

move away from the problem situation toward the human dimension, seeking *meaning* in the realm of needs and values. This special design skill has evolved as a reaction to the fact that problem situations often arise when organizations try to tackle an issue through fossilized frames, in technocratic or bureaucratic ways. Judging from the case studies in chapter 1, the overly technocratic and/or bureaucratic approach of conventional problem-solving in organizations is a significant part of our modern predicament. We have seen in the cases of chapter 2 that restoring the human dimension where it has been lost is an extraordinarily fruitful pursuit. In case study 6, understanding the nature of the loneliness that mentally handicapped people face when they are “reintegrated” into society leads to solutions that go far beyond the conventional framing of this problem situation in terms of care. The universal themes that drive the patterns of human behavior are manifold: they include the need to develop an identity, to feel at home, to deal with the loneliness that is an inseparable part of the human condition, etc. Arriving at these universal themes from the starting point of a concrete problem situation is not an easy process, and we will need much of the remaining chapters to explain the practices and strategies that expert designers have developed to traverse this difficult terrain. What the expert designers engage in is a subtle process of theme analysis that is very close to the practices used in “hermeneutic phenomenology” (van Manen 1990). But whereas in hermeneutic phenomenology, philosophers seek to reach a deep understanding of the human experience that underlies a text (hence “hermeneutics”), designers are interested in “reading” a problem situation.

Themes are a tool, a form of capturing the underlying phenomenon in a situation one tries to understand. Themes arise from the need or desire to comprehend—they are the sense we are able to make of a situation when we approach it openly, without prejudgment. The formulation of a theme is, at best, a simplification, helping us to distinguish a set of significant experiences and a deeper layer of meaning that underlies many observations. In hermeneutic phenomenology, distilling themes from a complex situation is described as a process of insightful invention, discovery, and disclosure. Philosophers have developed an extensive array of methods and helpful tools to systematically approach a text and to discover and formulate its themes. In his book *Researching Lived Experience*, van Manen (1990) for example describes the process of building an understanding of what it means for a child to be left alone by its parents. He systematically analyzes this theme by calling upon a broad array of sources: stream-of-consciousness texts, interviews, biographies, fairy tales,