share a difference - a visual impairment in this case - inhabit a different perceptual world and embody their blindness differently.

However flawed by the lack of substantial examples, my description of the dynamics between centre and periphery within the semiosphere makes valid points regarding the mechanism of marginalisation that operates through ideological, social, medical and discursive practices and rituals. Moreover, I indicate even at this early stage my awareness of the need for empirical research into the lived experiences of fencers who are blind and visually impaired. In this paper, I call for inquiry into whether they actually feel disabled or marginalised, among other things.

The problematic aspects of this text are numerous, and I will point out just a few of them here, as I engage with others in the three subsequent articles. For example, I use terms such as 'impairment' and 'disability' completely unaware of the context of disability studies, and in a manner inconsistent with existing discourse on the topic. I had remedied this oversight by the time I wrote the other three articles, and the improvement is noticeable. In addition, the chapter would have benefitted from, for example, presenting and problematising of the notion of *supercrip* (Hardin and Hardin 2004; Kama 2004) in the context of people with impairments being put in the centre of a particular semiosphere. Furthermore, I make a number of claims such as 'discourse used and patronising practices do more harm than good' (Koncul 2016: 20), which are unfortunately unsubstantiated.

When I write that '[t]he notion of the impaired body stems rather from normative practices and rituals than from the actual physical incapacities of the body' (Koncul 2016: 20) I am clearly unaware of the differences between impairments and disabilities and of the social model of disability, yet I do make a somewhat valid point. Another example of unsubstantiated claims or problematic expressions would be the use of the phrases such as 'survival strategies', 'their situation' and 'victims', as well as the following sentence: '[t]he notion of the body as such is considered to be a margin itself in western epistemological and other fields; it is a slippery terrain considering, for example, media saturation with images of bodies' (Koncul 2016: 21).

I firmly believe that mistakes in the research process should be accounted for rather than concealed, especially in such a sensitive context as the study of the meaning of embodied difference. Hence, I consider this problematic article an important part of my dissertation, as it has helped me clarify my objectives and expand my understanding of the ways in which embodied difference is or can be thought.

2. 2. Article summary: Rehab/ituation from a Phenomenological Perspective: the Case of Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired

The second article is based on an empirical study of the lived experiences of fencers who are blind and visually impaired, and explores how the respondents make sense of both the world and their own embodied differences. Together with the second author, professor Jenny Slatman, I have described and interpreted fencers' lived experiences in order to understand how the phenomenal body is lived in its rich and varied experience, by specifically exploring the meaning of ability and agency from a phenomenological perspective.

We open the article with a discussion about the difference between *impairments* and *disabilities*, and go on to criticise the deficit model of disability. Furthermore, we problematise the somewhat more appropriate and widely accepted expression of 'differently able-bodied'. We consider that all bodies differ in their abilities and argue that although this construction takes into account the possibility that a person does not feel or perceive themselves as *dis-abled*, the expression is still limited and does not accurately represent the subjects to whom it refers. Hence, we situate this article within the wider field of critical disability studies and aim to complement it by offering a phenomenological account of the lived experiences of fencers who are blind and visually impaired, as well as of the relevance of fencing for a plurality of usages of bodily affordances.

This is the most phenomenological article of all four - both in terms of the choice of theory as well as of method and methodology. The specificities and relevance of a phenomenological approach to understanding ability and agency are described in more detail in chapters four ('Phenomenology as epistemology, theory, method and methodology') and five ('Challenges and limitations of a phenomenological approach to understanding the meaning of embodied difference and means of amending the limitations'), and in order to spare the reader from redundancies, I will present them only briefly here.

We initially employ Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body (and its critique) and specifically make use of his concept of 'I can' to explore how people experience their grip on the projects they are engaged in, as well as their immersion in the world, based on their capacity and habituality.

In addition, for the purposes of analysing how fencers make sense of their own abilities and agency, we employ interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). We have chosen IPA as it is useful for studies of the lived experiences of illnesses, disability and rehabilitation, among other things.

Our findings suggest that respondents' embodied difference does not impede their being-in-the-world. Moreover, as long as they make use of their own specific bodily endowments and worldly affordances, fencers do not feel disabled and their immersion into everyday lives is without hinderance. In addition, we have identified three ways of being-in-the-world:

First, we have found that while visual impairments or blindness may cause disorientations (Ahmed 2006) and disruptions of one's taken for granted being-in-the-world, fencing supports different kinds of perceptual and motor reorientations in the world. Reorientations and other strategies fencers employ increase their ability to perform tasks and participate in practices that in turn endow them with agency.

Second, we have found that the respondents do not experience their embodied differences passively, but aspire to endow them with meaning through different practices, strategies, and habits they develop. Fencers especially gain agency through involvement in practices that require them to push boundaries and in turn provide them with excitement and adrenalin. Fencers' relation to their world can also be described in terms of throwing oneself into one's world.

And third, fencing helps its participants to get a firmer grip on the world, as they develop personal techniques and styles and refine their movements and actions.

I would argue that perhaps the most important contribution of this article is the concept of *rehab/ituation*, which we develop while criticising the normative connotations of the notion of rehabilitation. In addition to the three aforementioned ways of being-in-the-world, our findings suggest that instead of rehabilitating to the norm, fencing contributes to conceptualising the rearrangement of one's body schema according to personal affordances, to *rehab/ituation*. This concept makes possible a more creative and inclusive

way of being-in-the-world, as it allows fencers to employ senses that are spontaneous for them and to fully rehab/ituate their blindness as well as their embodiment in a manner that is most comfortable for them and that offers the most environmental cues.

Finally, we conclude that ability and dis/ability, both equally products of material realities and social constructions, are not fixed conditions. Respondents create various fits and misfits (Garland-Thomson 2011) with their environment, while involvement in fencing seems to improve their ability to rehab/ituate their embodied differences, and thus to be fully immersed in the world.

2. 3. Article summary: The Difference Embodied Difference Makes: Echolocation in Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired

The third article deals more explicitly with the issue of the meaning of embodied difference by engaging with Victoria Pitts-Taylor's (2016) question: what difference does embodied difference make? In this article, I proceed from the findings concerning fencers' ability and agency in the first study, in an attempt to provide an answer to Pitts-Taylor's question. I do so by looking at fencers' embodied bodies' capacities to change through the use of different affordances, habituation and echolocation. In particular, this article explores the different ways in which embodied difference affects the fencers' meaning-making processes and thus alters their lived experience.

An exploration into the ways in which fencers use their perceptual affordances and embodied endowments, this article aims to contribute to phenomenological studies of embodied difference by providing accounts of fencers' affective experiences, as well as of their experiences of embodied difference and of meaning making through echolocation and habituation. More specifically, I explore what the phenomenology of echolocation brings to debates on embodied difference in the context of people who are blind and visually impaired, as their experiences intersect with debates on habit,

affect and affordance. The purpose of this focus is to further explore the meaning of ability and agency by engaging with those debates.

I explore these issues through by employing phenomenology of the body as an empirical method for the description and interpretation of human experiences. Phenomenological insight into lived experiences of the use of echolocation and its relation to habituation is lacking, as most studies of these phenomena have been conducted within clinical and neuroscientific settings. I argue that the relevance of phenomenological insight is supported by Vivien Sobchak's idea that we perceive and enact our thoughts and movements, and not the 'firing of our neurons' (Sobchak, 2010: 52).

In this article I present three vignettes that summarise the experiences of three fencers who I met as part of my study. The vignettes illustrate some of my arguments about embodied difference, including: the role of different practices and habits that respondents develop, which allow them to participate in fencing; and how they draw on and amplify the skills they have learnt to handle living without or with limited sight. Each vignette exemplifies different arguments which I develop, as fencers' experiences of their embodied variances differ.

Framed in this way, the study responds to Victoria Pitts-Taylor's calls for a more benign theory of cognitive variation and an invitation to focus our studies on bodily variance and different ways in which bodies are experienced, instead of striving toward a universal ideal. The authors' idea that bodily difference affects epistemic difference has prompted me to look more closely at echolocation as an embodied sense and perception that is developed and amplified through fencing.

Echolocation is a generally under researched skill that allows people (and some animals) to use echoes of sounds to detect and identify objects in their surroundings. People who are blind or visually impaired seem to be more sensitive and skilled in using echolocation to make sense of their surroundings. I argue that whereas echolocation is interesting in its capacity to orient a person, what is really fascinating are not its technical specifics,

but the manifold ways in which people inhabit and share the world in spite of our differences.

As the study's findings suggest, echolocation is one of the skills that helps fencers to habituate their embodied differences as well as their surroundings. Both echolocation and habituation allow fencers who are blind and visually impaired to hone and expand their abilities in a world that prioritises visual information. Due to this, their embodied difference does not allow their blindness to become a disability. Departing from this point, I further explore the role and mechanisms of habituation by turning to scholarly works on habit that focus on its two-sided nature. That is, the paradox inherent in the notion of habit suggests that, while habits' nature is sedimentary and regulatory, habits extend the body's potential for engagement with creativity and change and allow for new meanings to emerge.

In order to understand how fencers use echolocation and habits, I have used narrative accounts of their lived experiences as a primary source. While the relevance of narratives for understanding the phenomenal body is considerable, much of bodily vitality and aliveness cannot easily be articulated and put into these narratives. A significant part of what is considered to be the experience of a somatically felt body (Blackman 2008: 25) happens within the realm of the non-cognitive, the pre-linguistic, beneath the threshold of consciousness. For this reason, I have expanded my theoretical framework to include affect studies. I have also returned to the field and engaged more intensely in the observation of fencers, in addition to enriching interviews with the accounts of the experiences they had trouble explaining: namely, the pre-conceptual, pre-linguistic and affective experiences.

The findings suggest that fencers who are blind or visually impaired seem to inhabit worlds abundant with affordances. Their bodily doings change their brain and bodily schema, and this openness of the body, or rather plasticity, not only enriches their lived experiences through a constant rehabilitation, but also endows them with agency. Moreover, fencers use the environmental cues in different ways and ascribe to them different meanings in various situations. Finally, I conclude that by relying on an

abundant set of non-visual cues or sets of cues, people create and inhabit different, fully functional, sensory worlds. Therefore, conceptualisation of blindness not as a lack or impairment, but as a different manner of participating in the world, a different state or a culture, has the potential to challenge the idea of blindness as a state of dis/ability.

2. 4. Article summary: Fencing Blindfolded: Extending Meaning Through Sound, Floor and Blade

The fourth article represents an attempt to mitigate the limitations imposed by the methods employed in the first three studies. These include the limitations of interview-based narrative accounts and observation of fencers who are blind and visually impaired. No matter how thorough the interviews or how attentive my observation, true insight into the underlying meanings of embodied difference remained elusive.

I argue that this is because the meaningful affective and pre-conceptual aspects of our lived experiences are inevitably subjected to articulation and translation by means of language. In order to grasp those affective and embodied aspects of experiences that were not accessible to me through the aforementioned methods, to find out how embodied difference affects lived experience, and especially how it affects meaning making and my own embodied subjectivity, I decided to engage myself in autoethnography.

The fourth article thus explores what an autoethnographic account of participation in fencing for the blind and visually impaired brings to the debate on embodied difference in the context of blindness and visual impairment. Autoethnography is used as part of a multi-method study, together with sensory methodologies (Iisahunter and Elke Emerald, 2016), and with a focus on inquiry beyond the visual. In an effort to describe my experiences by means of language, my sensory autoethnography pays special attention to sonic, tactile, and spatial affordances, affects, moods and emotions.

I acknowledge that since I do not live with blindness but only with a minor visual impairment, I am not able to provide an account of the complexities of the lived

experience of these impairments, but only of engagement in fencing for the blind and visually impaired. I do so by exploring how I make sense of my surroundings through the employment of other than visual affordances, how sensory difference affects my meaning making processes, and how this alters my experience.

Specifically, the fourth article explores the affective aspects of our experiences, how we habituate our phenomenological-cognitive-behavioural niches, and finally, how we make sense of our embodied difference.

This article draws from the same theoretical background as the second. It departs from Victoria Pitts-Taylor's suggestion concerning our experiences; namely, that they are intertwined with our surroundings, embedded in specific social and cultural settings and situated in historical milieus.

Similarly to the third article, I bring this study into dialogue with relevant ideas about affect (Massumi 2002; Clough 2008a, 2008b; Blackman and Venn 2010; Featherstone 2010; Papoulias and Callard 2010), the concept of affordance (Gibson 1979; Chemero 2009; Jensen and Pedersen 2016), as well as with habit and habituation (Weiss 2008; Grosz 2013; Kull 2016), in order to explore their role in meaning making processes.

This article complements autoethnographic studies that aim to give voice to athletes who live with embodied difference (Irish, Cavallerio and McDonald 2017) and to make their experiences more comprehensible (Ing and Mills 2017).

My autoethnographic reflection departs from an exploration of affective experiences and embodied sensations such as disorientations and defamiliarisations. This exploration has provided me with insight into enfolded understandings of thought and action (Papoulias and Callard 2010 34). This insight remained elusive in my attempts to observe and interview fencers, yet once I experienced blindfolded fencing for myself, it not only helped me make sense of my own embodied body, but of how embodied difference affects my experiences.

My autoethnographic account describes the different ways in which I made sense of the world while blindfolded by exploring the kinds of affordances (Gibson 1979) I employed

in order to habituate to specific phenomenological-cognitive-behavioural niches (Chemero 2009). In this context, I emphasise the role of affect and emotion as a constitutive part of meaning making processes and of our engagement with the world. My account describes how the habituation of my cognitive-behavioural-phenomenological niches affected my meaning making processes. I argue that I made sense of my body, of fencing blindfolded as well as of my surroundings through a complex engagement with the ecology of sensory and affective processes.

My engagement in the practice has made different aspects of other fencers' stories resonant and has increased my sensitivity to what it actually means to inhabit a predominantly sighted world. In addition, I gained the first-hand understanding that had eluded me through the application of methods such as interviews and observation. Writing my experiences in the form of an autoethnography and further analysing them through an academically framed narrative has helped me to explore the complexities of the meaning of embodied difference.

Finally, I propose that difference is indeed an inherent and essential part of embodied experience. Bodies are in a constant process of becoming, rather than 'being' (Shildrick 2009: 25), open and incomplete. In addition, I conclude that:

'[o]ur embodied becoming is dependent on a dynamic between our mutually constitutive biological, social and discursive bodies; a dynamic that 'implies a significant shift in epistemological and ontological conventions that insist on the traditional split between subject/object and self/other' (Shildrick 2009, 25)' (Koncul, forthcoming: 23).

In addition to justifying the complementarity of the different theoretical approaches I have employed in the four articles, in the following chapter I describe in more detail their theoretical underpinnings.

3 Understanding Embodiment

3. 1. Interdisciplinary understanding of embodiment

'We are all bodies - sensing, moving creatures, wonderfully simple, wonderfully complex. [...] We are creatures of habit, but also creatures of change, creativity, and curiosity. We are all these dimensions and more, potentially and actually. In the flesh, down to and into our bones, we are all bodies.' (Sheets-Johnstone 1992: 1).

Our bodies are complex processes of entanglements of selves and others, nature and culture, insides and outsides, material and immaterial, and individual and social. They are also ever changing, thus highly plastic, vulnerable and in a constant process of becoming. As such, our bodies are 'far from being a fairly standardised and self-contained entity [...] and rich in the possibilities of intercorporeality' (Shildrick 2010: 12). We perceive and make sense of the world through our bodies. Our embodied differences affect these sense making processes as well as our lived experiences.

I align my pursuit of understanding the meaning of embodied difference with works that problematise Descartes' separation of mind and body, and in chapter four ('Phenomenology as epistemology, theory, method and methodology') I describe how, in fact, our bodies are embrained and how our mind is embodied. Briefly, our bodies are not passive vehicles deprived of agency, nor is our mind a computer that directs and dominates the leaky flesh. The body is both the 'somatically felt body - the body that feels joy, sadness, and anger, the body that feels nostalgia and despair - and the tactile-kinesthetic body - the body that feels itself in the act of moving and touching' (Sheets-Johnstone 1992: 3).

This chapter describes the background and specificities of some of the theoretical underpinnings of the works I have used in the four articles below. One of the most significant influences on my work, phenomenology (as the study of lived experiences), is explored separately in chapter four ('Phenomenology as epistemology, theory,

method and methodology'). This study represents an interdisciplinary understanding of embodiment, and I therefore provide an overview of the relevant aspects of disability studies, affect theory, and semiotics, to show how they are complementary and how they provide important resources.

I will first discuss different aspects of disability studies as one of the main approaches within body studies that focus on embodied difference. I then turn to affect theory and describe the importance of pre-conceptual aspects of our experiences. Finally, I describe how semiotics complements affect theory and phenomenology and enriches the understanding of embodied difference.

3. 2. Disability Studies

By the earliest stages of my fieldwork, *ability* began to surface as one of the most common and important themes in interviews with fencers who are blind and visually impaired. One of the central arguments within my dissertation concerns the fact that, when people make use of the affordances that are comfortable and spontaneous to them, they inhabit worlds abundant with resources for meaning making; for them, embodied difference does not equal disability. However, my respondents still occupy 'a place defined as exceptional, rather than to simply be part of a multiplicity of possibilities' (Shildrick 2012: 31). This is where it gets more complex: people who live with visual impairments and blindness do not live in a bubble or vacuum, but are immersed in a complex web of social, economic, and cultural milieus, as well as in professional and political practices that affect their lived experience. Hence, understanding the meaning of embodied difference and its effect on a person's ability demanded a closer look at its opposite, disabilities. This meant that circumventing disability studies and not challenging the construction and maintenance of normative assumptions would have serious implications for my project. It would have ignored the important rethinking of ethical and ontological questions that are 'at the heart of the whole question of self and other' (Shildrick 2012: 30). In addition, Margrit Shildrick (2012: 35) claims that the socio-cultural imaginary (of ideas such as

morphological perfection) shapes our attitudes and values regardless of our bodily comportment; thus we all share a responsibility to question these attitudes and assumptions. Therefore, I engage with disability studies explicitly in the second article ('Rehab/ituation from a Phenomenological Perspective: the Case of Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired'), and less explicitly in the other articles. While criticising normative models of embodiment, critical disability studies and crip theory - two interesting and relatively recent approaches under the wider umbrella of disability studies - argue for different ontologies and ways of relating, and this subchapter further describes its theoretical grounds.

3. 2. 1. Terminological clarification: differently able bodied, impairments, disabilities

Throughout my dissertation I problematise notions used to describe people who live with embodied difference, such as 'disabled' and 'differently able bodied'. Whereas in the first article I use terms such as 'impairment' and 'disability' without reference to disability studies, I amend this in the other three articles. While I am critical of the idea of morphological perfection, I argue that we are all differently able bodied and provide more detailed arguments for this in the second article ('Rehab/ituation from a Phenomenological Perspective: the Case of Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired'). Here I would add that Tom Shakespeare makes a good point when he claims that disability is a spectrum, or rather a continuum (Shakespeare 2018: 6), as well as that '[w]hen people talk about 'differently abled', it feels like a slightly misguided liberal attempt to say that everyone has things they are more or less good at' (Shakespeare 2018: 2). Doubtless, what is important about terminology in this context is that we need to be attentive towards people's preferences concerning the ways in which they refer to themselves, as well as to focus on people and not merely on their medical conditions. Our abilities are always in a sense situational, meaning that we are in different ways capable of doing different things depending on more than just our bodily comportment. To use a simple example, if I am well rested I will be capable of doing more than if I am exhausted.

Embodied difference does not necessarily equal impairment. Impairment definitely does not equal disability, and I detail the differences between impairments and disabilities in the second article. Briefly, impairments refer to deviations from bio-medical norms (Thomas and Smith 2009: 7), while disabilities are considered to be social issues and ways in which people are 'disabled by society' (Shakespeare 2018: 3). Defined in this way, disability is a stigmatising 'cultural trope and historical community that raises questions about the materiality of the body and the social formulations that are used to interpret bodily and cognitive difference' (Goodley 2013: 633). Hence, bringing together people with such diverse experiences as schizophrenia and cerebral palsy and designating them as 'disabled' makes for an uncanny category. What they might share, however, is that many of them do not consider themselves disabled at all.

3. 2. 2. Medical and social models of disability

In addition to differentiation between impairments and disabilities, it is also important to refer to the differences between the two models that have shaped thinking about disabilities for decades. Whereas I write about medical and social models of disability in the second article, I will only describe them briefly here and refer to their critique.

The understanding of disability has changed significantly in the 1960s and 1970s. Disabilities and impairments were initially seen as a personal tragedy and as individual medical problems to be solved. This view belongs to the medical model of disability and 'has its roots in the historical discrimination of disabled people during the rise of industrialism' (Thomas and Smith 2009: 7). However, the shift in understanding brought the notion that disabilities should not be considered merely biological and medical issues, but examined as social constructions (Thomas and Smith 2009: 9-10). The social model has widened the focus on broader cultural and social processes and has prioritised themes such as disabling environments, discrimination, cultural representations, as well as the relationship between disability and industrial capitalism (Shakespeare 2018: 15). The social model of disability studies to some degree uses the same matrix (namely the one that focuses on the issue of otherness and its marginalisation) as different '-studies'

that emerged around the same time, such as gender, postcolonial, or racial studies. In the context of my dissertation, the social model would suggest that persons who experience sensory difference and live with visual impairments or blindness are not 'disabled by lack of sight, but by lack of Braille, cluttered pavements and stereotypical ideas about blindness' (Beauchamp-Pryor 2012: 178).

However, Shakespeare (2006) argues that the social model became a dogmatic epistemology as well as an outdated ideology, since it is difficult to maintain divisions between impairment and disability upon which it is based (Barnes and Colin 2012: 22). In addition, the social model minimises the importance of the material realities of the lives of people who are disabled, and presumes the existence of a pre-given subject that is waiting to be empowered (Shildrick 2012: 36). Shildrick argues that 'where disabled people have been treated in the past as passive objects of concern, rather than as autonomous subjects, the socio-political approach will be effective in demanding the recognition of independent agency' (Shildrick 2012: 36), and thus sounds the call for a new theory of disability.

3. 2. 3. Critical disability studies and intersectionality

Responses to that call are reflected in the emergence of intersectional and interesting scholarly work within critical disability studies, crip theory and monster studies, for example. These works are informed by the experiences of people who are disabled, instead of being based on assumptions about their lives made by non-disabled researchers, and they usually start with disability but do not end with it (Goodley 2013: 632). Shildrick (2012) argues that they are *critical* in the sense that they invite us to rethink the aspirations, assumptions and conventions of activism, research and theory. In addition, she argues that critical disability studies must be intersectional and in a dialogue with other disciplines dedicated to understanding embodied difference, experiences of marginality and forms of political activism (Goodley 2013: 632) such as queer theory, critical race studies, as well as with more traditional disciplines such as psychoanalysis and phenomenology of the body (Shildrick 2012: 32). However, the

intersectional character is reflected not only in the establishment of dialogue between these approaches, but in investigation of how they converge and diverge as well as in consideration of ‘how each supports or unsettles the constitution of one another’ (Goodley 2013: 632).

In my study of the meaning of embodied difference for fencers who are blind and visually impaired, I consider equally important approaches that focus on the social construction of embodiment as well as those that focus on the body’s materiality. As such, and in search for theoretical grounding that provides intersectional and emancipatory potential, I somewhat align my work with critical disability studies. The next subchapter describes affect theory as a way of turning to bodily materiality, its liveliness and to aspects of experience that come before their articulation, or discursive and social constructions.

3. 3. Affect theory

What emerged as one of the most important aspects of the experiences of both fencers’ who are blind and visually impaired, and my own experiences were our capacities for affectability and affectivity. Initially both the methodological lenses I used to look at these capacities as well as the theoretical background I examined them against were phenomenological, and in my articles I describe them as pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic experiences. These pre-reflective experiences of bodily self-awareness constitute the background of our perceiving, feeling, and acting, yet phenomenological vocabulary needs to be expanded here. These experiences are ‘modes of bodily attunement to, and engagement with, the lived world’ (Fuchs 2013: 613), and Fuchs argues that not only are our environments meaningful only through our affectivity, but that affects are at the heart of our existence (Fuchs 2013: 613).

Therefore, in the third article (‘The Difference Embodied Difference Makes: Echolocation in Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired’) it became apparent that there is more to pre-reflective states than just experiences that are difficult to articulate by means of language. In order to supplement my phenomenological inquiry, I decided to look closer at bodies’ materialities and to turn to studies of affect in both the third, as well as my

fourth article (entitled 'Fencing Blindfolded: Extending Meaning Through Sound, Floor and Blade').

In this subchapter, I describe the relevance of affect theory by exploring some of its sources and different currents within the field. This will help clarify its relevance and compatibility with the other approaches I employ, most importantly, how it complements phenomenology and cognitive semiotics and biosemiotics.

Although affect has been thought and written about for centuries, it is difficult to draw its boundaries or to provide a clear definition of its scope. In their introduction into one of the most accessible books about affect theory, Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth argue that 'there can only ever be infinitely multiple iterations of affect and theories of affect: theories as diverse and singularly delineated as their own highly particular encounters with bodies, affects, worlds' (Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 3). Though engagement with the field may seem conceptually and methodologically challenging, if not disorienting, the past twenty to twenty-five years have been marked with revitalisation of affect within humanities. The so-called turn to affect (Clough and Halley 2007; Clough 2008) is characterised by distancing away from the prevailing paradigm of representation, in other words, from various (post)structuralist and social constructivist approaches to embodied experiences towards the very materiality of not just the body but also the world. Affect theory destabilises the notorious binarities operative in philosophy and other related disciplines, most importantly those between human and nonhuman, stasis and dynamics, subject and object, representation and meaning, as well as numerous others. It does so by endowing inanimate objects with agency (especially the ability to affect), among other things.

3. 3. 1. Influences and approaches

'No one has yet determined what the body can do.' (Spinoza 1963: 87)

Enlightenment philosopher Baruch Spinoza (especially in his approach to materiality) is considered to have inspired much of the contemporary writing on affect. Yet, the myriad ways in which his thought has influenced recent works on affect and materiality differ greatly. Put very briefly, in his attempts to argue that there is nothing outside of reality and nature, Spinoza has introduced the notion of *immanence*. By this, he meant that there is only one materiality and nothing else beyond it: no transcendent God (the idea that got him accused of heresy), no such thing as Plato's ideas, nor Aristotle's forms, nor Hegel's absolute spirit. The claim that there is nothing outside of this reality has, in turn, made it significantly more complex and interesting for philosophical, political and even artistic projects of various kinds, and has especially inspired recent works that have been designated as 'new materialism'. In addition, Spinoza writes about *modes*, or expressions of (singular) substance that are getting into *relations*, or rather, *affects*: conditions as much as capacities of the body to affect and to be affected.

Several centuries later, as I have mentioned before, interest in affect has been revived. That is not to suggest that in the meantime no one has touched upon the topic - Alfred North Whitehead, William James, and Henri Bergson are considered to be part of the affect canon. However, two texts published in 1995 gave affect theory its primary momentum. Eve Sedgwick's and Adam Frank's 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold' (1995), inspired by Silvan Tomkins' (1962) psychobiology of differential affects, and Brian Massumi's 'The Autonomy of Affect' (1995), which derives from Deleuze's (1988) work on Spinozist ethology of bodily capacities (Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 5), have both given rise to two streams of affect theory to come.

In addition to these already canonic authors for affect theory, it is important to acknowledge a few others whose work is of great importance for the field: Felix Guattari, John Dewey, Antonio Damasio, Erin Manning, Sara Ahmed, Vivian Sobchak, Mark Hansen

as well as many others, even though they do not always subscribe their growing body of work to affect theory¹.

The works I have used in my articles are derived in different ways from vitalist approaches to affect, namely from William James' and Gabriel Tarde's work, as much as from Massumi's Deleuzian approach to affectivity. In order to avoid many repetitions, I will not go into the specificities of the works I employ in my two articles. Rather, this subchapter serves as a background that provides a broader context to the works I use as well as arguments for its relevance. To name just a few, I work with Lisa Blackman (2013) and Couze Venn's (Blackman, Venn 2010) Tarde and James (1890) inspired writing, with the Massumi-inspired texts by Clough, as well as with thoughts on affect by Mike Featherstone (2010), Constantina Papoulias and Felicity Callard (2010).

In what follows, I will finally try to explain what affects are.

3. 3. 2. What is affect?

The concept of affect has different connotations depending on philosophical, psychological and physiological underpinnings, as well as the ontological pathways, and is employed to achieve various pragmatic, philosophical and political ends (Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 5). In the same way it is difficult to delineate the boundaries of affect theory, or for my study's respondents and myself to articulate our affects, it is almost impossible to describe what is affect. Below I provide a brief overview of descriptions of affect that are relevant for my work.

Affects are interpreted as visceral intensities and pre-subjective forces, fields of potentiality, and as the possibility of getting in relations. Affects are defined as that which eludes meaning, cognition and form (Leys 2011: 450); as 'a gradient of bodily capacity' (Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 2); a 'nonsignifying, nonconscious "intensity" disconnected

¹ For an excellent description of eight different approaches to affect theory, see Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 6-8.

from the subjective, signifying, functional-meaning axis to which the more familiar categories of emotion belong' (Leys 2011: 441). Affects are about sense as much as they are about sensibilities, and Margaret Wetherell argues that parts of bodies such as muscles, thalamic amygdala pathways in the brain, and heart rate all interact with feelings, thoughts and social relations in different affective practices (Wetherell 2012: 13-14). Because affects are nonsignifying, autonomic processes that happen 'below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning' (Leys 2011: 437), they happen independently from cognition, beliefs, ideology and intentions, and prior to conscious representation and reflection (which is seen as a meaning making process). Affects are intensities that occur between bodies, and this in-between-ness as well as open-endedness are crucial characteristics for the body's continuous process of becoming. Defined in this way, affects and affect theory are of invaluable importance for a project that focuses on the meaning of embodied difference reflected in the body's plasticity, capacity to change, be open and whose *being* is rather understood as *becoming-in-the-world* (Shildrick 2009). In this sense, as Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth write, 'affect marks a body's belonging to a world of encounters or [...] the world's belonging to a body of encounters but in non-belonging' (Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 11).

Furthermore, Brian Massumi (2002) considers affect to be the *possibility* of relations between two bodies, rather than the relation between two bodies. He describes the materiality of the world as virtual and disembodied and not just embodied; meaning that it is a field of potentiality that cannot be emptied in its realisation (Massumi 2002). His idea that each body has this field of potentiality in which, depending on circumstances and context, they realise one but not other potentialities, is of great importance for my work on fencers' ability. In the first two articles, I argue that all bodies differ in their ability, and that depending on the context and circumstances, we are differently capable and incapable of conducting specific tasks. Moreover, Massumi (2002) suggests that different forms, levels and depths of embodiment have different capacities to get in relations. In other words, the body reacts in different ways to different stimulations, depending on the part that is exposed. For example, skin, hair, or eyes affect and are

affected in different ways, and we get in different relations with the surroundings depending on the part that is affected.

Finally, by looking at the realm beyond words, at how worldly affordances are used (both prior to reflection and by actively focusing on them), and at ways in which habituation happens (especially at a nonconscious level), among other things, I seek to understand how we engage with complex phenomena that are equally subjective, phenomenological, social, historical, somatic and neural (Wetherell 2012: 4). Wetherell argues that ‘the main things that an affective practice folds or composes together are bodies and meaning-making’ (Wetherell 2012: 20). Our affectivity and affectability are both intertwined with meaning making, which is why I have made a (seemingly) unusual choice to pair affect theory with semiotics. Hence, I proceed by describing different kinds of semiotics I have employed.

3. 4. Semiotics (plural)

Even though semiotics is often and unfortunately reduced to a discipline that has to do with structuralism, Russian formalism or semiology, there is so much more to it than de Saussurean dyadic signs or modelling sign systems and culture as text. Contemporary semiotics deals with meaning making at different levels, from intracellular to interplanetary. Semioticians work together with molecular and evolutionary biologists, physicists, and artists to produce exciting interdisciplinary work. As such, interesting and relatively recent streams of semiotics such as cognitive semiotics and biosemiotics (and many others too) provide useful resources for the analysis of embodied difference. Danish semiotician Frederik Stjernfelt writes that ‘theories of meaning that disregard the body must themselves be disregarded’ (Stjernfelt 2007: 227), which informs my decision to employ different semiotic theories in my dissertation.

Regardless of the scope and aim of any specific approach to semiotics, they all indeed have embodiment among their keen interests. For example, biosemiotics contributes to the examination of the notion of embodiment by exploring the semiotic character of biological processes, instincts, and (endo)semiosis on the level of cells and organs. In

addition, structuralist semiotics models the body as a text and studies cultural representations of embodiment. In different ways, semiotics of culture, semiotics of performance and multimediality, zoosemiotics, ecosemiotics and landscape semiotics also have embodiment at the centre of their inquiry.

Meaning making processes are at the very core of my study along with the ways in which people make sense of their embodied differences. I specifically look at the ways sensory difference affects epistemic difference and at what kinds of affordances people use to make sense of their surroundings. For this reason, I would argue that my study implicitly complements the growing field of cognitive semiotics. Similarly to affect theory, cognitive semiotics has, since the mid-1990s, been emerging as a field of scientific inquiry on the boundary between the humanities and hard sciences. Most scientists conducting research within the field did not initially use this label for their research projects, as many of them come from various different fields such as semiotics, cognitive science, complexity theory, linguistics, developmental psychology, philosophy, theoretical and evolutionary biology, among others. As a transdisciplinary study of meaning, cognitive semiotics aims at providing insight into the sphere of signification (both human and non-human), its cultural and other expressions, as well as into the crucial role of embodiment in meaning-making processes. Jordan Zlatev, one of the foremost Swedish cognitive semioticians, highlights the importance of distinguishing cognitive semiotics from other semiotic approaches. He claims that cognitive semiotics should not be considered a branch of semiotics, nor a modality (as biosemiotics, semiotics of culture, and sociosemiotics tend to be), nor a school (such are Peircean and Saussurean semiotics), nor is it a particular theory (Zlatev 2012: 2).

Using evidence from neuroscience, primatology and linguistics, cognitive semiotics contributes to the study of embodiment by exploring different sign expressions in gestures, conventionality, iconicity and indexicality. Besides the study of gestures, cognitive semiotic approaches to embodiment are rich in methodology and theoretical grounding. Theoretical endeavours to understand bio-cultural evolution have a great potential to blur the sharp line between biological and cultural evolution and to

emphasise how mind emerged from matter (Deacon 2011). Other theoreticians within the discipline use data obtained by cognitive scientists, theoretical biologists and also authors coming from the field of phenomenology to study direct experiences of perception and action as well as how different embodiments relate to this issue.

Furthermore, in my third and fourth articles I explicitly engage with works on habit by Kalevi Kull, one of the founders and most prolific scholars in biosemiotics. His work focuses on the body's materiality and explores the relevance of habituation for meaning making by drawing from Charles Sanders Peirce's writings. In addition, in an attempt to explain the (un)translatability of pre-conceptual experiences into narratives, in chapter five ('Challenges and limitations of a phenomenological approach to understanding the meaning of embodied difference and means of amending the limitations') I utilise theories and conceptual tools that belong to what is understood as more traditional semiotics, namely Yuri Lotman's (2005) writings on semiosphere. I employ the same model in the first article, but for different purposes. Namely, I utilise it to describe the dynamics between centres and peripheries of semiotic systems. In order to spare readers many repetitions, instead of reiterating the specificities of Lotman's and Kull's works, I will briefly discuss how semiotics as a theory (and methodology) of meaning complements my theoretical grounding based on the theoretical considerations that I presented above.

In addition to providing excellent tools for the analysis of cultural dynamics and different phenomena, semiotics explores how people make sense of their experiences, how they experience phenomena as meaningful, comprehend those meaningful phenomena, and further produce meaning and knowledge through science, communication and art. As I have previously mentioned, cognitive approaches to semiosis (meaning making processes) indeed do offer excellent tools for investigating the lived experiences of embodied difference, the ways in which they intersubjectively translate (or do not), as well as the dynamics between their representations. Unlike Cartesian philosophy, which understands meaning as that which comes from reason, cognitive semiotic theories argue that meaning begins with environment-, context- and species-specific situated

affordances. These serve as the basis for reason, and the term cognition is thus not limited to reasoning. Hence, semiotics complements the materialist and even vitalist approaches implicit in Merleau-Pontian phenomenology (which I outline in chapters four and five) and affect theory respectively. In addition, many cognitive and biosemioticians depart from theories of embodied cognition, and emphasise the relevance of the situatedness of knowledge, of the 'know-how', of subjects' engagement in the world by being/doing in it, over knowledge that is 'know-that'.

The following chapter further presents my theoretical grounding by describing the relevance of phenomenology as theory, epistemology, methodology and method.

4. Phenomenology as epistemology, theory, method and methodology

This chapter tackles the complex role of phenomenology in my studies. In order to clarify its different functions as an epistemology, theory, methodology and method, I will begin by offering an overview of phenomenology itself. I will describe the particularities of the phenomenological approaches relevant to my work, as well as the issues that have surfaced in my utilisation of some phenomenological concepts. Specifically, I will focus on the relevance of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on the phenomenology of the body as well as on the limitations of his thought that I have confronted in my research.

Defining phenomenology is undoubtedly a complex question, and one that is in itself phenomenological (Mortari and Tarozzi 2010). Describing this *movement* eludes oversimplification, making it difficult to provide a final and definitive explanation. What can be said for sure is that phenomenology is considered a cornerstone of Continental philosophy, as well as that its essence can be found in its practice (Mortari and Tarozzi 2010: 9). Hence, perhaps the question 'what is phenomenology?' needs to be rephrased: instead of asking what it is, one should think about how to do it (Mortari and Tarozzi 2010: 9).

Dan Zahavi recently (Zahavi 2018) reminded readers that Paul Ricoeur characterised the history of phenomenology as a history of heresies, or even patricide, meaning that many post-Husserlian phenomenologists have indeed been inspired by the canonical texts, but have not hesitated to rework and adjust their methodologies, aims and scopes. Phenomenology is remarkably divergent in its concerns, applications, and methods, and Spiegelberg, for example, claims that there are as many styles of phenomenology as there are phenomenologists (Spiegelberg 1982). The debates and tensions that concern what is appropriate or solid phenomenological research are simultaneously productive and off-putting for novices when entering the field, potentially threatening the quality of phenomenological inquiry (Finlay 2009). However, this tradition is being developed in various directions and although certain phenomenologists have distanced themselves

from Edmund Husserl's initial ideas, some common themes and questions still permeate many of the writings in the field. Perhaps the most accessible description of phenomenology comes from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, one of the authors central for my work, who understood phenomenology as the stance or posture of the researcher, as style of thinking even, one that 'existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 8).

It is important to mention a few of the prominent phenomenologists in addition to the aforementioned Husserl, such as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, even Jean-Paul Sartre, Max Scheler and Edith Stein. This allows us to recognise what still unites those invested in the field: namely, the rejection of scientism, objectivism and other different forms of reductionism. Many authors begin with the idea that in order to understand the world we live in, we must consider subjects as embodied, socially and culturally embedded, perceiving and feeling agents (Zahavi 2018). The focus of phenomenological research is on the subjective experience of different phenomena, the way they appear in our consciousness, what their essential and general structures are, and how we endow them with meanings. Three out of four articles central to this study focus on how people who engage in the discipline of fencing for the blind and visually impaired understand their embodied differences and endow them with meaning. Because I focus on subjective immersion (or rather, being-in-) the world, the deployment of phenomenology has become a crucially important choice at the very outset of my project.

Furthermore, instead of being committed to pursuing the Truth, phenomenology rather seeks to explore and expound upon the rich and complex descriptions of realities in which meanings assigned by subjects and objects to each other are mingled (Mortari and Tarozzi 2010: 18-19). One of the most appealing and even poetic descriptions of phenomenology has been offered by Frederick J. Wertz, who presents it as 'a low hovering, in-dwelling, meditative philosophy that glories in the concreteness of person world relations and accords lived experience, with all its indeterminacy and ambiguity, primacy over the known' (Wertz 2005: 175).

Phenomena are impossible to observe in their entirety at once, meaning that we see them only from a certain perspective and experience them as public, as they exist for others as well. This brings us to one of the most important properties of phenomenology for my study: it provides an in-depth analysis of the framework 'self-other-world'. This framework is also constitutional and operative in many, if not all, disciplines within the humanities - from psychology and cognitive science to anthropology and beyond. While I use the theoretical (and philosophical) underpinnings of phenomenological works in my articles in an explicit and reflexive way, I would argue that I rather practice phenomenologically based empirical work (Finlay 2009: 8).

Finally, just as phenomena appear to us differently, ideas regarding how to practice phenomenology appear more or less useful depending not just on the phenomenon in focus, but also on the researcher's theoretical grounding, philosophical values, and methodological practice (Finlay 2009: 17). In the following section I briefly describe different modalities that the phenomenological tradition can have and be used as, namely epistemology, theory, method and methodology.

4. 1. Different modalities of phenomenology

Qualitative research is considered (Crotty 1998) to consist of four central components which inform one another: the choice of methods, the way we support this choice, theoretical grounds, and last but far from least important, what we consider to be valid scientific knowledge (Mortari and Tarozzi 2010: 11).

The phenomenological approach can inform any of these four components, or rather steps, depending on the manner in which different authors employ it. In other words, phenomenology is sometimes considered to be: a) an epistemological paradigm (a theory of knowledge integrated in the theoretical perspective); b) a theory (philosophical viewpoint that provides context and informs the methodology); c) a methodology (a process that grounds the choice and use of specific methods); and d) method (precise steps and procedures in the process of gathering and analysing data) (Crotty 1998: 4). Put simply, as a paradigm, phenomenology endows researchers with an ontology (a

conception of reality, by asking what reality is), with epistemology (an idea of the nature of scientific knowledge, by asking how we know the things we know), and with methodology (research procedures) (Mortari and Tarozzi 2010: 15).

Within different aspects of this study, phenomenology is used in different ways. As an epistemological paradigm, I use phenomenology as an alternative to positivist science, meaning that I subscribe to the phenomenological underpinnings that are concerned with how things *appear* and are experienced subjectively. As a style of thinking and a theory, phenomenology informs and encompasses much of the methodologies in my studies, specifically works deriving from the Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of the body.

It is most prominently used as a method in the second article, 'Rehab/ituation from a Phenomenological Perspective: the Case of Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired'. Chapter five ('Challenges and limitations of a phenomenological approach to understanding the meaning of embodied difference and means of amending the limitations') describes the specificities of the employed phenomenological method (interpretative phenomenological analysis or IPA), and in order to spare the reader redundancy, I will not repeat it here. However, it is worth mentioning that many phenomenological methods for data analysis are characterised by the intertwining steps such as description of phenomena, phenomenological reduction, and the search for essences and intentionality (Giorgi 1997). Furthermore, with the exception of the first article, I rely on phenomenology as a 'philosophy of research, as a way of thinking about knowledge [...] and as a way to look at the world and make sense of it' (Mortari and Tarozzi 2010: 13).

Having outlined the different modalities of phenomenology, I would like to more thoroughly describe the two aspects of this tradition, which permeate all four of the aforementioned *procedures* and are crucial for my work. I proceed by providing insight into the relevance of description and interpretation for phenomenological studies, their relationship as well as their relevance for my study. As I mentioned above, the phenomenological method is described in more detail in the fifth chapter, but a few

things need to be mentioned here too. Description and interpretation will therefore be presented here, as the most important aspects of phenomenology in general as well as of my study.

4. 2. Description and interpretation

Following Merleau-Ponty's (1962) proposal that in order to understand a phenomenon we must engage in description as a principal cognitive act, my second article ('Rehab/ituation from a Phenomenological Perspective: the Case of Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired') presents an extended description of the lived experiences of fencers who are blind and visually impaired. This is the most phenomenological of all four articles in more than one sense: it theoretically derives from a Merleau-Pontian view on embodied subjects as immersed in the world (in Heideggerian terms, subjects who are being-in-the-world) and follows methodological procedures prescribed by a chosen phenomenological method (IPA). I have attempted as much as possible to suspend my preconceptions in order to clarify and capture fencers' lived experiences in their givenness. Husserl (1983) writes about epoché, an epistemological device used by a researcher for bracketing or suspending beliefs and attitudes while describing a phenomenon. Additionally, it is used for fulfilling a phenomenological way of knowing, necessary for a faithful description of a phenomenon (Mortari and Tarozzi 2010: 27). In epistemological terms, in addition to description, I have attempted to understand how the world comes to acquire its character of being valid and true. Phenomena are, as I have mentioned above, shared with others, and not 'subjective projections of human perception that cannot be shared' (Mortari and Tarozzi 2010: 19). This means that, with regards to knowledge, the endeavour of describing is different from skepticism and relativism.

Undoubtedly, the description of lived experiences is crucial for any phenomenological endeavour. However, going further, researchers engage in reflexive analyses of their descriptions. In addition to descriptive phenomenology, some scholars are dedicated to interpretive ventures. This stream emerged from hermeneutics, most prominently

present in works of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur. Put briefly, their idea is that our lived experiences are embedded in social relationships and language, and are situated in historical milieu.

Starting from my second, more descriptive phenomenological study, the following two articles rely on these descriptions as a departing point in order to interpret the data obtained. Hence, description and interpretation are employed in a continuum and aid the overall understanding of the meaning of embodied difference in fencing for the blind and visually impaired.

As I have mentioned before, in addition to the usefulness of its application as epistemology, method, and methodology, phenomenology has enriched my work by providing important theoretical grounds, especially when it comes to understanding embodiment. The following section describes Merleau-Ponty's approach to the phenomenology of the body and its relevance for my work.

4. 3. Phenomenology of the body

4. 3. 1. Embodied mind

In the four articles central to my study I have interchangeably used terms such as embodied mind and embrained body to refer to the inextricably intertwined relation between mind and body. Whereas the former has been used in phenomenological discourse for a long time, the latter has become part of the philosophical vocabulary relatively recently. In my work they are used almost synonymously: the reference to embrained body comes from Victoria Pitts-Taylor's (2016) writings, while the notion of embodied mind comes from phenomenology. Here, I would like to explain what makes the ideas about embodied mind (and embrained body) crucial for the ways in which embodiment is thought throughout my work. This endeavour will also clarify the specific phenomenological approach I use to gain understanding of embodiment (and embodied difference), and especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty's relevance for my study.

In a number of his books, but most prominently in his 'Phenomenology of Perception' (1962), Merleau-Ponty writes about our perception and immersion in the world as necessarily embodied, meaning that we perceive and act by using our bodies. Due to our fleshly corporeality, we are sensing as much as we are sensible. We are intercorporeal beings (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 143) that are endowed with the reversibility of the tangible (Oliver 2008: 134), meaning that we can touch and be touched, affect and be affected. This aspect makes a Merleau-Pontian understanding of embodiment crucial for the study of the meaning of the embodied difference of people engaged in fencing for the blind and visually impaired. Though it is most explicit in the second article, the third and fourth articles are also permeated with both conceptualisations and examples of how embodied being-in-the-world, openness, and vulnerability endow subjects with agency and expand the reach of their existence.

4. 3. 2. Embodied meaning making

However obvious it may sound today, due to the centuries-old burden of Cartesian mind (and/or soul) body dualism, it is important to emphasise their intertwined nature. We are simultaneously objects and embodied subjects endowed with agency, and our lived experiences emerge from the interaction between the body and the environment. The idea that the mind is embodied for Merleau-Ponty implies that 'mental life is a function of the kinetic and sensory relation between the fleshly body and its setting' (Scully 2008: 85). In other words, the mind itself is considered an activity of the body, which is always involved in spatial, temporal and interpersonal relations.

Furthermore, the embodied mind is engaged in pre-conceptual, pre-linguistic knowing, which comes prior to reflection and representation. In these terms, thinking may be seen as a product of the aforementioned relations. Additionally, for Merleau-Ponty the body is the foundation for abstract thinking and even imagination. In other words, our thoughts are not produced by an independent mind, but through our physical engagement in everyday activities and habits.

4. 3. 3. Embodied senses

Fencers who are blind and visually impaired make sense of the world by means of their entire bodies, just like everyone else. They orient themselves on the fencing strip by feeling the guiding thread on the floor with their feet, listen to the sounds of the weapons crossing and echolocate surrounding objects. It is not true that we perceive the world only through our eyes. Merleau-Ponty is critical of this kind of separation of the senses. He asserts that not only do senses consist of manifold sensations that affect each other, but all are correlated in our bodies (Merleau-Ponty 1968). Sensations involve the sensible and the sentient, folding 'the senses back onto themselves in a way that produces new levels of sensation and consciousness. The senses translate each other and work together to form perception' (Oliver 2008: 136). In other words, despite the primacy of the visual in the world we live in, perception is never limited to our eyes, but is a result of sensing through the entire body. Merleau-Ponty claims that the world is visible because it is tactile, and describes this visibility by means of tactile metaphors - of thickness, grains, waves, currents and tissues (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 134). He further insists on the notion of perceptual systems in place of senses and sense organs, claiming that these systems are the result of interactions between the parts of and whole body, and not of singular organs such as eyes (Oliver 2008: 136).

4. 3. 4. Agency

Philosophical as it is, Merleau-Ponty's work can sometimes be prosaic and empowering for readers, even those outside of the field of philosophy. For him, being-in-the-world is understood in terms of intentional directedness, and of striving towards. Subjects experience their everyday lives in terms of their orientation towards specific practices and projects, based on their embodied capacities and habituality. We are not passively immersed in the world and subjected to the external forces, but are endowed with what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the 'I can': 'the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 167). We have agency that provides us with the means to achieve a grip on the world. Scully (2008:

86) interprets this process as situated between sensory input and motor responses, meaning that our milieu directs our bodily orientations, movements and skills. My respondents' accounts are stories of their engagement in different projects and practices and stories of commitment to getting a grip on their experiences. These stories are about ability and about fencers who have agency in their lives.

Thus, while I have distinguished between impairments and disabilities in my articles, I have tried to argue that not only are they different, but that they are sometimes not perceived or lived as disabilities at all. Specifically, throughout my writing I have exemplified and argued that when the fencers use worldly affordances and embodied endowments in a way that is spontaneous for them and not imposed by the rules of the sighted world, the reach of their existence, their involvement in projects and their 'I can' are undisturbed. In some of the accounts, blind and visually impaired fencers' perception of their own agency and ability sometimes eluded discourses related to disability to such a degree that at various stages over the course of the project I considered framing the entire study differently. However, I am aware of the numerous and serious consequences of the choice not to bring the study of the meaning of embodied difference into dialogue with disability studies.

In the following section I will discuss another aspect of this issue related to Merleau-Ponty's work and the implicit assumptions about able-bodiedness. Namely, I will stress how Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body has given rise to tensions and limitations in my work. I address this by turning to the critique of his work from critical feminist and disability studies.

4. 4. Limitations posed by Merleau-Ponty's work

The application of Merleau-Ponty's (1962) formulation of 'I can', as well as his problematisation of 'having a grip on the world', gave rise to certain limitations in my work. Merleau-Ponty has been widely criticised for primarily exploring the meaning of normative embodiment. His accounts disregard the question of whether it is actually

possible to establish a 'proper' grip on the world (Scully 2008), as well as what this grip actually is and what it implies for various embodied subjects.

In his writings, Merleau-Ponty analyses (and even valorises, as some would argue) a kind of normative subjectivity, and the implicit exclusivity of this approach has been the focal point of many critiques of his work (Grosz 1994; Young 1990, 1998; Martiny 2015). In addition, the author's attempt to lay the foundation for a universal phenomenological ontology, as well as the lack of acknowledgement of embodied difference itself, have been subjected to thorough critique (Scully 2008). Though Merleau-Ponty does analyse instances of phantom limb experiences (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 76), as well as the case of veteran Schneider (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 108), who suffered from different mental and physical impairments as the result of brain damage, these examples primarily serve to explore *non-pathological* embodiment.

This focus on the formulation of 'non-pathological' embodiment, and the almost exclusive treatment of a certain kind of *normative* ('able-bodied', white, middle class, male) embodied subject has posed significant methodological limitations to my study, which focuses on the meaning of embodied *difference*. Specifically, Merleau-Ponty's approach does not account for the inhibited intentionality (Young 1990: 36) characteristic of 'non-normative' embodied subjectivity. In her critique of Merleau-Ponty's work, Iris Marion Young describes such intentionality in terms of female existence, which I would further expand to include varieties of existence that imply other forms of embodied difference. Young assumes that women underuse their embodied capacities in terms of the strength, potentiality, skills and coordination available to them (Young 1998: 36). In light of my fieldwork data, especially deriving from the second article ('Rehab/ituation from a Phenomenological Perspective: the Case of Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired'), I suggest that this is due to social norms, expectations, and constructs. Inhibited intentionality simultaneously includes the subjects' 'I can' as well as the imposed 'I cannot'. However, people who are congenitally blind or live with visual impairments do not necessarily experience these impairments as disabilities. The respondents' field of bodily action is structured around their actual body, and their field

of action is developed according to their own bodily dis/abilities (Martiny 2015: 561). Merleau-Ponty's 'I can' rather becomes a negotiation between 'I can', 'I cannot' and 'I no longer can', for the lived body is situated in a world filled with 'opacities and resistances correlative to its own limits and frustrations' (Young 1998: 37).

In addition to inhibited intentionality, my fieldwork data suggests that embodied difference often includes different spatiality as well as temporality. For example, for some of the respondents, the completion of certain tasks takes more or less time, depending on how their 'I can(not)' is felt and expressed. Similarly, the ways in which they inhabit and use the surrounding space, or more specifically, how they echolocate or move around differ depending on a number of factors, such as noise, crowdedness and the like.

Numerous other feminist works direct criticism towards phenomenology's aim to locate and describe the 'essential' structures of experience, as well as other 'essential quests for universal experience, neglectful of the specificities of biological sex and of gender and other forms of social-structural situatedness' (Allen-Collinson 2011: 299). In order to transcend the limitations posed by these aspects of traditional phenomenology to my work, I have employed its feminist critique as an additional lens and counterweight.

Finally, I consider phenomenology, its four modalities, and its criticism to be an invaluable addition to the theoretical works I utilise and which I have described in the previous chapter. In the following chapter I pick up on some of the aforementioned discussions about phenomenology, and specifically focus on phenomenological method. The fifth chapter also describes study focus and design, as well as a number of other related issues.

5. Challenges and limitations of a phenomenological approach to understanding the meaning of embodied difference and means of amending the limitations

Given the corporeal nature of my research topic, I methodologically situate the study within the phenomenological framework, broadly speaking. In pursuit of understanding the meaning of embodied difference in the accounts of lived experiences of fencers who are blind and visually impaired, I have conducted four separate studies and employed suitable and compatible standalone and mixed methods.

The first study ('The Construction of Limitations: Cultural Marginalization of Altered Embodiment') utilises a semiotic model of semiosphere to investigate how marginalisation of specific embodiments happens, as well as how they become central to signification systems such as culture.

The second study ('Rehab/ituation from a Phenomenological Perspective: the Case of Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired') uses as its object narrative accounts of lived experiences of agency and ability of study participants, and hence draws on phenomenological methods. The study addresses questions such as how fencers who are blind experience their own embodiment and focuses on narratives of risk taking, creativity, active handling, winning and failure.

The third study ('The Difference Embodied Difference Makes: Echolocation in Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired') builds on the second, and explores more affective, embodied aspects of fencers' experiences. These tend to be things subjects have difficulty putting into words, and which resist articulation through language, as well as aspects of experience that are 'beyond words'. In an attempt to understand the meaning of embodied difference, the third study focuses on the ways in which fencers' bodily difference affects perceptual variance, how meaning-making takes place, as well as how people (learn to) make sense of their surroundings using other than visual affordances.

While integrating phenomenological approaches in the second and third studies I encountered several obstacles. Three of these had significant implications: first, the limitations of Merleau-Ponty's work, especially his writings about the lived body; second, the essential (un)translatibility of pre-conceptual experiences into narratives; and third, the problem of hegemony and the limited nature of visual methodologies and narrative accounts.

As an attempt to address some of these issues, the fourth study ('Fencing Blindfolded: Extending Meaning Through Sound, Floor and Blade') addresses sensory dimensions of embodiment, and thus employs sensory methodologies, as proposed by Lisahunter and Elke Emerald (2016), with a specific focus on an inquiry beyond ocular (Daza and Gershon 2015). In addition, the fourth article employs autoethnography (Adams, Ellis and Jones 2017; Anderson and Austin 2012; Pavlidis 2013; Schaeperkoetter 2017) as part of a productive mixed-method study and as a means of widening my methodological and epistemological framework. In other words, I investigate my own embodied experiences of fencing blindfolded in an attempt to overcome some of the aforementioned issues.

In this chapter, I initially outline the methods I employed by describing the study focus and design, how I reached conceptual density and identify the potential applicability and transfer value of my study.

Whereas I address the limitations posed by Merleau-Ponty's work in the fourth chapter, ('Phenomenology as epistemology, theory, method and methodology'), I problematise the aforementioned (un)translatibility of pre-conceptual experiences into narratives from a semiotic perspective in this one. Finally, I address the hegemony of visual methodologies and narrative accounts and propose autoethnography as potentially useful means to address this hegemony.

5. 1. Method

5. 1. 1. Study focus and sample

This study draws on data generated over the course of two years. Following university and Norwegian national ethical approval by the NSD (Norsk Samfunnsvitenskapelig Datatjeneste/Norwegian Centre for Research Data), I contacted the Swedish and Norwegian Fencing Federations as well as my own personal contacts and former colleagues and friends from the fencing community in order to facilitate access to local fencing clubs.

As I mentioned before, the flawed first article already points towards the need for an empirical study. I conducted twenty-five interviews with six female and eight male fencers. Interviewees were between sixteen and sixty-five years old at the time of the interviews and of different fencing proficiency, including both first-time fencers and Olympic medalists. Out of the twenty-five conducted interviews, thirteen were with the four participants in focus, meeting three times with three of them and four times with the fourth person. The respondents included Swedish, Polish, Norwegian, Chinese and Uruguayan nationals, living in large urban areas of Norway and Sweden and fencing in two clubs. I collected narrative accounts from such a diverse range of fencers in order to learn how they use their embodied endowments and worldly affordances, but decided to limit the study to the two Nordic countries due to linguistic convenience and in consideration of cultural specificities. As part of the analytic process, I decided to focus on the lived experiences of four participants, which is less than I initially anticipated. However, the reduced number of interviewees in focus made it possible to give each of the respondents sufficient attention, as well as to conduct more in-depth analysis with the four fencers who became central to the later stage of this research. Having access to a limited number of fencers in combination with in-depth interviews and the use of other approaches (I will describe this in more detail later in text) to supply my understanding made this sufficient.

The respondents each have different degrees of sightedness and only one of the clubs has a separate group of people engaged in the emerging discipline of fencing for the blind and visually impaired. The causes of impairments and blindness in the participants in focus are different for each respondent, including congenital issues, glaucoma, various traumas, and sometimes due to a couple of similar causes. Clubs for fencing for the blind and visually impaired are relatively new, meaning that there are still not many fencers, in addition to many of the interviewees having only participated in the sub-discipline one or two times. Considering the scope of the study and its specific focus on the meaning of embodied difference, the decision to focus my analysis on the lived experiences of four interviewees arose from the observation that they illustrate how the bodies of fencers who are blind and visually impaired are 'site(s) of difference as much as commonality, specificities, peculiarities and inequalities are part of lived, practical, felt embodiment' (Pitts-Taylor 2016: 43).

The accounts of lived experiences of sighted fencers did not address these issues to the required degree, but focused on aspects of their experiences that are beyond the scope of this study. Despite their experiences being beyond the scope of this study, they are relevant and have served for the purposes of comparison and contrast. I initially planned to include a more varied selection of participants and especially fencers whose body schemas differ in diverse ways for comparative purposes, including fencers who use wheelchairs and those with prosthetic limbs. Due to rigid restrictions within fencing rules and categories, as well as the lack of wheelchair fencing teams in Nordic countries, the study had to be limited so as to exclude the participants of this particular Paralympic discipline.

5. 1. 2. Study design

In order to preserve the participants' anonymity, their names have been changed and certain descriptive information has been excluded from their responses. At the time of these interviews, some of the interviewees were minors, and therefore their parents' consent was obtained in addition to their own (Phelan and Kinsella 2013). Empirical data

for this study is documented in the form of digital audio recordings, transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. Interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions regarding participants' everyday and fencing lives, thus leaving space for the participants to bring up topics important to them. The interviews were about an hour long, and I met with some fencers on several occasions. Whereas the second study is mainly derived from the participants' narrative accounts, the third study was enriched by my participant observation of fencers during the trainings, duels and the interviews. Continuation of the dialogues with the interviewees as a methodological step provided me with access to relevant observational and ethnographic data, which deepened my insight. This type of accidental ethnographic data (Fujii 2015) – derived from attentive observation of unplanned moments occurring outside of structured engagement methods such as interviews – provided me with a broader overview of the research context. Being a fencer myself, I have employed my own knowledge of fencing as a resource for approaching the accounts phenomenologically and in an effort to gain better understanding of what these fencers were engaging in and how. I decided to do this in an attempt to mitigate the limitations posed by having only narrative accounts as insight into other people's experience. In addition, autoethnography has given me insight into the 'multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 793). In pursuit of a thick description of these experiences, I decided to include my own embodiment 'as the most grounded research instrument' (Zebracki 2016: 114). Moreover, autoethnography has helped me to acknowledge my own subjectivity and influence on this research. I will provide a more in-depth account of this matter later in this chapter.

5. 1. 3. Conceptual density and data saturation

The sample size is also based on conceptual density and depth, concepts proposed by Nelson (2017), as more suitable replacement for data saturation (Glasser and Strauss 1967; Nelson 2017), which has otherwise proven to be a useful tool for a study of this kind despite its critique (Bowen 2008; Kerr et al. 2010; O'Reilly and Parker 2012). Conceptual density and data saturation are reflected in the depth of nuanced, multi-

layered and detailed data, instead of in the numbers (Burmeister and Aitken 2012). In addition, density and saturation have been determined by the study objectives, the time allotted to each case (Patton 1990), as well as through definition and explanation of relationships 'between categories as well as the range of variation within and between categories' (Charmaz 2014: 213). Range in this context is understood in relation to meaning, rather than in frequency of occurrences (Morse 2015: 587). After the first two rounds of interviews with study participants I felt that depth as well as complexity were lacking in spite of the extensive transcripts and a wide variety of themes. Simultaneously, it became apparent to me that just conducting interviews with additional respondents would not fill the gaps that I had noticed. However, additional observation, supplementary interviews and conversations, and review of the earlier transcripts ultimately provided me with sufficient data to illustrate the concepts relevant for this study, which in turn are part of a wide and complex network of themes (Nelson 2017: 559). Both saturation and density of data became evident when, instead of new themes and codings (Guest et al. 2006), similar instances kept emerging and adding little novelty to the conceptualisation (Nelson 2017: 555). Considering the scope of the study and the nature of the topic, the small sample size has provided me with sufficiently rich and thick (Dibley 2011) qualitative data that is required to explore the issue.

5. 1. 4. Transfer value and applicability

Considering that the focus on four respondents' lived experiences is traditionally understood as small even in qualitative research, I have sought to determine whether my findings make sense in a general way. More importantly, I hoped to offer findings that are of primarily societal rather than statistical value (Small 2009; Tracy 2010). This means that I looked for the applicability of the study's main themes and concepts (Corbin and Strauss 2008) to other similar research within my field of study, and in other related fields as well. In this sense, I aimed to have an unbiased sample representative and illustrative of not just the experiences of fencers who are blind and visually impaired, but of, for example people living with other kinds of embodied differences. Thus, I consider that not only may the findings to some degree be generalised beyond the research setting in

question, but this kind of study also has the potential to provide a platform on which ‘moderatum generalisation’ may be built (Payne and Williams 2005). In addition, I have avoided to stay inward facing (Nelson 2017: 566) in my research, meaning that I tried to abstain from using specialised language (which has not always been easy or sometimes even possible because of the theories and concepts that are used in the fields relevant to my study), and from offering detailed and narrow descriptions of findings that are lacking transfer value. Moreover, Nelson (2017) proposes that studies that aim for applicability should also aim to conceptualise their findings so as to ‘raise[s] the level of analysis above technical description to more general themes’ (Nelson 2017: 566), as well as to formulate them in a way that is understandable to people who have familiarity with the social context and with contexts that are broadly similar to the one in focus. The transferability and applicability of this research has the potential to aid the understanding of those outside of the immediate field of research employed (Nelson 2017: 566). In other words, despite its narrow focus on the meaning of embodied difference in the context of fencing for the blind and visually impaired, this work addresses different audiences within academia (autoethnographers, disability and crip scholars, for example), blind and disability sports communities, as well as communities of people who live with embodied differences of various kinds.

5. 2. Phenomenology as a method

Despite the common view of phenomenology as a theoretical perspective, this philosophical tradition has also been employed as an epistemology, method and methodology (Mortari and Tarozzi 2010). Phenomenological approaches and manners of utilisation are as numerous and often very different, as are epistemological and ontological positions; however they all depart from the same canonical texts.

Because of this, the aspects of phenomenology that are more closely related to the theoretical realm have been discussed in the chapter four (‘Phenomenology as epistemology, theory, method and methodology’). In order to spare the reader too many

repetitions, this section will only focus on method and methodologically relevant aspects of phenomenology and thus remains quite brief.

As a methodological framework, phenomenology perhaps owes its popularity to the fact that it may also serve as a philosophy of science aimed at 'situating (various) practices within the shared human life-world' (Abrams 2014: 432). Though the term is often used as a synonym for the word 'experience' (Katz and Csodas 2003), an emergent body of significant literature utilises philosophical phenomenology to study notions such as space, time, and especially embodiment (Crossley 2004; Spencer 2009). In pursuit of understanding the meaning of embodied difference and gaining insight into the different modalities of perception and relations subjects may have with the world (Scully 2008: 94), a sort of return to the varieties of experiences of embodied difference is required. A number of phenomenological concepts and related methods are useful for analysis, hence my choice of this tradition. The phenomenological method, understood as 'an attitude of wonderment, an attempt to see the world through fresh, 'naive' eyes' (Allen-Collinson 2011: 305), derives from Husserl's idealist transcendental tradition and his ideas regarding the bracketing (*epoché*) of preconceived ideas, habits, thoughts and theoretical baggage. In addition, it derives from hermeneutic and existentialist traditions, from Heidegger's, Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's thought, to name just a few sources. Husserl's invitation to a reflexive move from objects in the world inwards, to the manner in which objects are perceived and experienced, is a point of departure for the qualitative analysis of experiences of embodied difference. Another aspect worth mentioning is the emphasis on the encounter between us and the world. This refers to the correlational character of phenomenological analysis, namely that between mind and world, as well as between self, other and the world.

A brief description of phenomenological methods within the limits of this chapter would not do justice to all of its influences, the canonical texts or their contemporary problematisation. I will only describe specific aspects that I have productively included in my work.

5. 2. 1. Interpretative phenomenological analysis

I have employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith 1996; Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009; Smith and Osborne 2015; Oxley 2016) as a departing method in my second qualitative study, in order to analyse the meaning of themes such as ability and agency in the narratives of embodied experiences of fencers who are blind and visually impaired. This method is particularly useful in the analysis of the significance of crucial events in the life of a subject, as well as of the way in which the person makes sense of these occurrences. IPA observes subjects as unique individuals and 'meaning makers' (Oxley 2016: 55) and provides each participant with sufficient attention while studying how subjects examine and comprehend their experiences.

The application of this method initially involves the description of a phenomenon through an attempt to suspend prior attitudes, knowledges and assumptions as much as possible. In addition to getting fully immersed in the data (Oxley 2016: 60) by re-reading the transcription of the interviews, the process departs from the creation of preliminary comments as well as inductive summarising of recurring topics. I conducted thematic analysis by initially assigning open codes to parts of the transcribed text, which I further developed and modified during the process. Once I revisited the codes and detected patterns, I found that some of them were related to each other and fit into specific themes.

In my next step, I reorganised themes into broader categories that related the data more closely to my research questions. Some of the codes related to a single theme, while the others could clearly be associated with more than one. I have tried to interpret the descriptions of what was said in the interviews by focusing on the semantic aspects of the content, as well as on the latent level (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the data - on the underlying assumptions, conceptualisations, ideas and ideologies (Maguire and Delahunt 2017) implicit in what has been said.

Exploration of these latent meanings in the respondents' accounts was conducted through interpretation of the whole by looking at its parts and vice versa, as well as by employment of within- and across-case analyses. This process is described in more detail

in the second article, 'Rehab/ituation from a Phenomenological Perspective: the Case of Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired'.

In addition to the thick description and thematic analysis of phenomena previously noted, IPA derives from hermeneutics and is devoted to interpretative endeavours. Not only is it necessary to study how embodied subjects make sense of their experiences, but also the way these meanings appear in and through the interpretation of these narratives. Jonathan Smith (1996) proposes IPA as a suitable method for in-depth analyses of small, relatively homogenous samples and particular cases that require special attention to be paid to the context in which meanings arise. The method requires the capacity to participate in another person's ideas and feelings as well as, whenever possible, participate in the observed practices. IPA is, however, limited, as it is mainly concerned with aspects of meaning that are usually verbally expressed and interpreted from the narrative accounts. Because I became aware of the need for more thorough understanding of lived experiences than that based solely on the narrative accounts in my second study, the requirement to enrich this method became apparent.

In order to explore the embodied aspects of the experiences in depth, in my study IPA has relied on phenomenology by deriving from Husserl's ideas on consciousness, intentionality and perception, Heidegger's formulation of being-in-the-world, Sartre's treatment of otherness, and most importantly, Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on embodiment as well as his notion of 'I can'. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body is a relevant aspect of the method in terms of description, thematising and interpretation of experiences. It is useful for exploration of the structure and the dynamics of embodied difference 'as it is experienced by a lived body' (Sobchak 2010: 52). Departing from the idea that immersion, or rather, being-in-the-world is necessarily embodied, Merleau-Ponty's seminal work suggests that in addition to our relationship with the world being embodied, so is our perception. Furthermore, the author has also emphasised the situated and intentional quality of our knowledge about the surrounding world.

In my study, I make particular use of Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'I can', which refers to the manner in which people can experience their 'grip' on the tasks and practices they

are engaged in, as well as their immersion in the world, based on habituality and their capacities. The author describes this concept as a sort of harmony between what is given between intention and performance and what we aim at (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 167).

As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, some aspects of Merleau-Ponty's work have given rise to methodological obstacles for my study. I provide an in-depth description of these tensions in chapter four ('Phenomenology as epistemology, theory, method and methodology'), and proceed here to describe the second limitation I have encountered, namely the issue of the (un)translatability of the pre-conceptual experiences into narratives.

5. 3. (Un)translatability of the pre-conceptual into narrative

In an autobiographical account of her own experience of living with a phantom limb, Vivien Sobchak (2010) argues that the phenomenology of the body is a useful method for the description, interpretation and thematising of human experience, which is always-already meaningful, even prior to reflection (Sobchak 2010: 52). This method is relevant in my study as well, especially in exploration of the structure and the dynamics of embodied difference experienced by a lived body. However, no matter how thorough interviews with the respondents may be, insight into the meaning of embodied difference is always in a certain sense incomplete, as we are inescapably confronted with issues of articulation and intersubjective translation.

Returning to the experiential character of the IPA, Laura Oxley recognises the two filters between the researcher and the direct experience: the participant's expression of their perception of the experience, as well as the researcher's interpretation of participant's words (Oxley 2016: 33). The translation of pre-conceptual experiences into narrative through these two filters has long been present and problematic in scholarship associated with this philosophical tradition. It is also one that would take much greater effort and lengthy writing than the form of this chapter allows me. It is, however, important to address this issue explicitly, as discussion may help resolve certain hesitations.

In addition to making narrative accounts my primary source of insight into the lived experiences of embodied difference, I have attempted to overcome these limitations by employing my own personal knowledge of fencing, by attentively observing the fencers in and outside of the fencing hall, as well as by fencing blindfolded with them. Familiarity with the rules, equipment (especially with holding and controlling the weapon), and sensations of being hit by the opponent have all aided my understanding. This familiarity has allowed me to be attentive to the nuanced of experiences of fencing blindfolded - both while observing others and while fencing myself. It has allowed me to notice and recognise, for example, the relative confidence of fencers' grip on their weapon, subtleties of their techniques, movements that are spontaneous to them as well as those that come with additional conscious effort.

As I have noted, the employment of such non-canonical methods as autoethnography has not only allowed me to deepen my insight, but also to rethink the boundaries of what is considered 'meaningful and useful research' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011: 2). Engaging with the research participants in this way has – I hope – saved me from the 'sterile research impulses of authoritatively entering a culture and exploiting cultural members' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011: 2), and has allowed me to employ my affective experience as 'situated within my intersecting roles of researcher, observer, participant and insider' (Zebracki 2016: 114). Still, there were aspects of research participants' experiences that none of this could capture. Subjective lived experiences are bound up in the world and entangled with both language and culture, meaning that each narrative of self-experience is always-already a construct.

Many phenomenologists consider the pre-conceptual and affective aspects of experiences already meaningful, even prior to articulation. Articulation, or rather translation as coding of the pre-conceptual within linguistic frames, an inherently semiotic issue, is also a process of negotiation. Therefore, in the following section I turn to semiotics and employ the concept of semiosphere in order to address the issue of translation of experiences - into languages as well as into different lifeworlds. The following considerations are relevant as they not only aid the understanding of the

processes of articulation and translation of meaning, but also as they problematise my position as both participant and observer.

5. 3. 1. (Un)translatability of lived experiences from a semiotics perspective

In the context of this study, translation is not limited to the intralinguistic rewording or interlinguistic 'translation proper' (Jakobson 1959: 233) of words by means of another language. It is also a kind of transmutation (Jakobson 1959: 233), or rather intersemiotic transformation of unstructured, prelinguistic experiences by means of different signification systems. This process requires us to choose what aspects of the experience we will include or foreground, and what we intend to leave out from the construction, depending not just on how we want to be perceived by the other person, but also on how we are (in)capable of translating the experience. Semioticians (Lotman 2005; Monticelli 2012) suggest that experiences are also meaningful despite belonging to extrasemiotic space - unfamiliar signification systems, whether another language, culture, or another person's affects, feelings and intensities that make up the experience of their own embodied difference.

Experiences are meaningful because the semiotic universe is considered to be a totality of individual signification systems, of other semiotic spaces that are related to each other, regardless of the modality of their coding - be it pictorial or natural languages or, in this case for example, discrete instances of affective experiences. The semiotic universe has been modelled and described as a semiosphere (Lotman 2005): semiotic space characterised by its abstract character and which cannot be visualised by means of the concrete imagination (Lotman 2005: 208). Neither can the boundaries of various semiotic spaces (for example, those between pre-conceptual experiences and narrative accounts) be easily visualised. Despite their elusiveness to imagination, 'these sums of bilingual translatable 'filters'' (Lotman 2005: 209) are crucial for translation. Meaning is translated (or semioticised) exactly through boundaries, as they 'represent[s] the division of self from other, the filtration of external communications and the translation thereof into its own language, as well as the transformation of external non-communication into

communications' (Lotman 2005: 210). Boundaries have a function similar to our sensory receptors, which convey external stimulation into the language of the nervous system and thus adapt external influences into a given semiotic sphere (Lotman 2005: 209). Boundaries are spaces of accelerated semiotic processes, of intense exchange and proliferations of meaning. Translation from one semiotic system to another includes moments of unpredictability, re-negotiations, misunderstandings and miscommunication. It is exactly in this intersemiotic interstice where both the impossibility of total translation and the generation of meaning are located. That untranslatability exists, and is ultimately (to a degree) insurmountable, is the semiotic fact that creates the conditions for meaning to exist. Greater degrees of untranslatability give rise to a surplus of meaning, and as such demand a negotiated understanding, rather than a forestalling of possibility.

My position of both participant and observer (which I will reflect on in more detail later) is one of involvement in several intersecting worlds or semiotic spaces. This position has provided me with the tools needed to translate and interpret my own and others' experiences of participation in fencing for the blind and visually impaired (as well as of meaning making in light of embodied difference) in a way that is different from those of other scholars, people living with visual impairments or blindness, or fencers. By belonging to two or more involved worlds, in Lotman's words, 'by virtue of particular talent (magicians) or type of employment (blacksmith, miller, executioner)' (Lotman 2005: 211), I occupy the threshold position of an interpreter. My position is situated in the area of cultural multilingualism, areas otherwise 'forming a kind of creolisation of semiotic structures' (Lotman 2005: 211) and securing contacts between different worlds. Despite the shortcomings of narrative accounts and my not being a permanent member of the community of fencers in question, my involvement as an autoethnographer has the potential to enrich understandings of the complex phenomenon of meaning making with sensory or embodied difference.

Finally, in his brilliant book 'Corpus', Jean-Luc Nancy (2008) engages this issue by posing (with a great sense of urgency) a question regarding the possibility of writing the body

itself, instead of writing *about* the bodies or about bodihood. Nancy wonders if we can write about bodies – not the signs or images of bodies, but actual bodies – instead of making them signify or signifying them (Nancy 2008: 9). The author considers the impossibility of such writing as an unavoidable yet inadequate response. My need to engage with bodies in light and in spite of untranslatability and potential misunderstanding, and write (about) them nonetheless, is inspired by Nancy's proposal that this *touching* (upon) the body happens in writing after all - 'along the border, at the limit, the tip, the furthest edge of writing where nothing but that happens' (Nancy 2008: 11). My inability to obtain omniscient insight into the lived experiences of fencers who are blind and visually impaired has given rise to various issues, challenges, and difficulties for my work. However, despite this limitation of phenomenological insight and especially of narrative methodologies, this work has provided me with significant insight, and has proven to be a valid vehicle on a journey towards the understanding of the meaning of embodied difference.

5. 4. Hegemony of the visual and narratives, and autoethnography as mean to enrich understanding

Reaching the threshold imposed by the limitedness of insight into lived experiences is a common issue within body studies in general. Engagement in the empirical study of meaning of embodied difference for fencers who are blind and visually impaired has itself demanded the employment of more-than-narrative methodologies. The study of being-in-the-world that does not primarily rely on visual cues as its source of information required that I enrich my conversations with observation, but also listening to sounds, silences and echoes. It required me to differently attune all of my senses to the different situations I was in, to recognise the ways in which my presence affects these situations as well as to allow myself to be affected by the other bodies, processes, ideas and feelings around me.

The moment I shifted my focus from the content of the interviewees' answers to their form, to the tone of their voices, to consonances and dissonances, to the intensity of the

sound produced by their steps, weapons and sighs, I found new space for the 'possibility for more socially just, ecological methodologies' (Daza and Gershon 2015: 639). This caused me to reconsider the primacy, or even hegemony, that narratives and visual data have over other modalities of empirical materials. Daza and Gershon (2015) suggest that a focus on, for example, sound as method and methodology opens different possibilities for engagement with old questions and conversations through, among other things, reconsideration of what we conventionally recognise as valid empirical material. They argue that sense embodied research is of crucial importance for emerging interdisciplinary qualitative studies within affect theory, new materialism, studies within STEM, big data, aesthetics and the arts (Daza and Gershon 2015: 640).

This has important implications for my study of the meaning of embodied difference, as it methodologically provides resources to explore 'echoes across time and contexts, opens relationships within and between ecologies, breaks down barriers between siloed fields and methodologies, provides a means for the marginalised to literally voice their perspectives, and to consider complex interrelations and orientations inside and beyond people' (Daza and Gershon 2015: 641). Widening my methodological framework in the fourth article by encompassing sensory autoethnography gave rise to opportunities to enrich understandings by 'knowing which is expressed beyond words' (lisahunter and elke emerald 2016: 30).

In order to capture the complexity of lived experiences of embodied difference, I have subjected myself to a more intense engagement with the materiality of bodies. lisahunter and elke emerald propose sensory studies as a means to transcend the limitations of narratives and ocular research, and the extension of epistemological and methodological frameworks by focusing on the senses, the sensual, the sensuous and the sensational in narratives (lisahunter and elke emerald 2016: 33). I have therefore decided to expand the methodological framework of the study so as to more intensely engage with embodied and multisensory inquiry and to in this way further enrich the study. Hence, in my final mixed-method (sensory autoethnographic) study (Kara 2015), I focus on understanding of the importance of the sensations that are commonly neglected in

favour of visual materials in academic research, such as spatial, aural, and tactile affordances, as well as affects, emotions and moods.

5. 4. 1. Autoethnography

In order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the meaning of embodied difference, I decided to more intensely engage in participant observation, that is, to fence blindfolded as often as possible and with as many people as possible - regardless of their level of proficiency or degree of sightedness. In an attempt to understand how we habituate embodied difference and how habituation affects our being-in-the-world, I fenced whenever I had access to a fencing hall, an opponent and to fencing equipment.

This means that I had shifted methodological lenses to employ my own experience and understand and describe the aforementioned aspects of fencing blindfolded. By engaging in the autoethnographical endeavour, I foregrounded my awareness that my own familiarity with fencing for the blind and visually impaired, and my intense involvement in the field, did not necessarily allow me to articulate more precise or valid knowledge in comparison to those who are not involved in the field. However, not only was I able to provide narratives by different and perhaps unique means (Adams, Ellis and Jones 2017: 3), but also to employ these narratives of my own lived experiences in order to describe and criticise social and cultural experiences. Subjective experiences are doubtlessly permeated with social and political conventions, and autoethnographers work to provide alternatives to dominant cultural scripts (Adams, Ellis and Jones 2017: 3). The fourth autoethnographic article ('Fencing blindfolded: Extending Meaning Through Sound, Floor and Blade') represents an attempt at writing against the dangerous practice of generalisation in research, which has the potential to 'mask important nuances of cultural issues, such as norms of (...) the body' (Adams, Ellis and Jones 2017: 3). Some of the most influential authors within the practice of autoethnography claim that not only is this approach closely related to the field of social justice (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011), but that it has great potential to contest canonical ways of doing research by describing lived experience for the purposes of, among other things, promoting social change (Ellis

and Adams 2014: 261). As such, autoethnography is an excellent method for study into the lived experiences of blindness and visual impairment, as it is motivated by the commitment to resist hegemonic narratives, as well as sterile and even colonialist research practices of 'authoritatively entering a culture, exploiting cultural members, and then recklessly leaving to write about the culture for monetary and/or professional gain, while disregarding relational ties to cultural members' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011: 2). As in the second and third articles, in the fourth one I did not neglect the subjective and intimate dimensions of the experiences, and have dedicated special attention to the affective and emotional aspects of those experiences.

My further involvement in participant observation as well as the decision to write an autoethnographical account have, however, raised certain ethical concerns. My gradual invisibility in the field gave rise to questions such as how the elimination of distance has affected the relationship between me and the research participants, as well as whether and how the participants changed their behaviour in my presence (Watts 2010). Whereas I do acknowledge my influence on the research, I consider that my involvement in the practice has enriched our relationship with acceptance and trust (Punch 1993), as the position of participant observer has provided me with access into private and sensitive aspects of other participants' experiences. By being a novice in the special discipline of fencing for the blind and visually impaired, my willingness to learn was seen as less intrusive or threatening (Watts 2008) by the other participants, who made this clear through their kind gestures and welcoming and encouraging words. In the fourth article, I addressed how my familiarity with the existing research, personal experience and insider knowledge are used as part of reflexive ethnography to produce thick narratives. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that my position has not only influenced the research, but has also informed the ways in which I have as a researcher evaluated the obtained data and represented it through descriptions and analyses. As an attempt to overcome the dangers of biases, of becoming too involved in the field and of losing sight of research questions, I have put great efforts in reflection and critical reevaluation of my involvement, field notes, analyses and writings. Thus, as means of maintaining the rigour

of writing an autoethnography, I have tried to remain continuously engaged in self-observation, introspection and a critical self-reflexivity (Cooper, Grenier and Macaulay 2017: 43). In addition, this has allowed me to situate my experience within its wider (and inseparable) social, cultural and political context (Ellis and Adams 2014: 254), and to investigate how these contexts affect the ways in which we are exposed to and act in a generally sighted world (Anderson and Austin 2012; Pavlidis 2013; Schaeperkoetter 2017). Furthermore, I reflected on ethical aspects on doing research on a number of occasions at the beginning, within, as well as at the end of the research study. Moreover, I have implemented an 'ethics-post-practice' (Dorner 2014: 10), as means of re-examination of the collected and analysed data, in order to see whether I succeeded in providing a representative sample of all data provided by the participants.

Finally, I have employed autoethnography as a method to show how ableism is reinforced within dominant cultural texts and reproduced within social institutions such as sports. Being an analytical autoethnography, the fourth article also complements the body of work that provide insight into the experiences of and meaning making from involvement with sport (Cooper, Grenier and Macaulay 2017: 44). One example of the reproduction of ableism is the description of the ways in which imposing the requirements of a sighted world on persons who are blind and visually impaired impedes their being-in-the-world. By means of my own experience of temporary blindness, aided with the accounts of research participants who are blind and visually impaired, the fourth article suggests that such impediment and oppression would not have taken place had we been encouraged to rely on our own embodied endowments and environmental affordances that are spontaneous and intuitive in specific situations.

5. 5. Concluding remarks concerning methods and study design

My pursuit of understanding the meaning of embodied difference for fencers who are blind and visually impaired has faced significant epistemological as well as methodological challenges. These challenges are not new or specific to my work exclusively, but have haunted scholarly research into topics related to embodied meaning

making (and into making sense of embodiment too) for decades. Despite the shortcomings posed by some of the canonical phenomenological works, I still consider descriptive and interpretative phenomenological endeavours to have been useful for my study.

In addition, the other issue that has long been present in the humanities and which appears in my work, namely, that of the (un)translatability of experiences, does not necessarily have to be an insurmountable obstacle to understanding these phenomena. Noise in communication and infidel heteroglossia are powerful tools in the struggle with totalitarian language and science. In a certain sense, meaning burgeons with noise. While staking the return to the world (and worldly experiences) on senses, and despite his view of language as a potentially toxic and obliterating form of noise (Serres 2016: 14), Michel Serres still considers this noise to imply 'relation, passage, variation, invention' (Serres 2016: 10). Both noise and heteroglossia are invaluable tools in an undoubtedly political project (even struggle) to employ multiple perspectives at once and to detect 'dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision and many-headed monsters' (Haraway 1985: 72).

Turning to sensory methodologies, or rather, to the abundant worlds of other than visual affordances, has undoubtedly added aspects to my study without which the pursuit of understanding embodied difference would have remained incomplete and flat. Together, narrative and sensory methodologies provide useful tools and possibilities to capture lived experiences in a detailed and rich manner. However, this kind of pairing, or rather, of division between the two – narrative and sensory – is still haunted by the Cartesian dualism I have tried to avoid in the first place. Yet, this kind of exploration of the experience of visual impairment and blindness offers important insights into the existential structure of these experiences, rendering them relevant for not just people who live with these impairments but with embodied differences in general.

Finally, there is a general consensus that the researcher's subjectivity is unavoidably implicated in their research, as well as that this subjectivity is not necessarily an

impediment, but a precondition for objectivity (Finlay 2009: 11). While admitting its inevitability, I have decided not only to pay attention to my own experiences and reflexively explore my embodied subjectivity, but to explicitly address these experiences (and especially experiences of engaging in blindfolded fencing) by providing an autoethnographic account. Disregarding my influence on the research or striving to rigorous objectivity would have left my study sterile and deprived of integral understanding of the phenomenon in focus. I would not have gained insight into how meaning making actually happens during fencing, nor would I be able to provide honest, detailed description and interpretation of the phenomenon in question. Foregrounding my own subjectivity, biases, experiences, and especially my position as a blindfolded yet sighted fencer, has helped me to understand how meaning making happens, as well as (to a certain degree) the meaning of embodied difference. Additionally, it has helped me to better embrace the intersubjective relationship with blind and visually impaired fencers. While attending to this, but also to the wider academic community, I have attempted to maintain both the rigour and resonance of the research, in order to ensure its relevance and impact (Finlay 2009: 14). I would argue that the somewhat risky endeavour of writing an autoethnography has encircled the methodological composition of the entire study, and that it undoubtedly complements both phenomenological and sensory methodologies.

Now that the research and writing process have been accounted for, and theoretical background and methodological challenges have been described, I continue by presenting the four articles central to this dissertation.

10. Conclusion

Measurement, quantification, or, for example, visual representations of firing neurons doubtlessly reveal important scientific facts about the materiality of our embodiment. However subjective, stories of the lived experiences of people engaged in the discipline of fencing for the blind and visually impaired still provide valid and relevant insights into the meaning of embodied differences. Personal accounts of how one makes sense of the world by means of one's own embodied endowments helps us to understand the specific ways in which fencers inhabit their perceptual worlds. Hence, phenomenological insight into lived realities, affective and visceral experiences, as well as into body's liveliness and enfolded becoming-in-the-world helps challenge uninformed assumptions and biases people may have with regards to visual impairment and blindness. They also provide valuable resources for further exploration that, for example, focuses on how embodied difference is enacted, performed or socially constructed.

Employing a distanced and academically oriented perspective without previous reflection on lived realities leaves exploration impoverished of crucial insights and makes for problematic understandings. One example of such limited understanding would be the first article, 'The Construction of Limitations: Cultural Marginalisation of Altered Embodiment', which is included in this dissertation as a prequel and cautionary tale. As I have mentioned before, the inclusion of this article serves to describe more than just the dynamics between cultural or social centres and peripheries. I consider such intervention a step towards a more accountable and honest approach to academic research, one that shows where we come from (in terms of the departing point of the research), how we proceed from there, and where we end up. In addition, this article also highlights the importance of taking into an account both material and social aspects of embodied experiences, as one cannot do without another. In fact, the real conclusion of this article came after its actual conclusion had been written, and rather as an afterthought – which suggested restarting the study by conducting empirical research.

The further pursuit of understanding the meaning of embodied difference through fencers' stories revealed specificities, complexities and multiplicities of experiences of the same phenomenon. Fencers' narratives reveal that people who live with the same or similar embodied differences do not necessarily inhabit the same perceptual world. Thus, I have argued for the importance of understanding perceptual and embodied differences and cognitive variation, instead of simply focusing on universal, normative embodiment. This study provides resources for recognition of the heterogeneity of both meanings and experiences of embodied difference.

I have argued for the importance of understanding embodied differences by initially describing the experiences of fencers who are blind and visually impaired in the second article 'Rehab/ituation from a Phenomenological Perspective: the Case of Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired'. The description of fencers' experiences has provided important insight into the meaning of ability and agency, which were expressed both in interviewees' narrative accounts as well as bodily, through fencing. This article has revealed an insight that was key for my further research, namely the idea that fencing contributes to *rehab/ituation* and rearrangement of fencers' body schemas according to their specific embodiment and worldly affordances. These findings have sparked an interest in finding out what kinds of relations fencers' specific embodiment and worldly affordances get into, and have brought me to explore the important role of habituation in meaning making processes. In the third article ('The Difference Embodied Difference Makes: Echolocation in Fencing for the Blind and Visually Impaired') I have discovered that in addition to developing and changing habits, the employment of, for example, echolocation and different combinations of senses (which are not characteristic of the sighted world but spontaneous to fencers) enriches fencers' becoming-in-the-world. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the affective aspects of fencers' experiences play an important role in their meaning making processes. Due to the difficulty of fully comprehending affective aspects of experiences (which are generally difficult to articulate) by relying solely on the observation of fencers and their narrative accounts, I have further sought an understanding of not just affects, but also the role of affordances

and habits for meaning making processes through autoethnographic writing. The fourth article ('Fencing Blindfolded: Extending Meaning Through Sound, Floor and Blade') presents autoethnography as a useful tool that has helped me gain invaluable insights into the ways in which meaning making processes happen without sight as a primary sense. Not only was the experience of fencing blindfolded helpful, but so was writing an academically framed narrative about this experience as such.

Not only did empirical research provide clearer insight into the meaning of embodied difference, but so did the enrichment of interview-based accounts with participant observation. What is commonly considered a small base in terms of the number of participants has provided me with an opportunity to endow each study participant with the extra attention needed to understand their lived experiences. Further methodological adjustments and the inclusion of sensory methodologies and autoethnography have helped me to grasp the perceptual and meaningful worlds of fencers who are blind and visually impaired in more detail. I find this methodological expansion particularly useful for understanding pre-reflective and affective aspects of fencers' experiences. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary theoretical grounding informed by phenomenology, disability studies, affect theory, and semiotics, provided me with the language and concepts to more precisely describe the phenomena in question and engage with relevant theoretical discussions.

My study contributes to academic discussions on the phenomenology of disability and disability sports by providing insight into the lived experiences of fencers who are blind and visually impaired and especially into their understanding of ability and agency. I engaged in discussions on affect, affordance, habit and habituation, as well as the concept of embodied cognition. By means of this engagement and by offering insight into the accounts of varied lived experiences posed by blindness and visual impairment (and for example, experiences of echolocation), this study also contributes to studies of embodied difference and the related issue of bodily integrity. In addition, the study complements autoethnographic studies of the experiences of embodied difference within the context of martial arts. In a more general sense, the articles provide material

that can contribute to answering the question Victoria Pitts-Taylor poses (2016) by showing what kind of differences embodied differences may make within the specific context of this study.

With regards to the practical implications of this study, I consider it relevant for rehabilitation practitioners, as well as practitioners within sports for people who are blind and visually impaired, and disability sports in general. The study's potential usefulness comes from the invitation not just for the practitioners, but also the community surrounding people who are experiencing blindness and visual impairment, to encourage the use of senses and affordances that are spontaneous and comfortable to those who live with these or similar sensory differences. In addition, the examples and conclusions I provide concerning the highly plastic nature of our embodied bodies, especially those that concern the idea that we learn new skills and habituate our bodies throughout our lives, may encourage people whose lives are affected by a sudden impairment to engage in different practices to re-gain a grip on their lives.

While the form of an academic endeavour such as this limits me from further pursuit of the understanding of embodied differences here, work on such an important topic, especially work that has emancipatory potential, is by no means ever finished. This study represents an opening, an invitation to further explore how embodied differences of various kinds are actually experienced by the people who live with them, as well as how we make sense of them. My dissertation is thus also an invitation for additional studies that focus not just on the lived realities of people who live with impairments or other embodied differences, but for studies that equally take into account biosociality and the material-discursive specificities (Pitts-Taylor 2016: 122) of our complex embodiment.

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