

Original Article

## Understanding the Meaning of the Ambiguous Body – A Hermeneutic Concept Analysis of Flesh and Fleshly

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### Abstract

**Background:** When the body becomes sick it sends out signals that might be difficult to interpret for the suffering human being. If the patient has no concepts or language that helps him to understand what is going on in his body, the bodily changes might be perceived as confusing and perhaps frightening and thus promote suffering. Merleau-Ponty seeks to describe the visible, but also the invisible body in order to understand the deepness and inner reality of the human being with his philosophy of flesh, a concept which may deepen our understanding of the human body.

**Aim:** The aim of the study is to explore and understand the meaning and content of the concepts of flesh and fleshly. Likewise, to show how this knowledge can enrich the understanding of the ambiguous body and what the body means to the suffering human being.

**Method:** To bring forth a deeper clarity and meaning of flesh and fleshly and hence the body, it was necessary to perform a hermeneutic concept analysis of flesh and fleshly, created by Koort and further developed by Sivonen, Kasén and Eriksson, and a review of descriptions of flesh in the dictionaries.

**Results and conclusion:** The study reveals dimensions of flesh as corporeal, protective, temporal, sensuous, shameful and vigorous body. It is important that nurses are aware of these bodily dimensions in order to help the patients articulate and make visible some of the wordlessness and invisibility, which concern the body, and thus help the patients regain feelings of dignity and health.

**Key words:** Body, flesh, fleshly, life experiences, concept analysis

### Introduction

The rational or objective dimension of the body has got most attention in nursing practice and in nursing research (Draper, 2014; Sandelowski, 2002; Wolf, 2014). However, when the body becomes sick, it might become like an alerting device that sends out signals and inhabits meanings that are beyond the rational or objective meaning dimensions of the body. The body speaks to the person through sensations and

not through objective diagnostic labeling (Picco, Santoro, & Garrino, 2010; Sakalys, 2006). The patients are sensible to bodily signals and try to understand what they mean according to the illness. It is crucial to make the invisible meaning dimensions of the body more visible by expressing them with words. Otherwise, if the patient has no concepts or language that helps him to understand what is going on in his body, the bodily changes might be perceived as vague, confusing and probably frightening and thus

promote suffering. It is through concepts or language people understand the world and make things meaningful (Eriksson, 2010; Gadamer, 2004). The language forms the basis for understanding (Eriksson, 2010).

In order to understand more about what the body represents and means to the suffering human being we looked for a concept that captured the ambiguous body. We found that Merleau-Ponty (1968, 2002)'s philosophy of flesh inhabited this dimension. Merleau-Ponty (2002) states that the body is not only a physical object, but also the human existence is based in the body. Thus, the body is something we have, but the body is also something we are (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). In his latest and unfinished work, Merleau-Ponty (1968) goes a bit further and seeks to capture and express both the visible but also the invisible dimensions of the body in order to understand the deepness and inner reality of the human being. He describes flesh as the individual's body, but it has also a metaphoric meaning and is an element of being (Merleau-Ponty, 1968; Sandelowski, 2002; Wolf, 2014).

Scientific articles (Gabrielsen, Lindström, & Nåden, 2009; Honkavuo, Sivonen, Eriksson, & Nåden, 2018; Werkander Harstäde, Roxberg, Andershed, & Brunt, 2012) refer to hermeneutic concept analysis to explore the meaning of a concept. Thus, we found it suitable to perform a hermeneutic concept analysis (Eriksson, 2010; Koort, 1975; Sivonen, Kasén, & Eriksson, 2010) of flesh and fleshly and a review of descriptions of flesh in the dictionaries to bring forth a deeper meaning of flesh and fleshly and hence the ambiguous body. It was necessary to perform two analysis because flesh has synonyms that are nouns (flesh) and adjectives (fleshly), and they have to be separated according to the method.

Few studies have explored in a deeper sense the meaning of body. Sivonen and Kasén (2003) have done a concept analysis of body, and Lindwall (2004) has done a modified semantic analysis of body in her doctoral thesis. There seems to be no semantic analysis of flesh and fleshly.

The aim of this study is therefore to explore and understand the meaning and content of the concepts flesh and fleshly. Likewise, to show how this knowledge can enrich the understanding of the ambiguous body and what the body means to the suffering human being.

## Method

The hermeneutic concept analysis was created by Koort (1975) and further developed by Eriksson (2010) and Sivonen, Kasén, and Eriksson (2010). The intention of this analysis is to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning content of a concept by doing an analysis of the lexical meaning of the concept related to its conceptual family. The analysis searches to capture the depth and core of the concept by detecting nuances, variations, and features, which might enable a deeper understanding of its meanings (Eriksson, 2010; Honkavuo et al., 2018).

The dictionaries to be included should cover as long a period as possible so that a development of the concept and its meaning and synonyms can be seen. In this study five etymological dictionaries and nine Norwegian language dictionaries, published between 1937 and 2016 have been investigated. The dictionaries, except the etymological ones, are shown in table 1. No older dictionaries were included because flesh does not appear in the oldest Norwegian dictionaries. The authority of the dictionaries was taken into consideration when selecting them for inclusion.

The first step in the analysis is to study the history of the concept (an etymological analysis). The analysis yields knowledge on how a concept is used and understood in a language during a historical period. The original and ancient meaning of a word, even if concrete and old fashioned, can reveal the intrinsic meaning content of the concept and lead to concrete situations and contexts that have formed our mental notions attached to the word, but also lead to new meanings that may open up our understanding of the body today.

The second step was to explore the lexical meaning content of the concepts and its related synonyms and strong and weak synonyms were uncovered (table 1). If the examination of the dictionaries shows that the synonyms are the same in all the dictionaries the semantic analysis is completed. However, when this was not the case in our study, discrimination matrixes were made which show the number of dictionaries in which the synonyms of the concept's synonyms are identical with the synonyms of the original concept. Then the interrelatedness or the degree of synonyms from the matrixes were estimated and the results are illustrated in two maps or discrimination paradigms with main concepts

and the synonyms of the synonyms which are regarded as characteristics of the concept (the paradigm phase) (figure 1 & 2).

According to Koort (1975) only synonyms with 40-50 % degree of synonymy should be included in the further analysis. Eriksson and Herberts (1993) broadened the perspective and claimed that sometimes even a weak synonym can be included if related to the research interest or to the original meaning content of the word. In line with the above statement, we have included all the synonyms in the discrimination paradigm, but in the description of results, we will concentrate on the words with the strongest bindings.

In the last phase, we did an interpretation of the results from the discrimination paradigms and the descriptions from dictionaries. The interpretation was inspired by Gadamer (2004)'s ontological hermeneutics. The results were interpreted through a dialogue or dialectical movement between the results with the highest degree of synonymy from the discrimination paradigms (figure 1 & 2), the etymological analysis, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of flesh and nursing and caring theory and research.

### *Descriptions of flesh in the dictionaries*

In the examinations of dictionaries, with the exception of etymological dictionaries, we find many descriptions of the concept of flesh in the form of phrases that give meaning to the concepts and show how it is used in different settings. These phrases cannot be included in the hermeneutic concept analysis, which is only possible on singular terms. Especially adjectives in the phrases that characterize flesh, and which are not present in the semantic and etymological analysis, are of concern. To gain a more comprehensive understanding, we also search for related synonyms to the adjectives in the dictionaries.

### **Results**

In this section, we present the results from the hermeneutic concept analysis and the descriptions from the dictionaries and show how meaning dimensions of the body emerge through the analysis of flesh and fleshly.

### *Etymological analysis*

Flesh is a common word in the Western and Northern Germanic languages. Etymologically, the word is related to the old English word *flæsc* and means the muscular parts of animals' and

humans' bodies. It is the soft, bloody and greasy part of the human or animal body, in contrast to bones and sinews (Bjorvand & Lindeman, 2000; Online Etymology Dictionary; Ordbog over det danske sprog. Historisk ordbog 1700-1950; Svenska Akademiens Ordbok SAOB).

Flesh has, in the Bible, a figurative use as carnal nature, animal or physical nature of man, especially in Paul's use of the Greek *sarx*. This leads to a sense of 'sensual appetites' from the 1200s. In a religious tract from 1548 we find *fleshling*, meaning 'a sensual person' (Online Etymology Dictionary). In Norwegian, flesh is an inherited word that, when used in religious settings has the Norwegian and Danish word-form *kjød* (Bjorvand & Lindeman, 2000; Falk & Torp, 1994). It is the bodily condition as opposed to the spiritual.

Flesh has also the meaning of fruit from 1570 (Online Etymology Dictionary). Other meanings are 'living creature' and 'near kindred,' as in the phrase 'flesh and blood'. Here flesh describes a living human being with human needs and desires. Flesh is also used in a phrase from the 1660s, meaning with figurative extensions, 'to clothe or embody with flesh', here related to *fleshed* and *fleshing* (Online Etymology Dictionary). An old English poetry word for body was *flæsc-hama*, literally 'flesh-home' (Online Etymology Dictionary). Another Norse word related to flesh (*kjotr*) is *kvett* (Falk & Torp, 1994). *Kvett* exists in skaldic poetry and has the meaning 'piece of meat of whale' (Bjorvand & Lindeman, 2000).

### *Hermeneutic concept analysis*

The synonym table (table 1) shows that the concepts that appear frequently according to flesh are the two Norwegian words of body (*legeme* and *kropp*) and nourishment. The meaning content of fleshly in the oldest dictionary was sensuous, earthly and sinful. In recent dictionaries corporeal, bodily, sexual, secular and sensual appear. Since the authors of the dictionaries seem to disagree about the synonyms of flesh and fleshly, it is necessary to conduct a discrimination analysis with all the synonyms which shows the connections and directions of the synonyms to the concepts flesh and fleshly. This begins with discriminatory matrixes and continues with discrimination paradigms of flesh (Fig. 1) and fleshly (Fig. 2).

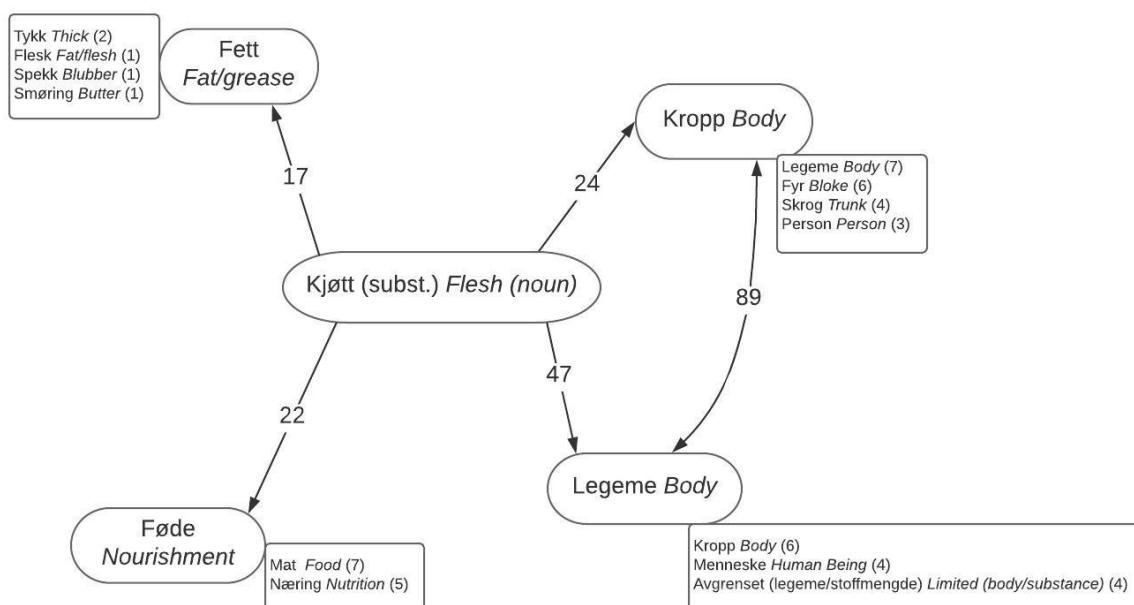
**Table 1. Synonym table for flesh and fleshly**

<b>KJØTT/KJØD</b> (noun) <b>FLESH</b>	Norsk Riksmålsordbok 1937	Norsk Synonymordbok 1964	Bokmålsordboka. Definisjon og rettskriving 1986	Cappelens ordbok bokmål 1986	Aschehoug og Gyldendals store Norske Ordbok 1991	Rettskrivningsordbok med synonymmer 1992	Norsk ordbok. Ordbok over det norske folkemålet 2001	Norsk Ordbok med 1000 illustrasjoner (2. utg.) 2005	Escolas ordbok, 7. utg. 2009	Total
Legeme <i>Body</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	9
Kropp <i>Body</i>	x	x				x	x		x	5
Føde (fra dyr) <i>Nourishment</i>	x			x	x			x		4
Fett <i>Fat/grease</i>				x			x			2
<b>KJØDELIG</b> (adjective) <b>FLESHLY</b>										
Sanselig <i>Sensuous</i>	x	x			x	x	x	x	x	7
Jordisk <i>Earthy</i>	x	x				x		x	x	5
Legemlig <i>Corporeal</i>		x		x	x			x	x	5
Kroppslig <i>Bodily</i>		x			x			x		3
Seksuell <i>Sexual</i>		x			x			x		3
Sensuell <i>Sensual</i>		x			x			x		3
Verdslig <i>Secular</i>		x			x			x		3
Syndig <i>Sinful</i>	x	x				x				3
Egen <i>Own/Individual</i>		x								1
Veritabel <i>Veritable</i>		x								1
Virkelig <i>Real</i>		x								1

The discrimination paradigm of flesh (Fig. 1) shows that flesh has quite a strong binding to body as *legeme*, and weaker binding to body as *kropp*, fat and nourishment. The related synonyms to flesh as body are both body as human being and body as body excluding head and limbs. Both are included in the further analysis because of the complex meaning dimensions of the concept. Body as human being reminds us of the living dimension of body. Body as body excluding head and limbs has a corporeal and a protective meaning while it keeps the body upright and together.

Another synonym of flesh is fat. The synonyms related to fat are thick, blubber and butter. Butter has both a concrete and an extensional definition, and in this study, the extensional definition is appropriate. Blubber has a specific meaning as the fat of sea mammals, especially whales and seals. These synonyms have properties of grease and softness, which in a metaphoric way give associations to flesh as the protective body.

The relationship between the above synonyms is visualized in figure 1.

**Figure 1. The discrimination paradigm of flesh.**

The discrimination paradigm of fleshly (Fig. 2) shows that fleshly has the strongest bindings to sensuous, earthly and corporeal. The 100 % link between corporeal and bodily demonstrates that these two concepts are identical.

Earthly and secular have also quite a strong binding that indicates a great deal of synonymy. The related synonyms to earthly and corporeal confirm the material dimension. Flesh does not last forever; it decays, perishes and breaks down and the dimension of flesh as the corporeal and the temporal body emerges.

Sensuous, with its strong binding to sexual and sensual, confirms the dimension of desire and flesh as the sensuous body appears. Fleshly has also a binding to sinful, with its corresponding synonyms horrible, burdened with, shameful and unchristian. These synonyms confirm dimensions of shame and disgracefulness and flesh as the shameful body emerge. The relationship between the above synonyms is visualized in figure 2.

#### **Descriptions of flesh in the dictionaries**

The meaning content of the descriptions of flesh in phrases reveals meanings of strength (juicy and luscious), living and fragility. These give

associations to flesh as the vigorous body and not just a dead material. Likewise, fragility gives associations to flesh as the temporal and shameful body.

#### **Interpretative discussion**

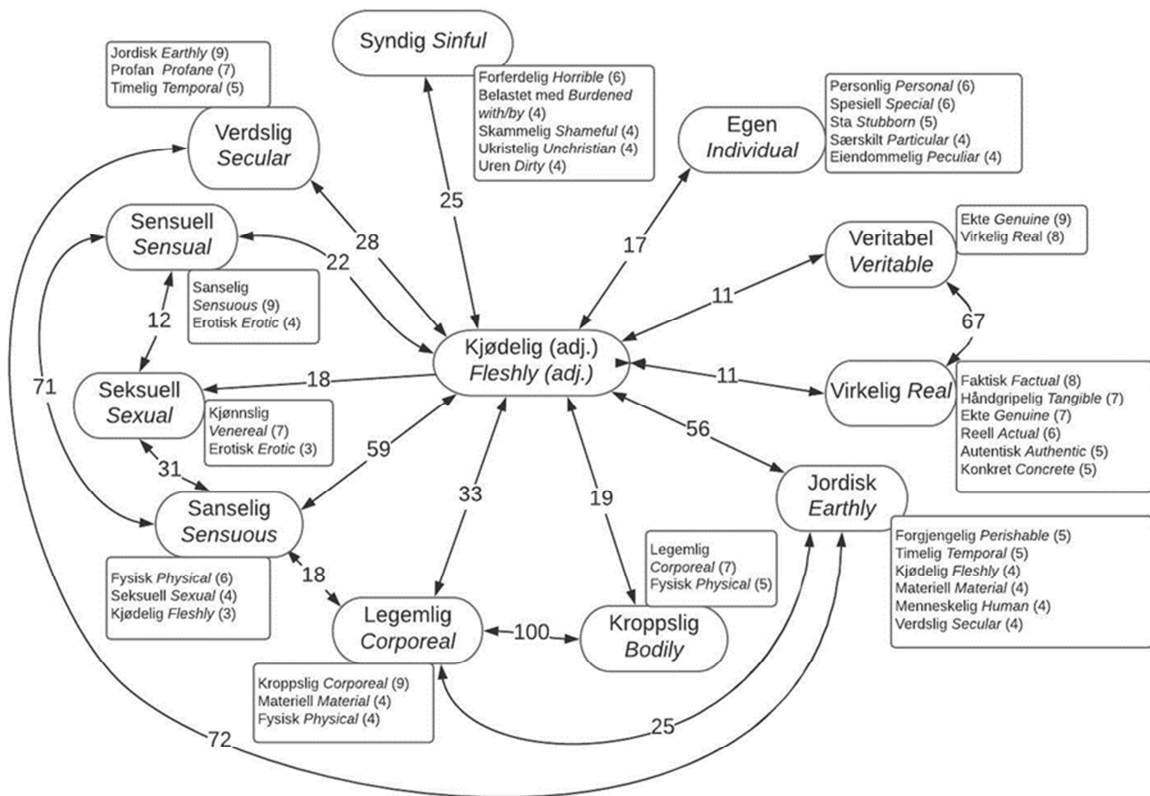
Due to Eriksson's theory about the human being as an entity of body, soul and spirit (Eriksson, 2006), it is impossible to separate the body from the entity. Thus, while flesh is both the individual's body but has also a metaphoric meaning and is an element of being (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 2002), interpretation of the results of flesh and fleshly brings forth a deeper meaning of flesh and fleshly and hence the body.

Six themes emerged from the interpretation process:

- 1) Flesh as the corporeal body
- 2) Flesh as the protective body
- 3) Flesh as the temporal body
- 4) Flesh as the sensuous body
- 5) Flesh as the shameful body, and
- 6) Flesh as the vigorous body.



Figure 2. The discrimination paradigm of fleshly.



### ***Flesh as the corporeal body***

The physical and material aspects of body are found in the hermeneutic concept analysis of, respectively, fleshly with its synonym corporeal and flesh with its synonym body. The related synonym to body, trunk, is the central part of the human body, which keeps the body in an upright position, and the body is dependent on it for its existence. An empirical study (Lorentsen, Nåden, & Sæteren, 2019) shows how important it is for patients to feel that their physical body still carries them, that they are still able to stand upright despite an advanced cancer diagnosis. When the body is no longer able to carry the person in an upright position, this causes helplessness and vulnerability, reminding the human being of her changed condition due to illness.

### ***Flesh as the protective body***

The body as trunk may also be understood as a form of protection while it keeps the body in an upright position and prevents it from falling, and flesh has an element of protection in the description of flesh as soft in the dictionaries. Flesh is also the soft tissue between the body's skin and bones, according to the etymological analysis. These descriptions of flesh evoke the body as something good, protective and restful.

Elements of protection are also found in the characteristics of whales from the etymological analysis. Whales are covered with a thick layer of blubber that insulates against cold and stores energy, which is important to the health of whales and protects them in periods when they do not eat. Blubber is also a related synonym to fat in the semantic analysis of flesh. The other related synonyms to fat: thick and butter, have also characteristics that confirm the element of protection.

These descriptions of goodness and protection, which the body represents, both concretely and metaphorically, may describe the body as the bearer of dignity (Edlund, 2002; Edlund, Lindwall, Post, & Lindström, 2013). However, understanding the body in this sense is problematic when the body is sick and the relative dignity is threatened (Edlund, 2002; Edlund et al., 2013).

Thus, the sick body can illuminate dignity as a value inherent to the human being rather than connected to what the body is able to perform.

### ***Flesh as the temporal body***

The dimension of time also becomes evident in the hermeneutic concept analysis of fleshly. The synonym earthly, which has one of the strongest bindings to fleshly, with its related synonyms perishable, material and temporal, shows that flesh is final; it is temporary and fleeting. People are going to die and the body is going to decompose or decay. Secular, with its related synonym temporal, also confirms the temporal dimension of the body. This is further affirmed by Løgstrup (1978) who describes time as irreversible: it is linear, transitory and will not return. Life is always a movement towards death.

However, studies show that time might also have a wider meaning, as timeless time. Timeless time is the moment where time stands still, and one might gain a glimpse of something real and genuine, or a sanctifying infinitude, as Nurminen (2009, 2012) calls it. We did not find this dimension in neither the semantic nor the etymological analysis. However, we might recognize this dimension of time in Merleau-Ponty (1968)'s philosophy of flesh when he claims that flesh is the place where mind, body and world cross. Time as flesh might also be understood, as in Kierkegaard's description of the moment, as the time when temporality and eternity meet (Sæteren, 2006). In this moment of timeless time, people may experience renewal and alleviation.

### ***Flesh as the sensuous body***

There are elements of sensitiveness, or rather sensuousness, in the hermeneutic concept analysis of fleshly with the synonyms sensuous and sensual, both strongly related semantically. Even though the synonyms related to the two synonyms sensuous and sensual are of a more sexual and erotic character, the sensuous dimension of the body is important and has the strongest binding to fleshly in the discrimination paradigm. We also found elements of sensitiveness in the descriptions of flesh in the dictionaries, where soft was understood as being touched lightly and as sensitive. The etymological analysis also reveals, especially in a religious setting, flesh as 'sensual appetites' and flesh as 'a sensual person'.

Merleau-Ponty (2002) confirms how the body can gain access to the truth through relating to or affecting the senses rather than the intellect. He claims that sensuousness or perception is our

access to the world through our materiality or through our flesh. Corbin (2003) also states that the body speaks to the person through sensations that are anchored in meaning that is derived through experience in the social world.

### ***Flesh as the shameful body***

There are elements of shamefulness and dirtiness in the hermeneutic concept analysis of fleshly, where both descriptions were synonyms related to sinful. Other synonyms related to sinful were horrible, burdened with and unchristian. Shame is something that people often hide from others; it is mute and dark and experienced deep inside the human being, exerting a negative influence on the self (Dolezal, 2015; Werkander Harstäde et al., 2012). Living with a hidden and unarticulated suffering or shame, or suffering with no language, leave people unable to articulate who they are (Råholm, 2008).

### ***Flesh as the vigorous body***

The results show a number of synonyms with elements of strength. These are descriptions from the dictionaries of flesh as juicy and flesh of the fruit, but also the descriptions of flesh as something succulent and fresh that nourishes the body and provides strength. We also found fat and nourishment as synonyms of flesh in the hermeneutic concept analysis, which may be understood as important sources of energy that provide strength. Flesh is not just a piece of dead meat, but is alive and vital. The etymological analysis also confirms this by showing that flesh relates to an old English word that means the muscular part of the human or animal body. These synonyms confirm the importance of the life-affirming dimension represented by the body.

### **Methodological considerations**

The dictionaries included in this study were from almost every decade (1937-2009) except for the period from 1940-1950s, when there were few relevant dictionaries, possibly because of problems related to World War II (Gabrielsen et al., 2009). This is important in order to have knowledge of the concept's development over time (Koort, 1975; Sivonen et al., 2010), to be able to explore and understand the meaning of constructs. It is also important to have as much width as possible in the family of concepts. This we have also almost achieved, except for the fact that two of the dictionaries have one editor, Guttu (1991, 2005), which may explain why

there are many similar synonyms in the two dictionaries.

Semantic analysis is preferably done in the researcher's native language, as the interpretations of the results are presumed to be more valid in one's first language. When translating conceptual meanings into another language, the challenge is to find words that express the same meaning (Sivonen et al., 2010). Still we wanted to translate the Norwegian semantic analysis into English as we found the knowledge generated from the analysis to be of a wider, professional and scientific interest. An authorized translator performed the translations of the Norwegian words.

The choice of method for exploring and understanding the meaning of flesh may seem antagonistic to Merleau-Ponty's belief in language. He claims that things expressed metaphorically are considered to mirror the activity of life more closely than a language that is more semantically resolvable (Sellheim, 2010). Nevertheless, hermeneutic concept analysis is a fruitful method to widen our understanding of the concept because it allows a deeper understanding of the conceptual content when lexicons and thesauruses are used in a new way, not primarily for explanations of words but for exploring the meaning of constructs.

### **Conclusion and implications for nursing practice**

The study reveals insight into the meaning of the ambiguous body. The body is more than the physical body we recognize with our eyes. The descriptions of flesh as corporeal, protective, temporal, sensuous, shameful and vigorous body shed light on dimensions that are important for the human beings' feelings of dignity and health.

It is important that nurses are aware of these meaning dimensions so they may help the patients discover how the body can protect them or how they can feel the strength that the vigorous body represents. Likewise, nurses should take into account that peoples' access to knowledge is through the sensuous body and the importance of being sensitive to underlying shame in order to help the patients regain feelings of dignity and health.

The several meaning dimensions of the body detect nuances of reality and might be a reminder of the complexity of nursing care. However, while part of our understanding of the other is



rooted in our body and is less available for our consciousness because it is unarticulated and affective, this study might help us articulate and make visible some of this wordlessness and invisibility, which concern the body. Thus, in order to care for the whole human being and thereby help nurses perform better nursing care, it is important to explore the different meaning dimensions of the body. Likewise, to develop knowledge that the body is more than the visible body, a knowledge which previously has been more or less hidden.

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