

TITEL PAGE

RUNNING HEAD: NOURISHING COMMUNION

**“Nourishing Communion”: A less recognized dimension of support for young persons  
facing mental health challenges?**

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### **Abstract**

This study, the third in a series of three, draws on a broader Norwegian research project exploring the phenomenon of support for young persons with mental health issues. The aim was to explore and explicate the sense of “nourishing communion”, as a somewhat neglected aspect of support. Fourteen Norwegian young adults, aged 18-25, were interviewed about their experiences of support. Data was analyzed using van Manen’s hermeneutic-

phenomenological approach to open up possible meanings of how nourishing communion is concretely lived. Analysis was supplemented by in-depth reflexive dialogues between the first and second author, which fostered a nourishing communion akin to the processes and dimensions of our phenomenon of interest. Findings highlight five intertwined existential themes: a) trusting the other to hold vulnerability safely; b) flourishing in mutual participation; c) acceptance in a felt togetherness; d) feeling found and received; and e) feeling an attuned resonance. The notion of “nourishing communion” as a significant but neglected element of support challenges current practice, suggesting the need for a different approach to collaboration with young persons and their networks. From the perspectives both of individual professional engagement and of policy making, there is a need for further exploration of how young persons might be supported to create and maintain a broader range of nourishing relationships.

Keywords: support, communion, phenomenology, young adults, mental health

## **Introduction**

*Being with my friend makes me feel uplifted....more vital...I am filled with something good. She is my best friend and supporter* (Peter, a participant).

This article draws on findings from a broader Norwegian research project exploring the phenomenon of support for young people with mental health in terms of what qualities make support supportive. It is the third of three sub-studies drawing on the same empirical

material: in-depth descriptions by young persons recruited from different services supporting young persons in vulnerable life situations, in a small municipality in the southeast of Norway. The first study in this series suggested that support is a relational phenomenon, with certain ways of relating (for example, being open, present and non-judgmental) being more supportive than others (Sommer & Saevi, 2017). The study explored two situations founded on service, where the reciprocity in the relationships were influenced by an inherent power differential. The experience of being supported seemed to be more likely to happen when the power differential was diminished by the professional's attitude of wonder and openness towards the Other, entering a not-knowing-position. A supportive relationship, even when one of the parties is a professional service provider, had some qualities recognized in friendship, such as trust, being cared for, awareness and commitment. The second study explored the complex ways in which support and lived space are connected. It found that while some relationships tend to make our lived space narrower, constricting and diminishing our opportunities to fulfill our potential, other relationships provide the room we need to grow and flourish (Sommer & Saevi, 2018). In both studies, participants (young adults) described their search for friendship-like relationships, ones that made them feel, as Peter puts it in the introductory quote, "filled with something good."

This quest gave us food for thought. What were young persons' experiences of developing these friendship-like relationships? Could their experiences of close relationships with others offer insights of relevance to professional practice? In a bid to respond to such questions, this article reports on the third study which identifies and analyzes further the elements that constitute supportive relationships, together with the meanings associated with them, towards the goal of providing better, more focused support for young persons confronting mental health problems.

The starting point for this third exploration involved our reflecting on how to describe a relationship experienced as more than just “being together”. A Norwegian word, “fellesskap”, appeared to capture the essence of that experience. Difficult to capture in English translation, this term combines notions of “community”, “fellowship”, and “communion”. After careful consideration of the etymological meanings of these terms, we finally opted for the English word “communion”, which we saw as conveying a relationship that is at once fulfilling and supportive. The term “communion” derives from the Latin word *communio*. Here, the prefix *com* (with, together) is conjoined with *unus* (oneness, union), to convey a sense of fellowship, mutual participation, sharing. These etymological meanings speak to the intimacy, togetherness and closeness that emerge as essential qualities in the supportive relationships described by the participants in our research project. As we saw it, the mutuality and oneness implicit in the word, “communion” captured a deeper connection between persons than that conveyed by such terms as “fellowship” or “mutual participation”. At the same time, the term “communion” did not entirely capture the sense of being “filled”, as described by Peter and other participants in the study. Further reflection on this word led us to recognize that feeling filled implies feeling nourished, even “full-filled”. All living beings need nourishment if they are to grow and flourish. In view of the fact that professional practice aims to support young persons with mental health problems to grow and flourish, we thought this phenomenon required further investigation.

## **Background**

The value of supportive relationships for mental health is backed by a considerable body of research (Sommer, Ness, & Borg, 2018; Topor, Borg, Di Girolamo, & Davidson, 2011). Relational, social and contextual factors have been identified as significant factors for mental and social wellbeing (Tew et al., 2012; Topor & Denhov, 2012), while the World

Health Organization (WHO) (2013, 2017) has recognized the importance for mental health of individual and social experiences of everyday life in families, schools, workplaces and communities.

The first-person accounts of persons with mental health problems emphasize the significance of living a meaningful life within a local community, including participation in social arenas (Karlsson & Borg, 2017). Studies of young persons with mental health issues suggest that living with anxiety or depression over long periods tends to curtail social contact with family and friends (Kolouh-Söderlund, Lagercrantz, & Göransson, 2016). When young persons once again participate in these arenas, they often replace isolation with a sense of involvement and community. Being with others, doing things together, sharing, laughing with others, eating with others, going for a walk: all bring meaning to life (Kolouh-Söderlund, Lagercrantz, & Göransson, 2016). Such findings are in line with research by Borg (2007) and Glovers (2002) on environments that encourage and nurture recovery: for example, supportive work places, pleasurable home environments, pleasant local surroundings, and welcoming social organisations.

Although family relationships are important for young persons, so too are relationships with friends, fellow students and colleagues (Arnett, 2004). In a study of wellbeing among young persons with mental health problems, Honey, Coniglio, & Hancock (2015) found that having good relationships with others contributed considerably to whether participants saw themselves as successful or accepted. Other research suggests that the amount of time young persons spend with friends at school is linked to their sense of belonging (Morrow, 2001). The desire to belong has been defined as feeling valued and respected within relationships founded on shared beliefs and experiences (Mahar, et al., 2013). Research suggests that feeling connected to others is achieved through working with other persons (Wilcock, 2007) and through experiences of social interaction, mutual support and friendship (Rebeiro, 2001).

The meaning of ‘nourishing communion’ does not seem to have been described or explored outside a spiritual/religious context. The literature we examined on “communion” tended to relate to religious understandings of the term: for example, the importance of being in communion with God and supported by a faith community. In Christian religious terms, the spiritual “food” of Holy Communion is seen as representative of how God’s living presence nourishes the soul (Lindvall, 2007). While the language of “nourishing communion” has not been applied thus far to mental health, concepts such as “connectedness”, “relationship” and “reciprocity” have received some attention from researchers.

Connectedness appears to play a critical role in recovery from mental distress. As Tew et al (2012) underline, people do not recover in isolation. Participation in the community is essential (Borg & Davidson, 2008; Davidson, 2011). In one particular project, young persons spoke about the need to break patterns of isolation, build relationships, and feel supported not only by family, friends, and health workers but also by those who had been through similar experiences (Mental Health Coordinating Council/MHCC, 2014). In the same project, parents of young persons with mental health problems characterized connectedness as interaction with others within a range of meaningful activities: for example, being part of one’s community, making friends, and being able to function well in society and relationships. The literature review conducted as part of the project suggested that connectedness was especially important in the case of young persons, given their developmental need to define and redefine themselves via their relationships with others (MHCC, 2014). Slade, Williams, Bird, Leamy, & Le Boutillier (2012) argue that connectedness relates not only to an individual’s connections and relationships with other persons but also to their links with the wider community and with society as a whole. Connectedness therefore embraces peer support, support from professionals and support from the community, family and friends.

Research underlines the importance to persons with mental health problems of supportive relationships with their health professionals (Borg & Kristiansen, 2004). Denhov & Topor (2011) identified three main components in such supportive relationships: interpersonal continuity, emotional climate, and social interaction. Other research has focused on issues of reciprocity: for example, the extent to which the professional is perceived as ‘walking alongside’ the person in need of support (Ness, Borg, Semb, & Karlsson, 2014, p. 3). In a review of the literature on support conducive to participation in education and work, Sommer, Ness, & Borg (2018) found such support to be linked to relationships where the professional valued the person receiving support as an equal and as someone with potential and competences. The finding that a caring relationship provides the ground for helpful support is borne out by other studies (Andersson, 2016; Sommer & Saevi, 2017). In contrast, relationships conducted by professionals in a more impersonal way are found to be less helpful, providing little space for collaboration, personal growth or a feeling of being nourished by the other (Ljungberg, Denhov, & Topor, 2015). The most important ingredient in relational work, it would appear, is being as “present as a person meeting the person of the other” (Yontef, 1993, p. 24). The relationship works when it is an evolving, co-created, collaborative, dialogical partnership, rather than a top-down transmission where the powerful yet distant therapist imparts information and makes interpretations (Anderson, 2012).

## **Methodology**

[Phenomenological description] must stick close to experience, and yet not limit itself to the empirical but restore to each experience the ontological cipher which marks it internally. (Merleau-Ponty, 1960/1964, p.157)



The aim of this research was to explore and explicate the experience of “communion” as an aspect of support and being supported. The meaning of being filled or nourished in a relationship as a somewhat neglected aspect of support, was explored from the perspective of young adults facing mental health problems. A hermeneutic-phenomenological approach was employed to open up possible meanings and capture the way a sense of nourishing communion is concretely lived in an embodied, relational, and contextual way. Lived experience is the starting point and the end point of phenomenological research. The term “lived experience” is derived from the German *Erlebnis*, the active-passive living through of experience within the flow of life (Heidegger, 1927/2010).

While hermeneutic phenomenology prioritizes rich description, it also acknowledges the inevitable role of interpretation (van Manen, 1997, 2014). As Heidegger (1927/2010) put it, the act of description always involves prior interpretation. Interpretation is a precondition for all understanding, and understanding is inseparable from life and experience.

### ***Gathering empirical material***

Descriptions of lived experience, from which underlying patterns and structures of meaning might be drawn (van Manen, 1997), were derived from in-depth interviews with 14 young adults (9 women and 5 men) aged 18-25. All participants had had experiences of mental health problems and of being partly or fully out of education or employment as a result. They were all ethnic Norwegian but differed in terms of socio-economic background and the degree to which social welfare services had been involved in their lives. While some lived with their parents, others lived with foster parents or on their own.

Experiences of support were elicited by the interviews, which aimed to explore experiential narrative material (van Manen, 1997). The interviews were semi-structured, in that guiding questions were loosely prepared in advance to enable a focused approach towards

understanding the meaning of everyday-life experiences from the perspective of the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The aim was to stay close to the topic being explored while at the same time maintain a sense of an ordinary conversation, reflecting a back and forth dialogic movement, sometimes in an unstructured way. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### *Dwelling*

We did not go straight from the data - the participants' descriptions of support experiences - to the phenomenon of "nourishing communion". The phenomenon slowly manifested itself to us through patient phenomenological reflections, which includes an open attitude of wonder and a dwelling with horizons of implicit meaning (Finlay, 2012). It lay buried, initially invisible, and our role was to excavate the meanings. We had an intuition there was something "more" in the data, something ineffable in the depth of the situations where support was arising, that we wanted to pull out. Through dwelling with the data, out of a waiting silence, we listened for something deeper; we resonated with the "more" of what the participants' descriptions were pointing to and of our moment-to-moment experiencing. Put simply, the participants were speaking about support and this phenomenal description functioned as a medium through which the latent meanings of nourishing communion came to the fore.

Churchill (2018) explains this process with reference to the Heideggerian (1927/1962, p. 24) concepts of *Befragte* (the "object"; what is being interrogated) and *Gefragte* (the "subject"; what is being pointed to). We were working with the data about the "object" (support situations) which illuminated the "subject" (nourishing communion) of a phenomenological study:

The research phenomenon itself is something that we cannot know quite so clearly at the beginning of an investigation; it is easier to talk about the *situation*, that is, the “lived experience” that we wish to have described for us. It is this experience – communicated to us by the informant’s descriptive testimony – that is the “object” of our study, whereas the “subject” of our study is often something that only slowly reveals itself to us. (Churchill, 2018)

Dwelling with the participants’ descriptions, we asked ourselves: What possibilities of meanings of support are not yet seen and understood? We searched the individual contexts - the idiographic dimension - probing each person’s “project to-be” (what the person aims for, dreams for, wants for his or her life) and their lived relationships as a backdrop for our phenomenological analysis. Here, each participant’s particular situation gave the research its deepest, most evocative existential meanings. Highlighting this context supported us to remain faithful to the participants’ lifeworld, and not get lost in philosophical abstractions. Over time, the idea of ‘communion’ as a phenomenon emerged. Yet, this too, did not quite capture what we were sensing. It took continued dwelling, and dialogue between first and second authors, before the phenomenon of “nourishing communion” came into sharper focus. Churchill (2018) points to the Latin term *capta*, to refer to what we take or capture from the data. In this process from *data* to *capta*, there must be a transformation. We are always transforming *data* into *capta* in our analysis. While reflecting upon the data about support, the research phenomenon gradually emerged.

### ***Engaging a hermeneutic process***

Attempting to stay faithful to the phenomenological process, we engaged the “*epoche*” and “reduction”, taking up an attitude of openness, wonder, engaging a radical, reflective attentiveness to the way in which the participants - and ourselves - experience the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962; Finlay, 2008).

The wonder of that thing takes us in, and renders us momentarily speechless . . . From this moment of wonder, a question may emerge that addresses us and that is addressed by us. It should animate one's questioning of the meaning of some aspect of lived experience. It also should challenge the researcher to write in such a way that the reader of the phenomenological text is similarly stirred to the same sense of wondering attentiveness to the topic under investigation. (van Manen, 2002b)

However, in this reduction, we needed to go beyond our predilections which would prevent us from seeing and listening to the deeper meanings to be found. van Manen (2017) explains the couplet of the epoché-reduction like this:

It is a method of reflection on the unique meaning of the phenomenon that one is studying to gain an eidetic grasp, fundamental understanding, or inceptual insight into the phenomenological meaning of human experience (moment or event). (p.819)

Inceptual thinking contrasts from conceptual thinking, and involves coming upon an inceptual thought. Van Manen (2014, pp. 235-238) highlights how Heidegger in his *Contributions to Philosophy* (1999) makes a distinction between *Begriff* and *Inbegriff*. While, *Begriff* can be straightforwardly translated as concept, *Inbegriff* is more opaque. Various translations of Heidegger's work suggest "in-grasping" and "incept" are equivalent English terms for *Inbegriff* (van Manen, 2014, p. 237). With inceptual insight or thinking, there is an initial "covered-up-ness" which is eventually disclosed through the hermeneutic investigation. Once revealed in a meaningful moment, meaning insights have to be wrestled with to gain depth and clarity, and their complexity often requires further insights (van Manen, 2014). They are not grasped once and for all but are in a constant interplay between self-showing and concealment. Here they comply with the ancient Greek term for truth "Aletheia", meaning

disclosure, unconcealment, withdrawal, and openness as Heidegger (1988/ 2013) explained in his 1931-2 lectures.

Phenomenological enquiry involves a method of leading back (*reducere*) to the way the phenomenon is experienced before the experience is conceptualized or theorized (van Manen, 2014, p. 220). But pre-reflective experience in the moment of “now” is already gone. To investigate the meanings of “nourishing communion”, we encountered this moment retrospectively through the participants descriptions of support but also through linking back to our own understandings, experience, imaginings, sensings and memories. We were present as researchers (Churchill, 2018) and so had impact on the direction of the analysis in that our own interpretations inevitably played their role. In other words, hermeneutic principles come into play more deeply when we try to sense and make sense of the meanings within. For Heidegger interpretation is not an additional procedure, it constitutes an inevitable and foundational structure of our being-in-the-world (Finlay, 2003). Instead of setting our preunderstanding and prior knowledge aside, which we see as not possible, we are following Heidegger’s (1927/2010, p. 144) recognition that all understanding has the structure of “something as something” – that is, prior interpreted understanding. These fore-structures of prior understanding can be seen as a circle of understanding, where new understanding arises from and is nurtured by what is already understood. Rather than freeing ourselves from our preunderstanding or fore-structures, and risk that they are given to us by chance, we used them partly as a lens to reflect on them critically and let them inform and motivate our inquiry (Churchill, 2018).

As we dwelt with and probed the sense of nourishing communion, new insights and interpretations emerged which had not been apparent previously; as we proceeded on the basis of this new understanding, yet another interpretation evolved. Our process can be understood as a cycle of: having a fore-understanding...meeting a “resistance” when interrogating

experience... an interpretative revision of the fore-understanding...and so on. At each stage we searched, sensed and made sense; we moved between reviewing, resonating and reasoning. Throughout we recognized our part in actively co-creating our knowledge through the back and forth dialectic between (pre-reflective) experiences and awareness (Finlay, 2003, 2011).

Although the aim of phenomenological research is to better understand a particular phenomenon, it should be acknowledged that such research is always tentative and incomplete; there will always be more to be seen. Understanding is always open to further description and interpretation. The language used to describe is only a substitute for meaning and cannot fully capture the experience as it is lived in its entirety. Nor can it describe how all people will experience the particular phenomenon (van Manen, 2014).

### ***Reflexive explorative dialogues***

Following preliminary insights gained from encountering the experiential material with openness (van Manen, 2014, p. 224), the first author (Mona) adopted a wondering attitude, asking: What is the lived experience of communion? And how is communion related to support? She oriented to the phenomenon by tuning into her own lived experience of communion and reflecting on her experiences. She returned iteratively to the empirical data, looking for patterns of meaning and stories that seemed to reveal meanings of communion. As participants' descriptions began to resonate with the researcher's own experience and understanding, they functioned as a springboard to latent meanings, (Churchill, 2018).

These early reflections became the starting point for deep reflexive (i.e. critically self-aware meta-analysis) explorative dialogues in face-to-face meetings between Mona and Linda (second author). The use of reflexivity (Finlay, 2017) was central to our approach – not least because we were partly using ourselves and our experience for exploring the meanings. This

involved continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself. We engaged “reflexive dialogue” (Finlay & McFerran, *Pending*) over the course of two days. The point of engaging reflexivity is to examine how our own subjectivity as researchers was inextricably intertwined with interpretations made (Churchill, in press). By reflecting on our experience as researchers, alongside the phenomenon being studied, we moved “beyond the partiality and investments of our previous understandings” (Finlay, 2003, p.108).

As we searched for meaningful insights about the experience of relationships that have this quality of nourishment, we moved between experiential *reflexive* closeness and analytic *reflective* distance (Finlay, 2008); between our own experiences and the participants’ experience of communion, and the possible layered meaning within the experiences. We also explicitly explored the intersubjective process going on between us, opening up ourselves for moments of communion to appear in our relation. In a moment of mutual disclosure and shared vulnerability, an embodied experience of communion was manifested between us and within us. In this process we recognized the specific version of the communion experienced as nourishing and healing, rather than simply about a being-with connection. As Finlay (2011) claims:

The depth of personal introspection and the dialogical journey involved [laid] the ground...for research that has deep personal significance and this helps to ensure its evocative resonance and relevance. (p.166)

During the writing process, Mona also had explorative dialogues with what we’ve called a ‘competence group’. This group has accompanied the researcher all through the research process with reflections and discussions at different stages of the research. The group consisted of four professionals working with vulnerable youths and three young adults with

experiences of mental health problems and dropping out of school. The members were invited into the group by the researcher, because of their valuable competence related to the research topic. Drafts of the analysis were presented and reviewed with the group for two reasons: to enhance the researcher's understanding of the themes and to ensure the descriptions and reflections resonated with lived life and opened up for instant moments of recognition, an experience of: "yes, this is how it is, I know this". Explorative dialogues were also carried out with the other co-authors.

### ***Writing the meaning***

The writing process passed through numerous iterations and dialogues between the different authors. At a pragmatic level, thematic statements were formulated as "units of meaning" in concert with the analytic-reflective methods described above, to help point to the unique and invariant aspects of meaning that belong to the phenomenon (van Manen, 1997). These thematic statements were used to structure the research texts. Anecdotes were constructed from the interview material and refined to attend to the subjective aspects of experience, to assist the researchers and to evoke for the readers of the research a sense of what 'nourishing communion' means (van Manen, 1989). We made no effort to verify whether a description of a situation was in keeping with the way things actually happened, as the aim was to arrive at plausible descriptions of human experiences.

This iterative writing-up process became an embodied lived experience in itself. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a textual form of qualitative inquiry where writing is closely fused to the research process (van Manen, 1997). It is an artful *reflexive activity* itself. The ambition of phenomenological writing is contact; to touch the lived meaning of a phenomenon and to be able to be touched by it. In the process of writing and rewriting, a space that belongs to the unsayable is created, and further it may evoke immediate understandings that otherwise lie beyond their reach (van Manen, 2002, 2014). "To write



means to write myself, not in a narcissistic way but in a deep collective sense. To write phenomenologically is the untiring effort to author a sensitive grasp of being itself” (van Manen, 1997, p. 132).

We searched for, and savoured, words as we ourselves engaged in an intriguing parallel process of a togetherness which included a sense of nourishing communion (particularly in our reflexive dialogues), resonating with and responding to each other. We played with our words and drew on our bodily felt sense to tell us if the words we had chosen were a good enough fit. As we explicated the over-arching phenomenon of nourishing communion, various themes emerged which became the intermediate reflective tools for further phenomenological inquiry and reflective writing, eventually coalescing into the five existential themes explicated below.

## **Ethics**

Permission to conduct this study was approved by the National Committee for Medical Health and Research Ethics. Strategies to diminish the possibility of participant identification included use of pseudonyms, careful selection of anecdotal examples and alteration of specific recognizable information. It was emphasized that participants should not feel compelled to speak about themes with which they were uncomfortable. Possible emotional difficulties from interviews could be followed up in the ongoing care initiatives. To avoid conflict of interest, the first writer, who conducted the research interviews, did not interview young adults with whom she had worked in practice.

## **Findings**

By drawing on our own experiences of communion that give a sense of nourishment, mirrored and refracted in the light of the participants’ experiences, we came to identify five overarching intertwined existential themes: a) trusting the other to hold vulnerability safely;

b) flourishing in mutual participation; c) acceptance in a felt togetherness; d) feeling found and received; and e) feeling an attuned resonance.

### **Trusting the other to hold vulnerability safely**

#### ***I hold your head***

*I hold your head*

*in my hands, as you hold*

*my heart in your affection*

*as everything holds and is*

*held by something other than itself*

*As the sea lifts a stone*

*to its strands, as the tree*

*holds the ripe fruit of autumn, as*

*the world is lifted through worlds and space*

*So are we both held by something and lifted*

*to where mystery holds mystery in its hand*

Stein Mehren (1964)

[originally in Norwegian: “Jeg holder ditt hode”. Translation by Elizabeth Rokka]

Moments of experiencing a sense of nourishing communion seem to rest upon trusting the other. These are moments in which participants dare to come forward, lay themselves open before another, and allow themselves to be held. The etymology of “holding” (“the act of holding” or “that which is held”) embraces verbs that include “support”, “keep” and “protect”, suggesting a dialectical relationship between the one who holds and that which is held. We hold, and we are being held, literary and figuratively, physically and emotionally. We are always in this “holding” in one way or another. In Mehren’s poem, to hold something

and to be held draws our attention to the human conditions of dependence and interdependence. It underlines how the holder is also held. We are, to a large extent, dependent upon one another. Through the holding by another our sense of ourselves grows. As psychotherapist DeYoung (2003) notes, “A child’s experience becomes a sense of coherent self only within the consistent, affirming, holding presence of responsive others” (p.125).

### ***The power of holding***

The power of holding is well illustrated by Kathrin, a participant suffering from muscle pain in addition to mental health problems. Here she shares her experience of seeing a physical therapist in a mental health unit and of how the physical and emotional holding offered by this therapist made a difference to how she felt about herself:

I remember how she cared for my physical body, helping me to relax by her gentle strokes with her caring hands. She helped me to find a comfortable position, tucked me in with a warm blanket. It felt so good: healing and refreshing. (*Kathrin*)

For Kathrin, a physical and emotional space is created by holding. The holding where she let herself be held by another person, changes something about how she feels about the situation and herself. The reduction of distance between the person holding and the person being held enlarges the space around them. New space is created in the act of physical and emotional holding: a space between the two and the rest of the world. Kathrin trusted the therapist to care for her suffering body. What we metaphorically hold of another person’s life, or what we ourselves deliver to another from our life, may vary greatly, from the smallest amount to something of immense significance. In the moment of holding and being held, there are possibilities of healing and of being renewed.

### ***Trust as a moment of letting go***

Over a ten year period, Ida, who suffered from depression and anxiety, encountered a range of professionals in the fields of mental health, child protection, and social services. She was resistant to trusting others, finding it difficult to place her faith in another person's capacity to bear the weight of her traumatic life experiences, distress, dreams and desires. Then she received support from a follow-up team for vulnerable youths. Here she describes what happened to enable her to experience trust:

I build a wall around me and I put on a mask, to protect myself. I need to find out if the other person is trustworthy, if it is someone who will tolerate me as I am. Often I find that I cannot trust another person, and I resist opening up. My service provider in the follow-up team must have done something right, because already in the second encounter with her my wall sank lower and my mask fell off. I felt safe enough to show her my tears, my naked face. (*Ida*)

To lay one's burden in another person's hands is an act of trust. Trust is a premise for this delivery to happen. However, where does trust come from? Trusting to be held is not simply a product of our own making; as we sense in Mehren's poem, it is part of human existence, As Løgstrup (1956/1997, p.18) notes, "Our life is so constituted that it cannot be lived except as one person lays him or herself open to another person and puts her or himself into that person's hands either by showing or claiming trust." Through our act of trusting, we expect the other to accept our surrender, although there is no guarantee that the other will protect what has been placed in their hands. As a rule, we trust one another with some reservation. Even in situations where we desperately need help we do not trust unconditionally (Løgstrup, 1956/1997). Trust demands courage, even more so when the "givenness" of trust is challenged by repeated ruptures of trust, as in the lives of the young people in this study. For them trust is not something that goes without saying. Ida needed to "find out" if the other person was trustworthy. When she found this to be the case, and felt safe as a result, she was

able to lay herself open and reveal her vulnerability, her “naked face”. We can liken this moment to a deep exhalation: a letting go, a release of tension.

### ***Holding as a shared experience***

Unlike a mother holding her newborn baby, holding is not generally something we *do* to someone. We cannot just decide to “hold” another person or to be held. The other person has to accept, give and receive the holding (Finlay, 2016). The other also offers holding in return. We hold as we are held. To hold is a shared experience of the one who holds and the one who is being held. This shared experience may create a sense of togetherness and communion. Trust and openness lay the groundwork for a readiness to reach out, make contact, and find one another. Following Edith Stein’s (1916/1989) example, Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) likens this to the action of pressing our hands together:

When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together...placed side by side, but an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the role of ‘touching’ and being ‘touched’. (p. 93)

While touching and being touched never fully coincide, they are intertwined in an interdependent sentient-sensible relationship of mutual encroachment. This notion of mutuality is explicated further in the next theme.

### **Flourishing in mutual participation**

A shared experience of communion by definition involves the participation of at least two parties. The verb “participate” means to take part in, join in, share, and actively involve oneself. While participation may not necessarily produce a sense of nourishing communion, it has the potential for this. Jonathan, Sofia and Benjamin share their experiences where participation has a quality of mutuality and lay the ground for personal growth and flourishing. An experience of this sort seems to involve mutual respect and disclosure, along

with a sense of being present for the other, thereby opening the possibility for each participant to flourish in the enabling presence of another.

### ***Mutual respect***

I feel like I'm taken into account, that I'm worth listening to. The way my service provider always includes me and asks for my views makes me feel respected. He is more like a companion who walks beside me. I'm not sure if it's him or me who takes the next step -- it feels like we're in it together. Although there's a difference between us, both in roles and age, I feel comfortable with him. (*Jonathan*)

Jonathan has been unable to attend school because of a physical illness, and at times he is feeling overwhelmed by dark thoughts and a sense of hopelessness. However, meetings with his service provider provided him with companionship and enabled him to feel perceived as an equal. With mutual respect comes a feeling of being appreciated and valued, an ever-present dimension rather than something one needs to be vigilant about maintaining. The space between and around widens, while at the same time we are brought closer together by a sense of companionship. Jonathan's lived experience provides an illustration of this process. Mutuality is not necessarily symmetrical and does not imply equality in the sense of "sameness". Rather, it acknowledges that two (or more) people are mutually participating in sharing and disclosing themselves as persons.

### ***Mutual disclosure***

It is as though I know her, even though I don't know much about her private life. She seems so genuine, and the sharing of thoughts between us makes her visible to me as a person. It makes a big difference for me, that she's open like that. It feels like real contact, and it's easier for me to open up. (*Sofia*)

A mutual disclosure embraces a sharing of reflections, wonder and engagement. Through mutual disclosure, Sofia gains a sense of knowing her service provider as a person. Mutuality reveals itself as sensed, lived, and true to the individuals involved. It embraces a willingness to disclose oneself as a person. Such disclosure “makes a big difference” to Sofia, as if the appearance of the “who” gives the act of support existential meaning. As Arendt (1958/1998, p. 181) notes, “Action without a name, a ‘who’ attached to it, is meaningless, whereas an art work retains its relevance whether or not we know the master’s name”.

### *Flourishing as possibility*

Benjamin has struggled with anxiety since his early teenage years and this has affected his social life and interrupted his education. At the time of the interview, he was attending an alternative school for young persons who have dropped out of the ordinary school system. He also received support from a community team to remain in this alternative school, and to get supported with housing and economy. Both the staff at school and his service provider are nurturing his self- confidence and affect how he looks at himself:

Their (the staff at school) thoughts about me, their confidence in me and my capability...in the beginning I couldn’t take it in. But over the months I started to adapt it. Their recognition opened up my future, in a way... It felt like a transformation, from being no one to being someone with possibilities. (*Benjamin*)

Sometimes he (the service provider) gives me a gentle push, to support me to do the things I want to do, but feel anxious about. It feels like he’s giving me a hand. I can take it, or not. It’s there as a possibility, even when I’m not with him. His companionship makes me become more than I thought I could be. (*Benjamin*)

A possibility for flourishing involves a sense of being given space and of being nurtured by the other’s recognition and affirmation. Participation grows beyond a focus on tangible, day-

to-day affairs towards more transformative possibilities, and may open up an enduring sense of possibility, beyond time, space and physical body. Being accompanied in a sphere of mutuality seems to enhance the Other's ability to embrace the invitation for action. Arendt (1958/1998) sees invitations as new beginnings. The beginning is not the beginning of *something* but of *somebody*. In a realm of latent possibilities, we can require the other's willingness to enter into such a relationship with us, but it is beyond our will and control. It is a moment of grace (Buber, 1923/1958). **Acceptance in felt togetherness**

The young persons in this study often take the initiative to be with others. They seek out persons to be with: persons who make them feel good. Feeling good being with another involves acceptance and felt togetherness. An embodied experience of unconditional acceptance as a bridge to communion appeared in several participants' stories of support.

***Acceptance that releases one from self-criticism***

Following a difficult upbringing, including violence at the hands of caregivers, Markus has difficulty concentrating and suffers from anxiety. His life has been marked by instability, whether in relation to caregivers, homes, school attendance or employment. He wants to work and enjoys using his practical skills. Here he tells of the importance of being with his friends, who make him feel valued as the person he actually is:

I went to school to meet my friends. My friends were the only reason I stayed in school. I'd rather go to school and see my friends than stay at home and be alone. We hung out together in the breaks and after school; we played computer games. When I'm with my friends, I don't think about my problems. I'm not so caught up with what they think of me if I say or do something stupid. I feel good when I'm with them.

*(Markus)*



In an accepting environment we feel sure of our value as a person in relationship with others. We feel liberated from intrusive self-consciousness and self-criticism, both of which might otherwise block out experiences of communion. Being acknowledged by another helps us let go; it releases us from concerns about how other people may evaluate us; it tends to enhance our very being. Inspired by Levinas, Kunz (2006, p. 248) expresses the idea thus: “I find myself by being taken away from myself by the Other”. There is no real “being-with” without mutual acceptance.

### ***Being-with as felt togetherness***

In moments of felt togetherness, we become truly present to the reality that to be a person is to be in the world with others. Alma, suffering from depression and unable to attend school, shares her experience of felt togetherness with a close friend:

I have a friend who understands me. I can be myself with her. When we meet, we don't have to do so much really. We are just together, being with each other, or we are talking. It helps just to be with another person. Sometimes she just holds my hand or gives me a hug. I can sometimes be together with others without feeling I am *together* with them. Being with my friend, really feels to be *with someone*. (Alma)

In being-with as felt togetherness, we are nourished by the presence of the other and the relationship. We are never outside “being with”, just within it in different registers or degrees of intensity (Heidegger, 1927/2010, pp.114-122). Moments when we are absorbed by the presence of togetherness may only be fleeting ones, as in Alma's description of instants when she really feels herself to be “*with someone*”. Such moments stand in contrast to the indifference of everydayness, where moments come and go without catching our attention. In such fleeting moments, the person(s) I am with is not just any other, but stands out from the crowd before me, pronounced and perceptible, as someone I feel *together with*.

Felt togetherness may be seen as a fountain of ease and healing. For Nora, who has been in mental health treatment for an extended period, her relationship with a particularly close friend has the effect of easing her pain:

I was talking to my friend on the phone... she felt so near to me. I was filled with gratefulness; of knowing her, and to have a friend like her in my life. Being with her is my best medicine. (*Nora*)

Through the pleasure gained by being with another, our healing can begin. When we are called away from ourselves, we are open, and thus, vulnerable to the other person. We put our weakness at stake. Paradoxically, our “weakness” has this powerful effect calling us to be responsive.

### **Feeling found and received**

Small children love playing hide-and-seek. The hiding is exciting, and so is the being searched for. The “seeker” is supposed to search in many places before getting nearer and nearer to the actual hiding-place (which is probably known from the beginning), swelling the delight of the little child waiting in suspense. The Norwegian psychologist and author; Guro Øiestad, describes her three-year-old’s response the moment she is discovered:

I hug her while she beams with joyfulness and released tension. And then: “One more time, mummy!” And precisely the same procedure repeats itself, with as much joy as before. (Øiestad, 2004, p.18, authors’ translation)

The most joyful moment of this playful event is when one is *found and received*. Winnicott (1965, p. 186) captures the existential significance of this moment when he writes: “It is joy to be hidden, and disaster not to be found”. To be called, searched for, found and received is an existential need we never grow out of. It signifies being held in mind and actively sought by someone. It means that we matter to someone. For the participants in our study, being

found and received manifests itself in moments of feeling noticed and significant. At such times, participants describe feeling cared for and being seen and taken in.

### *Feeling welcomed as significant to the Other*

For Kristin, a 20-year-old woman battling depression and fatigue, such moments occurred during visits to a friend's home. Kristin had felt alienated in the foster family she had lived with since early childhood until recently. Now she experienced something altogether different:

I went with a friend to her house every day after school, even if it was just for a few minutes. Her mother always talked to me...it was so nice just to be there with them. I remember I felt welcome, taken under her wing. It was this warmth... I really felt it. Sometimes I think her warmth saved me. (*Kristin*)

In the context of a caring atmosphere, the experience of being taken in and having a sense of being significant to an Other may open a door to oneself. Being warmed by another person's caring concern is a vital source of nourishment, even of survival as a person. Buber (1947/1965, p.168) puts it like this: "Man can become whole not in virtue of a relation to himself but only in virtue of a relation to another self". To feel seen and understood can unfold as a subtle realization in long-term relationships as well as sudden insights within shorter encounters. It encompasses an experience of being known and of recognizing oneself in the Other's gaze. There is a sense of "coming home", of being welcomed by someone who truly knows you.

### *Feeling witnessed*

Tuva, a 19-year old, whose family was struck by tragedy when she was 7 years old, struggled with depression and suicidal thoughts. Following the tragedy, she had been largely

left to her own devices, tending parents who had sought refuge in drugs and were not able to be there for her. Then one of her teachers enabled her to feel seen and understood:

He just listened calmly and patiently. He didn't go into hysterics when I told him about my suicidal thoughts... just tolerantly accepted them. It was this atmosphere between us... free from judgement. Simultaneously softness and solidity... he showed me that he *would* and *could* be there for me. I felt safe... and free in a way, with him.

*(Tuva)*

To have a witness to what matters to us validates our very existence. It gives us space to be. In the embodied being-with another, we are no longer an object for another, exposed to their evaluation or devaluation. It is a way of being-with that "sees" what is, as it is, and appreciates whatever it "is" for its own sake without "why" or "for the sake of", or "in order to" (DuBose, 2015). It is like a smooth landing in existence itself. Tuva also spoke of her efforts to draw attention to the neglect she suffered as a child:

I tried to tell other adults, also Child Protection, but they didn't believe me. So they did nothing. I withdrew into myself... felt alone and sad. Then I met this health visitor... I told her my story, and she believed me. Just like that. To be believed felt like coming to a restful place. My world changed... suddenly there was room for me.

She saw me. *(Tuva)*

Here the attitude of the health visitor helped make Tuva's world brighter, richer and more secure; Tuva experienced a sense of being understood. A shared moment of finding and being found is a moment of freedom in which both parties feel open to being touched and claimed by the other. It is also a moment of receiving and being received. This powerful experience goes beyond the moment it is lived; both are affirmed as existing and as valuable persons to each other even when not together.

### **Feeling an attuned resonance**

When we experience an attuned resonance, we sense that the other has empathically attuned to us. We feel felt as the other gently tunes into us, resonating with our experience. We borrow the shared experience from Benjamin, Susanna and Emma to try to capture the sensitivity in these moments of deeply felt contact.

### ***Tuned to the same frequency***

Benjamin describes his experience of gaining support from an attuned other:

I have met several psychologists, but there was one with whom I felt a special contact and bond. She somewhat intuitively knew what kind of support I needed, before I said so...as if she felt my feelings... She felt nearer to me, in a way, than other psychologists I have seen. The connection I felt with her...I have never had that since.

She left a void when she moved to another job. (*Benjamin*)

Benjamin here seeks to describe the connection he felt with his attuned psychologist, who was able to sense and “feel” him. To attune means to adjust to another in sympathetic, synchronous relationship, to bring into harmony. Musical terms such as resonance, rhythm, duet and chorus come to mind when describing an attuned relationship (perhaps unsurprisingly so, given the “tune” in attune). The process of being “in sync” with another involves an attunement that mediates emotion and responds to the emotional tone of the other (Finlay, 2016). It is like two violins in a room: when the strings on one are plucked, the other also vibrates, if tuned to the same frequency (Rowan & Jacobs, 2002).

### ***Feeling touched in connecting with another***

Susanna recalls a moment of a deeply felt sense of communion, when both she and the one listening to her were mutually touched:

That was the moment for me when I thought: “Yeah, she really gets this. She gets me.” And that was the moment for me when I really felt seen and understood.

*(Susanna)*

This deeply felt sense of communion is an experience of mutual understanding: I feel-that you feel-that I feel. In this shared moment of being touched we honor one another’s vulnerability. We can be in the presence of others without feeling connected with them. We can distinguish connection from *disconnection* or a more neutral presence that passes over us in silence, as if unnoticeable. We cannot really tell *how* connection happens, but it is deeply sensed *within* our living body as really *there* – in the ‘between’, as a nearness to oneself and to the other, to us. Shared nearness comes with the sense of *feeling felt* by the other. An attuned awareness of the relationship and the between may sometimes come as a feeling of oneness, a joining at the multiple levels of mind, body and soul (Finlay & Eatough, 2012). It is like being on the same page, and to see the other beyond what is immediately apparent. Empathic attunement opens the possibility for such moments, when one can sense the unsaid and reveal the unspoken. “I listen to the tune being sung by the other. I try to connect with a deeper song – the song of contact, meeting, connectedness, longing” (Finlay & Evans, 2009, p.125).

### ***Resonating with the Other***

When one person’s tune harmonizes with another, there is an experience of resonance and becoming absorbed with the Other’s world. Emma shares one such experience:

I was struck by the intensity in our encounter, a communion on a deep level, a nearness balancing on the limit of what I could possibly bear. There were moments of almost confluence...the words she said could have been mine... they merged together. I was so *in* it...time and place disappeared from my

consciousness. Afterwards I needed time in solitude, to dwell with it, to digest it. I felt enriched...I was filled with something bigger than myself. (*Emma*)

In the moment of feeling in tune with (and attuned to) another we can feel a merging in which we become absorbed in the Other's world and somehow lose sight of our own. "To the extent that I understand," Merleau-Ponty (1960/1964, p.97) writes, "I no longer know who is speaking and who is listening." In this embodied intersubjectivity, there is a mutual openness toward another, one that discloses the Other (Merleau-Ponty, 1960/1964). As our attention turns toward the other, and we lose our focus on our own needs, we feel nourished and enriched. The merging of interpersonal worlds holds a possibility of unfolding each person's potential, of creating something greater than either person alone could achieve. In the wake of this, we may experience both reverence and humbleness. We may feel blessed by a wondrous and ineffable mystery.

## Discussion

The aim of this article was to explicate layered meanings of "nourishing communion" as an aspect of support to young persons with mental health problems. As the concept of nourishing communion has not been previously addressed in this specific, non-secular, way, we argue that our study makes a distinct, new contribution.

In the moment of nourishing communion, there is a feeling of trust and holding, of being present and mutually participating, of acceptance in felt togetherness, of being found and received, and of attuned resonance. These dimensions of "nourishing communion" expand the general point concerning the importance of support and relationship for persons with mental health challenges. They highlight relational qualities that are a source of pleasure in life, help strengthen oneself to cope with challenges, and impart a sense of faith in oneself

as a valuable person who is significant for others. The experience of nourishing communion may also enhance connectedness to broader contexts, such as schools, workplaces and places of worship, as well as to contexts related to interests such as music, art or sport (Karlsson & Borg, 2017).

Our study suggests that a sense of “nourishing communion” can emerge in relationships and communities both *within* and *outside* professional services, and we would recommend that service providers include both contexts in the support they offer young people. Although a nourishing communion can be found between a professional and a young person in need of support, it seems more likely to happen outside professional services, in contexts where the young persons live their everyday lives. It can blossom within the family, or in the company of friends; it can take place at school, at the workplace, in places of worship and during participation in other activities. This confirms the importance of everyday life as the orientation point for social and mental health support (Karlsson & Borg, 2017; Schön, Denhov, & Topor, 2009; Ness, Kvellø, Borg, Semb, & Davidson, 2017). Indeed, it would seem particularly crucial in the case of young persons (MHCC, 2014). This finding suggests that practitioners should be encouraged to make use of resources beyond their own professional context and domain when working with and on behalf of young persons (Ness et al., 2014).

The findings of our research suggest the need for health and social services to encourage professionals supporting young persons with mental health problems to pay attention to their clients’ interests and skills and emphasize relational qualities of trust, mutuality, acceptance, and attunement. This would involve putting aside the traditional professional agenda of knowing, informing and advising in favor of a more intimate encounter based on *being-with*. From our research, we would suggest that professionals could usefully enquire about the young person’s own agenda and life goals and then collaborate



toward these goals (even when such goals are at variance with the service provider's own preferences) (Kolouh-Söderlund, Lagercrantz, & Göransson, 2016).

The young persons in our study seem more than capable of searching out relationships that are important and inherently nourishing. Services and practitioners need to recognize this agentic competence and involve the young persons themselves in the processes of identifying and defining where and how they might create this kind of relationship (Kierkegaard, 2016).

Although young persons are able to search for relationships and communities of their own choice, opportunities to do so may be restricted in situations where mental health problems limit or prevent access to social arenas, such as school and work (MHCC, 2014). Professionals therefore need to facilitate opportunities for young persons to establish and maintain broader networks and nourishing social relations. This may involve service transformation and different collaborative partnerships and organizational structures. Perhaps professionals could do more to create hybrid services that include other partners such as volunteers, peers, public players, and actors from the local community (Kierkegaard, 2016). User organizations might also prove important collaborative partners, given the emphasis they place on service users' rights to be treated as equal citizens (Karlsson & Borg, 2017).

Professionals should also be encouraged and supported to establish networks and collaborative partnerships with any arena where young persons connect meaningfully with others: clubs, schools, work settings, places of worship, and so on. For health and welfare policy to facilitate such networks and partnerships, much work needs to be done to operationalize the findings and values discussed above.

### **Methodological considerations and further research**

The strength of phenomenological research lies in its potential to evoke and capture the richness of lived experiences and to deepen the understanding of a phenomenon through

descriptions from daily living. This is an especially valuable research approach when little is known about a topic (as is the case of the phenomenon of nourishing communion).

While the findings of this study may apply to other target groups, we see the findings as of immediate relevance to the field of mental health provision for young persons even if we cannot strictly generalize them. Rather than maintaining a rigid adherence to traditional criterion of generalizability favoured by positivists and quantitative research, phenomenology values the uncovering of possible meanings and deeper, more humanized empathic understandings of the phenomenon of interest (van Manen, 2014). It is not to say a nomothetic focus and generalizability is not important and not a dominant interest in phenomenology as it is (for instance, as seen in the work of Giorgi, 2009 and Wertz, 1985). But we want to acknowledge the hermeneutics of facticity (Heidegger, 1923/1999, p.12; see Churchill, 2013 for an elaboration), acknowledging the importance of *texture* as well as structure. Particular poetic depth and richness can be found at an idiographic level and this may not be generalizable – this is the “texture” (Keen, 2003, p. 18) we have tried to open up.

The first author invited the young persons attending the study to participate in open dialogues about support which revealed experiences suitable for further exploration for this research. We recognize that deeper descriptive accounts of the experience of nourishing communion would probably have resulted had we focused initially on this angle with the participants. There were numerous points in the interviews when the interviewer might have gone in a different direction, perhaps exploring embodied experience of nourishing communion more deeply. However, our emergent process of discovery fits our hermeneutic approach and demonstrates an appropriately non-judgmental, open phenomenological attitude. Future research might usefully attend more deeply to embodied lifeworld meanings. It might also seek to embrace different age groups and include participants of non-Norwegian ethnicity.

One unresolved and potentially problematic methodological issue concerns our decision to work through two languages. We acknowledge that the process of translating the young persons' words from Norwegian to English was always going to be tricky. In addition, the various authors involved in iteratively writing this article had to negotiate meanings between the two languages. That our reflexive dialogues were engaged in English, the first author's second language, meant our communications were not always smooth. We recognize that some meanings slipped away or shape-shifted through the process. We accept that reflection on meaning always "miscarries at the last moment" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 9).

It could be argued that our attuned attentiveness to language is a strength of this research, for it meant that we appreciated and addressed multiple ambiguous meanings. Certainly, in our commitment to embrace van Manen's artful hermeneutic phenomenological approach to writing, we remained concerned to find just the "right" word to evoke the phenomenon. This meant that we took our time dwelling with the iterations and this led us to explicate the themes more deeply.

Although we adopted the somewhat unusual approach of supplementing interview data with reflexive processing, the reflexive dialogues (between first and second authors) proved rich and inspiring. We found ourselves awed by the depth of contact and the way that deeper meanings fluidly emerged in our own nourishing communion. We are clear that our dialogue took us further and deeper than we would have gone had we just reflected individually. For this reason, we would argue that this research offers a further contribution in the shape of its relatively novel methodology which may suggest an interesting way forward for other research teams. We suggest that this method of reflexive dialogue (see also Finlay & McFerran, *Pending*) can be used as a sensitizing exercise to explore one's fore-structures, as part of the dwelling-analysis process, and also as data itself.

We acknowledge that our findings remain tentative and partial, since we cannot possibly capture a given experience in its entirety nor describe how all people will experience it. We therefore present our emergent thematic aspects as a starting point. We invite you as readers both to experience your own nourishing communion and to engage reflexive dialogues to further explore the phenomenon.

### **Conclusion**

This study has sought to advance understanding of the importance of nourishing supportive relationships for young persons with mental health problems. It has shed light on the many facets of the experience of being nurtured in a relationship as a significant quality of support and of being supported. The meaning structures that were revealed through our phenomenological analysis may be seen as a phenomenon of “nourishing communion”. A sense of nourishing communion embraces: feelings of trust and holding; flourishing in mutual participation; being found and received; acceptance in felt togetherness; and awareness of attuned resonance. In the context of young persons who are struggling with mental health challenges, or even just to grow up – which can be quite challenging in itself, the term “nourishing communion” as we have explored it in this article, may reflect healing possibilities in an early stage of life. The notion of “nourishing communion” as a particular type of support challenges current practice by suggesting the need for a different approach to collaboration with young persons and their networks. From the perspective of individual professional engagement, and at the level of policy making, there is a need for further exploration of how young persons might be supported in creating, establishing and maintaining contexts and relationships that hold the qualities of nourishing communion.

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