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Hermeneutics: An exploration

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Abstract

The terms 'hermeneutics' and phenomenology' are often used interchangeably in the literature, which can result in confusion for the reader. This article traces the relationship of these two philosophies and explains the various terms used when describing the different schools of phenomenology. The association between positivism and descriptive phenomenology is mapped. The origin of hermeneutics is traced and the role of Gadamer in following on from the work of Heidegger is explored. Gadamer's belief on the importance of pre-understanding or prejudice is found to be central to hermeneutics. Furthermore, the role of the researcher in the hermeneutic circle is explained. Finally, the need for nurse researchers to clearly explore the philosophical underpinnings of hermeneutics is argued.

Introduction

This article represents months of reading, which initially began in an effort to try to understand the popularity of hermeneutics and phenomenology in nursing research. I wanted to find an answer to the following burning question: Why was hermeneutics such a popular research methodology in Nursing?

On my journey I had to negotiate through many various meanings and understandings. This paper is the result of my reading. It is hoped that my voyage will help others trying to come to grasps with what is meant by hermeneutics, and its links with phenomenology.

Before examining hermeneutics in detail, it is important to briefly discuss its relationship with phenomenology, as both terms are often used interchangeably. Both phenomenology and hermeneutics provide two approaches to express the knowledge embedded in nursing practice.   The phenomenological method looks to uncover meanings of phenomena experienced by individuals through the analysis of their descriptions (Parse et al 1985). Phenomenology has its focus on a person's lived experience and obtains commonalities and shared meanings, whereas hermeneutics assumes that humans experience the world through language and this language provides both understanding and knowledge (Byrne 2001).

Phenomenology

The phenomenological movement arose in Germany before World War 1 and occupies a eminent place in modern philosophy and aimed it attacks on the dominating epistemology of the time (Gadamer 1963).   The language of phenomenologists could not be described as clear (Cohen and Omery 1994). Perhaps this is because it is both a research method and a philosophy (Wilkes 1991). However, phenomenology is considered first and foremost a philosophy, or a mixture of unique, yet related philosophies, and is secondly concerned with approach and method (Ray 1994).

It is important to understand the difference between phenomenology as a research method, as a philosophy and as an approach. The phenomenological method of research developed from a philosophical movement that has many perspectives, and this has resulted in multiple interpretations of phenomenological philosophy to be found in the literature (Omery 1983). This may account for the accusations that nursing publications about phenomenology and hermeneutics have been fertile but confusing (Koch 1999), and the grave concern expressed of a lack of philosophical understanding of phenomenology in the nursing literature (Ray 1994).

As mentioned earlier, the terms 'phenomenology' and 'hermeneutics' are often used interchangeably in the literature, which has resulted in some confusion as both phenomenology and hermeneutics, encompass various schools of thought and methodology. Therefore, at this point of the discussion, it is important to clarify the various terms used in the literature.

Three schools of phenomenological philosophy have developed different approaches (Table 1) that have been used comprehensively in social science research (Cohen and Omery 1994). The first is known as eidetic phenomenology, which aims to obtain fundamental knowledge of phenomena, is guided by Husserl and is considered to have a strong psychological orientation (Maggs-Rapport 2001). This eidetic or descriptive phenomenology is sometimes also referred to as objective hermeneutics. This use of the term "objective hermeneutics" is awkward, and probably adds to some confusion.

The association of qualitative research with the positivist paradigm is clearly evident in descriptive phenomenology. The strategy of bracketing is an effort to maintain 'objectivity' in phenomenological methods (Koch and Harrington 1998). Bracketing is the suspension of all biases and beliefs regarding the phenomenon being researched prior to collecting data about it. The reason for such efforts to maintain 'objectivity' can be traced to the history of qualitative research. The first of five historical moments through which qualitative research operates is traditional (1900-1950) and is associated with the positivist paradigm (Dinzin and Lincoln 1998). This was probably a reaction to the critics who deemed qualitative researchers as soft scientists engaging in unscientific inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln 1998) The dichotomy of qualitative research is summed up eloquently by Schwandt (1998) who argued that interpretivists advocate and prioritise the real world of the first-person, yet simultaneously follow Cartesian tradition by seeking distance from that experience through objectivity. Koch (1999) also maintains that the

Cartesian tradition is clearly to be found in Husserl's subjective phenomenology; "Cartesian" referring to the philosophy of Descartes (1596-1650), which upheld the view that all beliefs must submit to proof beyond doubt.

The second school of phenomenology has as its aim the interpretation of phenomena to uncover hidden meanings and is guided by Heidegger. According to Ray (1994), the primary difference between the Husserlian and Heideggerian approaches is that Heidegger communicates the stance that presuppositions are not to be eliminated or suspended (Ray 1994b). Heidegger was openly critical of the way Husserl represented phenomenology, in particular his fundamental emphasis on description, rather than understanding *(verstehen)* (Cohen and Omery 1994). Heidegger considered that the primary focus of philosophy was the nature of existence (ontology), while Husserl's focus was the nature of knowledge (epistemology) (Cohen and Omery 1994). Indeed, Heidegger is accredited with developing his work on hermeneutics in order to clarify under what conditions understanding occurs for the purposes of ontology , which subsequently led Gadamer to explication of how hermeneutics can give a fair hearing to the historical authenticity of understanding (Gadamer 1989).

Hermeneutic inquiry guided by Heidegger is commonly referred to simply as 'hermeneutics', sometimes 'interpretive phenomenology', 'Heideggerian phenomenology' and even 'existential phenomenology' (Koch 1995) (Table 1). The origins of the use of "existential" probably stem from Heideggers efforts to give understanding an ontological orientation by interpreting it as an 'existential' (Gadamer

1989).   It is important to also clarify here that the term 'philosophical hermeneutics' is used when referring to the work of Gadamer (1989), and that its inquiry branch is known as hermeneutic phenomenology.

The third school is guided by the Dutch school (scholars such as van Manen) and is a combination of descriptive and interpretive phenomenology (Cohen and Omery 1994). This 'break-down' of phenomenology into the three schools outlined appears straightforward. However, Cohen and Omery (1994) caution that this description is more intricate than it first appears as individual researchers and schools of researchers have applied the philosophy and used variations in methods and forms of reporting.

Hermeneutics

As previously mentioned, interpretive phenomenology is also known simply as 'hermeneutics'. The term *hermeneutics* has its origins in the 17th century, when it was introduced as a method for biblical and classical literary interpretation to illuminate the meaning of the text (Eberhart and Pieper 1994). Two entrenched assumptions of hermeneutics are that humans experience the world through language and this language provides both understanding and knowledge (Byrne 2001) Hermeneutics is known as the 'art of interpretation' and has in recent times moved from being regarded as a secondary aspect of European philosophy to being one of the most extensively debated topics in contemporary philosophy (Bowie 1998).

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There are no universal principles of hermeneutics and hermeneutics includes several schools of thought, which sometimes conflict. Therefore, it is not surprising that hermeneutics is considered an especially difficult field with different theoretical positions and methodological implications (Koch 1996).

Three branches of hermeneutic theory within hermeneutic philosophy are classified in terms of methodological implications: objective hermeneutics (briefly mentioned earlier), Gadamerian hermeneutics and critical hermeneutics (discussed later) (Thompson 1990). Gadamer built on the work of Heidegger, therefore a brief description of Heidegger and his connection with Hermeneutics is firstly addressed.

Heidegger and Hermeneutics

Through his work, *Being and Time,* Heidegger developed hermeneutic phenomenology as a philosophical methodology to uncover the meaning of being of human beings, which he maintained had been ignored by past philosophical approached that were reductionistic and objectifying (Plager 1994). Heidegger's argument was that being itself is time (Gadamer 1989).   Heidegger believed that *understanding* is the realization of *Dasein,* which is being-in-the-world (Gadamer 1989).   Heidegger also believed that *Sein* or Being, is presence in the world. Conversely, being, or 'being there' *(Dasein)*, suggests people (beings) who understand this presence (Cohen and Omery 1994).   The capital B denoting the ontological nature of existence (Taylor 1994).

Heidegger believed that hermeneutics was a method of interpretation that directs the investigator to Being (presence in the world) (Cohen and Omery, 1994). Heidegger viewed hermeneutics as a philosophical method, not a scientific method and he in fact rebelled against method and viewed research as the mark of modern science, which he considered markedly preoccupied with itself and its method (Cohen and Omery 1994). Gadamer also had similar views of research to Heidegger. Gadamer argued that the task of philosophical hermeneutics is not the systematic collection and analysis of data but the illumination of the ordinary process of understanding (Habermas 1990). Nevertheless, the main arguments of philosophical hermeneutics are accepted as a research paradigm *within* the social sciences (Habermas 1990).

Gadamer and Hermeneutics

Gadamer, with his work *Truth and Method,* followed on the work of Heidegger, and his book is considered to be one of the most significant works of the last century (Weinsheimer and Marshall 1989), and is credited with firmly placing hermeneutics at the centre of contemporary philosophical debate (Bowie 1998). The two central positions in hermeneutics advanced by Gadamer are – (a) prejudgement (one's preconceptions or prejudices or horizon of meaning that is part of our linguistic experience and that make understanding possible) and (b) universality (the persons who express themselves and the persons who understand are connected by a common human consciousness, which makes understanding possible) (Ray 1994).

Gadamer asserts that pre-judgements or prejudices have a special importance in interpretation, and are not something that should be or can dispose of (Pascoe 1996), and that the past has a profoundly pervasive power in the phenomenon of understanding (Linge 1976). This notion of prejudice became one of the most contentious features of his philosophy (Linge 1976).

Daniel Ernst Scheiermacher (1768-1834), the German Protestant theologian is accredited as playing a founding role in modern hermeneutics (Bowie 1998). Scheiermacher himself defined hermeneutics as the art of avoiding misunderstanding (Gadamer 1966), but Gadamer (1989) questions if there is such an art or technique of understanding, and argued that the work of hermeneutics is to illuminate the circumstances under which understanding takes place rather then develop a process for understanding.

Regarding understanding, Gadamer (1989) argued that to understand does not mean an individual understands better (e.g. because of clearer thoughts on the subject being understood); rather, an individual understands in a different way. He also argued that the detachment of our fruitful prejudices that facilitate understanding from our prejudices that obstruct our understanding occurs in the process of understanding itself (Gadamer 1989). Therefore, in philosophical hermeneutics, understanding is derived from personal involvement by the researcher in a reciprocal processes on interpretation that are inextricably related with one's being-in-the-world (Spence 2001). The inquiry using Gadamerian hermeneutics becomes dialogue rather than individual phenomenology and

interpretation permeates every activity, with the researcher considering social, cultural and gender implications (Koch 1999).

Gadamer places a stronger emphasis on language than Heidegger, and affirms the position of the researcher in the hermeneutic circle (Koch 1996). He describes the hermeneutic circle as the fusing of horizons, which is circular in process. Gadamer (1989) asserts that in order to understanding the meaning of something held by another, we must not attach blindly to our own fore-meaning. He argues that we remain 'open' (p. 268) to, and also embrace the meaning held by the other person or text with our own meanings. What is essential throughout this process is that we are aware of our biases in order for the text to portray its uniqueness against our own fore-meanings (Gadamer 1989). Therefore, the hermeneutic process becomes a dialogical method whereby the horizon of the interpreter and the thing being studied are combined together (Outhwaite 1990).

Gadamer is also associated with critical hermeneutics. Critical hermeneutics combines the interpretive and critical paradigms. Gadamer's philosophy represents the interpretive element and the philosophy of Jurgen Habermas resides in the critical paradigm, which regards knowledge as active and entrenched in a socio-political context. Critical hermeneutics stresses the need to expose individuals to the meanings that they cannot see themselves (Thompson 1990). This also adds to the confusingly use of Hermeneutics in the literature, as the work of Gadamer is considered to be philosophical hermeneutics

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(Spence 2001), but also is differentiated from philosophical hermeneutics to be labelled critical hermeneutics (Byrne 2001).

Critical hermeneutics stands at the juxtaposition of convergence and divergence between the philosophies of Hans Georg Gadamer and Jurgen Habermas (Lutz et al 1997). Habermas is a prominent promoter of critical hermeneutics, which is an outgrowth of Frankfurt School critical theory and claims that interpretation is inhibited and biased by social, political and economic forces. Habermas believes that critical reflection and critical hermeneutics can fully improve individual's communicative and interpretive practices. Habermas's theory of communicative action argues that through language and dialogue, individuals in social interactions are not guided by unquestioned traditions, but rather these traditions are questioned with a resulting new understanding (White 1995).

This classification firmly places Gadamer as principal in hermeneutics, as he is also accredited with helping extend philosophical hermeneutics to critical hermeneutics by stressing the importance of tradition, background and history in our ways of understanding (Annells 1999, Byrne 2001).

Conclusion

There is a growing world-wide awareness of the profits for nursing by utilising hermeneutic inquiry (Annells 1996). However, Allen (1994) argues that hermeneutic approaches, as currently understood in nursing are inadequate for the study of clinical practice as they tend not to address conditions such as organisational structure or

ideological commitments that could have influenced participants' descriptions of their experiences. Nevertheless, some nurse researchers have addressed this perceived shortcoming of hermeneutics by employing critical hermeneutics (Ruangjiratain & Kendall 1998, Sigurdsson 2001).

Moreover, there is a dearth of critique in nursing literature regarding the use of hermeneutic phenomenology in nursing research (Annells 1996). Nursing research utilising Heideggarian phenomenology is sometimes confusing. The following examples are offered to illustrate how misunderstanding arises. Parse et al (1985) discuss the phenomenological method of inquiry for nurses and traces its development from Brentano to Husserl and then Heidegger but do not discriminate between these different schools of phenomenology when outlining the research process of their method. More recently, Hodges et al (2001) use Heideggarian phenomenology and also refer to Gadamers work. However they do not discuss the philosophy directing their study and their data analysis utilises the work of Colaizzi, who Cohen and Omery (1994) associate generally with eidetic phenomenology. Moreover, Bergman (2001) indicates the use of a hermeneutical approach to guide interview transcription, and cursory mention of Gadamer is offered but there is also no exploration of his philosophy.

In conclusion, it is vital that nurse researchers utilising hermeneutic phenomenology clearly explore the philosophical underpinnings of their study, as this determines the role of researcher in data collection and analysis. Not to do so also leaves the reader with more questions than answers, and contributes to the confusion that sometimes abounds hermeneutic nursing research.

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Table 1: Three schools of phenomenology

School	Eidetic or descriptive phenomenolgy	Hermeneutics	Dutch phenomenology
Philosophical guidance	Husserl	Heidegger Gadamer Taylor	Van Manen and others
Other descriptions	Objective hermeneutics	Interpretive phenomenology Existential phenomenology/ Heideggerian hermeneutics (Heidegger) Philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer)	

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