



DISCUSSION

Exploring Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology: A perfect fit for midwifery research

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ABSTRACT

Background: Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology has been used widely to understand the meaning of lived experiences in health research. For midwifery scholars this approach enables deep understanding of women's and midwives' lived experiences of specific phenomena. However, for beginning researchers this is not a methodology for the faint hearted. It requires a period of deep immersion to come to terms with at times impenetrable language and perplexing concepts.

Objectives: This paper aims to assist midwives to untangle and examine some of the choices they face when they first come to terms with an understanding of this methodology and highlights the methodology's capacity to reveal midwifery authenticity and holistic practice.

Discussion: The illumination of a selection of various concepts underpinning hermeneutic phenomenology will inform midwives considering this methodology as suitable framework for exploring contemporary midwifery phenomena.

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1. Introduction

The use of qualitative methodologies in midwifery research has grown significantly over the last two decades. These methodologies have enabled researchers to use participants' stories to present insights into the humanistic aspects of midwifery work. In particular, a hermeneutic framework provides researchers with a process of valuing stories that express the experiences of others' everydayness as they engage in the phenomenon of interest.^{1,2} Researchers using this methodology unpack and repack stories so they can explicate meaning for others. Todres et al.³ present the following metaphor as an example to explain the opportunity that phenomenologists have to grasp these meanings: 'Just as fish take for granted the water they swim in, we as humans may find it difficult to notice and articulate the humanly qualitative nature of the world we live in' (p. 54).

Phenomenology has been used by many midwifery and nursing research studies, including those examining the lived experience of nursing dying or dead people,⁴ the experience of chronic illness in rural Australia,⁵ and the lived experience of infertile women, who

terminated treatment after in vitro fertilisation failure.⁶ These researchers (and others using this methodology) all aimed to understand the holistic nature of midwifery and nursing practice, that of mind, body and spirit in relation to a specific phenomenon. The philosophy of midwifery encourages practitioners to look holistically and care for individuals according to their individual needs. Therefore, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach aligns with midwifery philosophies as it requires integrated wholes to be explored.^{7–9} The original works of Husserl and Heidegger heralded two branches of phenomenology, epistemological and ontological. Heidegger's work, Mackey¹ suggests to use an interpretive approach that provides a framework to explore lived experience.

One of the main challenges to understanding hermeneutic phenomenology is the use of complicated, and at times cryptic, philosophical language. Heidegger¹⁰ frequently constructed his own terminology to bring attention to specific concepts. In addition to these initiatives, the direct translation from German to English has been at times difficult and makes his phrases more complex. Despite this difficult and complex methodology, Heidegger's¹⁰ hermeneutic phenomenology has potential to reveal the everydayness of life's experiences.

It is our intent to use a range of sources and our own experiences to explicate some of Heidegger's terminology and the concepts of temporality and spatiality, *sorge* (translated as care)

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and authenticity. In the attempt to increase understanding of and the accessibility to Heideggerian thought it is necessary to appreciate the value of using interpretive approaches that allow research to be ‘conducted in a natural, uncontrolled setting’¹ (p. 179). The following discussion will concentrate on demonstrating how we used the methodology for a study investigating midwives experiences of caring for women who use illicit drugs.

1.1. The research question and significance

What is the lived experience of midwives who care for pregnant women who use illicit drugs? This research question was considered and conceptualised from the experience of the primary researcher, a midwife. Understandings gained through this research provide insights into these midwives’ roles and become the motivation for others to work with women who are marginalised and vulnerable.

2. The origins of phenomenology

Phenomenological thought emerged in the late 19th century. Although philosophers Kant, Hegel and Brentano had all sought a different paradigm it was not until Husserl’s dissatisfaction with the scientific approach to knowledge that phenomenology developed as a new paradigmatic stance.^{2,11} Known as the father of phenomenology, Husserl wanted to generate knowledge by understanding why things are the way they are (epistemology). Other philosophers were also drawn to and developed the approach further. The intention of this paper is not to align with the writings of Husserl, or those linked to him such as Colazzi and Giorgi.^{1,12} These authors are more interested in articulating a more generalised analysis of essence (ontic), as their approach has been discussed elsewhere.¹³ Rather, this article seeks to stay close to experience itself (ontologic) and therefore align with philosophers such as Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Hans George Gadamer (1900–2002), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), John Paul Sartre (1905–1980), and Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005).

Heidegger emphasised the ontological status of phenomenology^{10,14} as explicated in his seminal work ‘Being and Time’. His thinking was based on the belief that by asking theoretical questions about Being (human existence) as ‘Dasein’ (there-being) in the world, he would be able to shed light on that experience of being human. Heidegger’s emphasis was on illuminating the everyday and taken for granted aspects of our lives. His focus was ontological through the concept of ‘Dasein’, which is what it is to be human in our world. Heidegger argued that Dasein’s presuppositions are a legitimate part of Being and cannot be isolated or bracketed, rather they should be enveloped as integral to the researcher’s understanding of self being-in-the-world.^{10,14} Lived experiences from birth to death are influenced and shaped by the intimate interactions between self and the world, so they reveal the very nature of being. Heidegger asserts that our experience of the world is based on our particular context of the world, because we are of the world and cannot be separate from it.^{10,14}

Presuppositions or preunderstandings are researchers own understandings and own experiences of the phenomenon¹⁵; whereas, ‘bracketing’ is seen as the act of setting these aside. For the Heideggerian phenomenologist researcher bracketing is seen as untenable. Cohen et al.¹⁶ suggest that ‘bracketing’ reduces researchers’ bias. McConnell-Henry et al.¹³ reject this notion stating the hermeneutic phenomenologist would embrace the presuppositions of the researcher. van Manen¹⁷ asserts that rigour comes from being able to illustrate the connections between philosophical framework and findings as an interpretative process.

Gadamer¹⁸ contests that individual prejudices or presuppositions are impossible to eliminate from one’s perceptions, but more

importantly this process is unnecessary. Interpretation is limited by the absence of the researcher’s own experience. Further, Gadamer’s ‘fusion of horizons’ metaphor demonstrates that understanding involves the viewpoint of the researcher and the participants that spiral into new understandings of the participants’ experiences of the phenomenon.¹⁸ For this fusion process to begin, the researcher readies in openness to hear the story of the other, and makes interpretations from a number of linguistic sources: the words that were heard, the story told, the emerging meanings and the revealing of that that was once hidden, the silence, the deep sigh or laughter. These insights occur at every step of the research process, data collection, transcribing, interpreting and writing. Gadamer¹⁸ said ‘Discovery of true meaning is never finished, it is an infinite process’ (p. 265), understanding therefore will never be complete. Hermeneutic Phenomenology is contemplative and considerate, striving to seize the in-between-the-lines understandings of the experience of being. Phenomenological tradition commonly uses hyphens. This hyphenated expression is meant to capture the totality of the way we live and are involved in the world. The intention is to emphasise that formal written language can be expressed to take on holistic meanings. The example of being-in-the-world underscores that there is no separation between humans and their world, and they cannot interpret their world without the other.¹⁹

2.1. Hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodological framework

Phenomenology is a philosophy, which can be applied as a methodological research approach. The word phenomenology translated from Greek means ‘to bring into the light’.¹⁰ Hermeneutic phenomenology uses an interpretive approach to study the participants’ everyday worlds from the perspectives of the people experiencing a particular phenomenon. The emphasis is on the individual ‘life-world’ inclusive of how the life has been socially constructed and the experiences of the individual relating, interpreted and situated within their personal world.²⁰ The researcher is encouraged to look beyond the face value of the everyday experiences of life and uncover the hidden meanings of phenomena.^{2,21}

There are, however, choices to be made within the framework. A choice based on the nature of the research question and the philosophical tenet of the study is required in order to use Heidegger’s phenomenology. However, Smythe²² asserts that even though you may be drawn to the methodology, ‘it seems to just happen’ (p. 12), as the methodology chooses you. The following concepts were the researcher’s choice and have been selected to highlight the specific phenomena under examination ‘the lived experiences of midwives who care for pregnant women who use illicit drugs’. The concepts picked were those that situated our questioning and elevated our understanding of the generated data from our study. It is important for the reader to appreciate that the appraisal of Heidegger and his hermeneutic phenomenology is not exclusively about the philosophy, it is more about the bringing together of relevant philosophical standpoints to establish a methodological framework to both guide and interpret midwifery research.¹²

Midwives come into contact regularly with women and their families from all walks of life. Women who take illicit drugs are just one such group seeking care in pregnancy or health matters. Midwives are occupied daily in the worlds of others and the communities in which they live. Heidegger¹⁰ states that as entities of the world we alone do not contribute to our Dasein (our being-in-the-world), as others contribute to the interaction of living and as such we are unable to separate ourselves from these interactions. Midwives are immersed in the world of childbearing women, as their professional lives and the community they serve interact.

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