

Doing Heideggerian hermeneutic research: A discussion paper

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Received 13 August 2007; received in revised form 17 September 2007; accepted 18 September 2007

Abstract

Background: Much has been published related to the epistemology of Heideggerian hermeneutic research. We seek to reveal insights from our experience of enacting such research.

Objective: To articulate the lived experience of ‘doing’ Heideggerian hermeneutic research.

Design: The authors of this paper shared their experiences with the primary author towards articulating the process of ‘doing’ such research.

Participants: The authors all have long experience with Heideggerian hermeneutic research and meet regularly at the Institute for Interpretive Phenomenology. They supervise student’s research and are mindful of the process of coming to understand how to work in a phenomenological/hermeneutic manner.

Methods: First the section on philosophical underpinnings was written by the primary author and then shared with all authors. There was published data related to the experience of three of the participants already available. This provided a spring board to further conversations when the primary author visited America, able to engage in daily conversations with three of the co-authors. In the spirit of phenomenology this paper represents a process of reading, talking, writing, talking, reading, re-writing, re-talking and so forth.

Results: The process of doing hermeneutic phenomenology is represented as a journey of ‘thinking’ in which researchers are caught up in a cycle of reading-writing-dialogue- which spirals onwards. Through such disciplined and committed engagement insights ‘come’. The researcher is always open to questions, and to following a felt-sense of what needs to happen next. However, it is not a process of ‘do whatever you like’ but rather a very attentive attunement to ‘thinking’ and listening to how the texts speak.

Conclusion: This paper argues that alongside a disciplined understanding of the methodology, both researcher and reader need to share a commitment to ‘thinking’ which is willing to question, and open to trusting the resonance of understanding that ‘comes’ without expecting answers that are declared ‘truth’ for all time.

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Keywords: Heidegger; Gadamer; Phenomenology; Hermeneutics; Thinking; Trustworthiness

What is already known about the topic?

- Enquiry arising from interpretive phenomenological/hermeneutic philosophy is becoming more accepted and better understood by nursing scholars around the world.

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- Step by step methods of doing such research reflecting from various philosophical commitments.
- Insights gleaned from such phenomenological/hermeneutic research contribute to disciplinary understanding of a wide-range of phenomena of interest to nurses and other health care providers.

What this paper adds

- A clear articulation of how the philosophical ideas of Heidegger and Gadamer can be enacted in ‘being’ a phenomenological/hermeneutic researcher.
- A showing that goes beyond the ‘theory’ or ‘method’ (procedure) of how to do such research to illuminate the process as it is lived—that is, to uncover the ontology.
- An argument that such research is a journey of ‘thinking’ rather than a specific, pre-determined process by which ‘findings’ can be pinned down.

Many authors have written about the epistemology of Heideggerian hermeneutic research. Early researchers revealed the ‘how’ of methodology and method and others eagerly engaged in such research. *Techné* (know how) from the wider qualitative domain informed questions of rigour, which was later renamed as trustworthiness. There was a sense that there was a method to follow. We, the authors of this paper, have enacted the methodology many times both in our own work and when guiding doctoral students. We call it by several names embracing a selection and combination of the following words: interpretive, phenomenology, and hermeneutics, drawing specifically on Heidegger and Gadamer. We do not situate ourselves within the writings of Husserl, or those linked to him such as Colazzi and Giorgi (Dowling, 2004; MacKey, 2005). That is, we seek to stay close to experience itself (ontologic) rather than try to articulate a more generalised analysis of essence (ontic).

In conversation with each other we perceive disquiet: there seems to be a gap between how our approach to enquiry gets reported in the few paragraphs that accompany a paper or manuscript and how we experience undertaking our enquiry. *Techné* (know how) that pre-defines a ‘way’ has silenced lived *phronesis*, the wisdom-in-action that knows in the moment, and finds the way day by day. In this paper, we return to the notions of Heidegger and Gadamer to articulate something of *phronesis* that resists being pinned down, refuses to be a set of steps, is enacted differently by each one of us, and yet shares a common quest. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the emerging, in-the-play event of Heideggerian phenomenology as-lived.

Let us put forward as a guiding light to this paper the statement: ‘Phenomenology means a way of staying true to what must be thought’ (Harman, 2007, p. 155). We argue that research is thinking ‘that which is pointed to as something to be thought about’. All is thought, which raises questions about ‘how do we think’ and ‘how do we understand the nature of insight which thinking seeks to uncover’? We draw from Arendt’s understanding: ‘We are so accustomed to the old oppositions of reason and passion, of mind and life, that the idea of a passionate thing, in which thinking and being alive become one, can be but startling’ (Arendt and Heidegger, 2004, p. 153). In other words, who one is as-researcher is fundamental to the thinking of research, for thinking does not happen as a mechanistic process divorced from being in the world. Rather thinking is lived, breathed, and dreamt, felt, run-with, laughed, and cried. It arises from all that has come before in one’s life, both the remembered and that which is known without knowing. Thinking reveals itself in the ‘ah ha’ of words jumping off a page, in conversation that gives insight, in writing where sentences seem to fall onto the page of their own demanding. Thinking is everything. The researcher is as-thinker, and so too is the reader who is called to think about ‘this’ and not so much about ‘that’. All is in-play, being played and sometimes out-played (Gadamer, 1982). There is little that can be pinned down without losing the salient nature of the quest. Nevertheless, a ‘showing’ requires that the pause button be pushed to allow us to see a still frame of being before the play button once again activates that which in the living can never be stopped.

1. At the heart

To be human, to be a researcher who lives life as articulated by the writings of Heidegger is to always already be in-the-midst of a specific situating that is constantly in flux. Heidegger (in Harman, 2007, p. 28) says that life is ‘thisly’: this life doing this research this way with these people at this time and place in this mood with these possibilities. Thus, any pre-conceived plan always rubs up against what ‘is’ which may or may not fit with pre-thought ideas of order or process. Specific knowing can only come in the moment. Time, past, present and future come together and are torn apart amidst such moments:

We find ourselves delivered to a situation that must be dealt with somehow (past). Yet we are not mere slaves to this situation, since we go to work on our current situation by glimpsing possibilities in it that we can try to actualize (future). Finally, every moment of factual life is a profound tension between what is given to us and how we confront it (present).

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