Article

Ricoeur's Theory of Interpretation: An Instrument for Data Interpretation in Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Heather Tan, PhD, M.Grief & P.C.Couns
Research Fellow
Palliative Care Research Unit
School of Nursing and Midwifery
Monash University, Australia

Anne Wilson, PhD, MN
Senior Lecturer
Discipline of Nursing
School of Population Health & Clinical Practice
University of Adelaide, Australia

Ian Olver MD, PhD
Chief Executive Officer
Cancer Council Australia
Sydney, Australia

Abstract
Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, although providing an appropriate philosophical foundation for research in the social sciences that seeks to investigate the meaning of lived experience, does not provide clarity of process, making it difficult to assign the degree of rigor to the work demanded in an era dominated by the positivist paradigm. Ricoeur (1981) further developed both Heidegger's and Gadamer's ideas, in the areas of method and interpretation of hermeneutic phenomenological research, in a direction that has addressed this difficulty. In this article the authors outline Ricoeur's theory, including three levels of data analysis, describe its application to the interpretation of data, and discuss two apparent contradictions in his theory. Ricoeur's theory of interpretation, as a tool for the interpretation of data in studies whose philosophical underpinning is hermeneutic phenomenology, deserves consideration by human sciences researchers who seek to provide a rigorous foundation for their work.

Keywords: palliative care, phenomenology, qualitative research methodology

Introduction

Hermeneutic phenomenology, being the process of interpreting and describing human experience to understand the central nature of that experience, is well positioned as a suitable methodology for human sciences research. Increasingly it is the philosophical underpinning of choice in qualitative health research (McKibbon & Gadd, 2004). In recent years this methodology has been used in various disciplines such as nursing (Evans & Hallett, 2007; Koch, 1995; Todres & Wheeler, 2001) and mental health (Barnable, Gaudine, Bennett, & Meadus, 2006; Thomas, Bracken, & Leudar, 2004), and in the study of the experiences of hope (Dickerson, Boehmke, Ogle, & Brown, 2006) and of grief (Fielden, 2003). The existence of various forms of phenomenology does, however, create a minefield for the unwary researcher.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is not a method of research but, rather, both a theoretical perspective and a methodology, a strategy or plan that lies behind the methods employed in a particular study (Crotty, 1998). Unless there is clarity and accountability of method, it is difficult to assign the degree of rigor to the work that is demanded in an era that has been dominated by the positivist view that has been known to claim that scientific knowledge is utterly objective and is the only type of evidence that is valid and certain (Crotty, 1998). It has been argued that qualitative methodological theory might be both unnecessary and counterproductive (Avis, 2003). Avis has argued that often such methodologies are used to justify particular methods in a manner that closes off any scrutiny or reflective examination of those methods. However, as Avis also pointed out, we work in a medical system in which policymakers and funding bodies predominantly cling to the view that the only truth is so-called objective truth. It therefore remains important that the methods employed in qualitative studies are accountable and rigorous, if their results are to be seen as making a genuine contribution to knowledge. The work of Gadamer (1989) and especially Ricoeur (1981), further developed Heidegger's (1967) ideas in the areas of method and interpretation of hermeneutic phenomenological research, in a direction that has helped to address this difficulty.

Both *hermeneutics* and *phenomenology* have been variously defined, but for the purposes of the study underpinning this article, they were taken to have the following meanings: Hermeneutics is the "art and science of interpretation" (Ezzy, 2002, p. 24), especially as it applies to text. Phenomenology is the study of the essence of a phenomenon as it presents itself in lived experience in the world (Crotty, 1998).

In this paper we will illustrate the application of Ricoeur's (1981) theory to data analysis and interpretation as applied in a study exploring the application of the family meeting as an instrument of spiritual care of palliative patients and their families. The development of hermeneutic phenomenology will be outlined, followed by an explanation of how Ricoeur's theory was applied to data analysis and interpretation.

Toward a hermeneutic phenomenology

The development of hermeneutic phenomenology was an evolutionary process to which a number of renowned philosophers contributed. A brief outline of the key points of their thinking is presented.

Edmund Husserl

Philosophical debate had been dominated by the search for the foundations of knowledge and the so called Cartesian model of subjective-objective duality (Koch, 1995). However, Husserl (1931), widely acknowledged as the founder of phenomenology, introduced the term *lifeworld*, which was understood as being what is experienced prereflectively. He claimed that the essence of this lifeworld is not readily available to us because it is always influenced by that which we take for granted and that to which we have been conditioned by our past experience.

For Husserl (1931), the key to the study of a phenomenon was through consciousness and an intentional grasping of the ultimate essences of the unique experience. However, identification of the essences requires, according to Husserl's theory, phenomenological reduction, or "to set aside all previous habits of thought, see through and break down the mental barriers which these habits have set along the horizons of our thinking . . . to learn to see what stands before our eyes" (p. 43). This process has become known as bracketing. Husserlian phenomenology claims to remove distortion of perception, by enabling a refraining from judgment through the process of bracketing (Husserl, 1931).

Wilhelm Dilthey

Dilthey's (1976) work and thinking were focused around hermeneutics (as opposed to phenomenology) and mark a critical turning point in hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1981). Dilthey recognized that interpretation of historical documents needs to be done in the context of history, and, as Crotty (1998) has pointed out, "few have stressed the essentially historical character of human existence as forcefully as [Dilthey] does" (p. 94).

The thinking of Dilthey's time drew a real distinction between the natural and social sciences, and Dilthey (1976) tried to endow the human sciences with methodologies that would be as respectable as those of the natural sciences. A conflict runs through his work as he grapples with the "explanation" of the natural sciences and the "understanding" of the human sciences. However, as Ricoeur (1981) was later to acknowledge, Dilthey "glimpsed a mode of transcending finitude without absolute knowledge, a mode which is properly interpretive" (p. 53).

In his later work Dilthey (1976) considered that our prime source of understanding arises from things such as language, literature, behavioral norms, art, and religion, which are the basis of our cultural structure and context (Crotty, 1998). In gaining understanding, we move from the text to the historical and social context of the author and back. This, of course, has connotations of the hermeneutic circle for which others, such as Heidegger (1967), are perhaps better known. Dilthey retained, however, an epistemological stance, a focus on a way of knowing rather than on a way of being.

Martin Heidegger

Heidegger (1967) took an ontological stance, a focus on the nature of being, to the point of considering ontology and phenomenology to be inseparable. He embarked on a phenomenology of human being, or, as he called it, *Dasein*, a term denoting the essential nature of the human being, which includes the ability to inquire into the nature and possibilities of Being. In Heidegger's thinking a person exists as a being both in and of the world. From his perspective, preunderstanding is a fact of our being-in-the-world and it is not something we can eliminate or bracket, as Husserl (1931) claimed. Heidegger (1962) asserted that nothing can be encountered without reference to a person's background and preunderstanding and that we cannot have a life in the world except through acts of interpretation.

In combining the meaning of the two words *phainomeno* and *logos*, from which the word *phenomenology* is derived, Heidegger (1967) concluded that phenomenology means "to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself" (p. 56). However, to speak of revealing and unveiling has connotations of description, interpretation, and language and hence of hermeneutics. In this sense life is like a text. Our preunderstanding influences our interpretation of this text but, in turn, is changed and enlightened by the interaction. This, of course, makes reference to Heidegger's version of the hermeneutic circle. For Heidegger the real question "is not what way 'being' can be understood but in what way understanding is 'being'" (Koch, 1995, p. 831).

Hans-Georg Gadamer

Gadamer (1989) is known more for his hermeneutics than for his phenomenology. In *Truth and Method* he deals with the obsession for the development of an objective method in human sciences, and his approach is an attempt to overcome this and to ask: What is going on in methods, what is occurring during the research process? (Koch, 1995). Two key aspects of Gadamer's thinking are that we stand in tradition and that tradition is irrevocably linked to language.

From Gadamer's (1989) perspective the interaction between researcher and participant, or between reader and text, is a constant discourse, and hence interpretation is a collaborative process. Entering into this process is what he calls the fusion of horizons. He sees this process of being one of constant mediation between the past (tradition, culture, experience) and the present horizon (the immediate experience) of the interpreter. As soon as we really open ourselves to a question, the understanding that we have as a result of all our previous experience or knowledge of the question is immediately superseded by the impact of our exposure to the new experience. Hence, our understanding is continually expanding as we expose it to dialogue with text, be that written or lived experience.

Paul Ricoeur

Ricoeur (1981), more than any other, cemented the connection between hermeneutics and phenomenology and as Thompson (1981) has pointed out, the mutual affinity between hermeneutics and phenomenology provided the philosophical basis for much of his work. He is probably best known for his theory of interpretation, primarily released in a series of publications during the 1970s (references?). A number of key concepts need to be understood to grasp and apply this theory of interpretation. Before entering into a discussion of these, however, the study, entitled The Family Meeting as an Instrument of Spiritual Care of Palliative Patients and Their Families, used to demonstrate the application of this theory, will be briefly outlined.

The Family Meeting as an Instrument of Spiritual Care
of Palliative Patients and their Families

The philosophical underpinning of the reported study was hermeneutic phenomenology. Its objective was to explore the experience of palliative patients and their family members who had participated in a family meeting which focused entirely on psychosocial and spiritual issues. Murphy's (1999) family meeting model was used. Murphy describes a five-part paradigm to guide families through this process, which includes the story of the journey of the illness (told by the dying member), worries and fears, roots (bringing out memories from the shadows), hearing from other family members, and a blessing or closing of the meeting. One fundamental premise of this model is the demonstrated value of telling and reframing stories (Chochinov et al., 2005; Murphy, 1999; Richert, 2003).

Three main roles described within the model are the storyteller (the patient and then, in turn, other family members), the witness(es) (those who listen to the story), and the guide or facilitator, who has the task of encouraging and supporting the storyteller and other family members. Using general prompt questions such as, Would you like to say more about that? or How has that been for you? the facilitator encouraged but did not demand greater depth of exploration and expression of experience.

Following approval by the appropriate human research ethics committees, palliative patients were recruited from two metropolitan palliative care services. Using the following selection criteria, medical and nursing staff referred patients who were over the age of 18, were able to converse in English, were physically and mentally able to participate in a family meeting, and whose prognosis was less than 6 months. Those referred were approached by the researcher, who explained the study. Twelve patients who agreed to participate, and who had given informed written consent, then invited 35 significant people in their life (called family members) to attend a family meeting. These participants also gave written informed consent.

In the study, the first author, who had extensive training and experience in working with families and in grief counseling, acted as facilitator of the family meetings, which took place at a time and location suitable for the patient and the attending family members. Five meetings took place in patients' homes, one in a relative's home, four at inpatient hospices, and two in hospital. These family meetings lasted 1.5 to 2.0 hours, and great care was always taken to ensure the comfort and well-being of all participants, especially the patients. An important process in this study was the documentation of the key researchers views, beliefs, and background, which were likely to have impact on how they responded to the situations arising. A journal was kept in which these were recorded along with the researcher's observations of each family meeting and interview.

Participants of the family meetings were subsequently invited to take part in individual in-depth interviews. Consequently 47 interviews were conducted by the first author. Each interview began with the question, Would you tell me about your experience of the family meeting? General prompt questions such as, Can you tell me more about that? or What was the impact of that for you? were used. Interviews (average length 45 minutes) were audio recorded and transcribed and the transcripts then checked for accuracy. Analysis of data was assisted by software NVivo 2.0, and Ricoeur's (1981) theory of interpretation was used in the interpretation of data. Examples will be provided to illustrate application of this theory. First, however, the key aspects of the theory will be outlined.
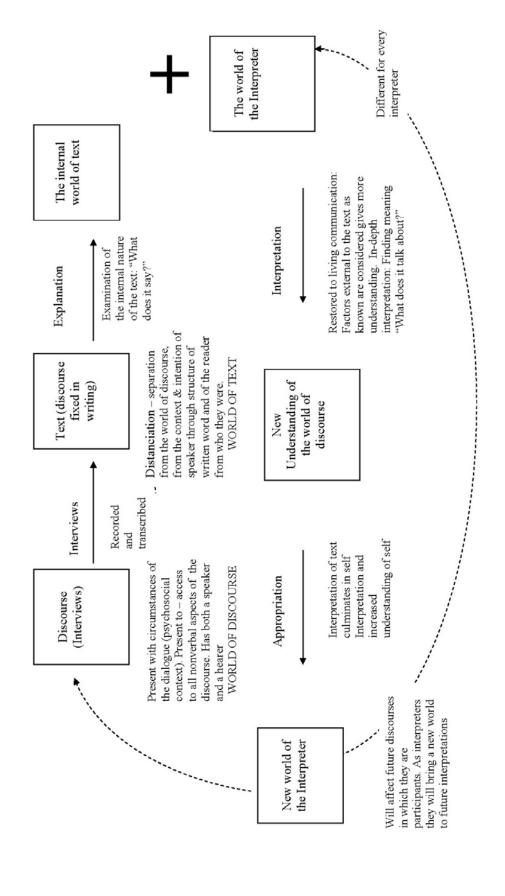
The world of the Interpreter

The internal world of text

+

Different for every interpreter

Explanation

Examination of the internal nature of the text: "What does it say?"

Interpretation

Restored to living communication: Factors external to the text as known are considered gives more understanding. In-depth interpretation: Finding meaning "What does it talk about?"

Text (discourse fixed in writing)

Distanciation – separation from the world of discourse, from the context & intention of speaker through structure of written word and of the reader from who they were. WORLD OF TEXT

Interviews

Recorded and transcribed

New Understanding of the world of discourse

Discourse (Interviews)

Present with circumstances of the dialogue (psychosocial context). Present to – access to all nonverbal aspects of the discourse. Has both a speaker and a hearer WORLD OF DISCOURSE

Appropriation

Interpretation of text culminates in self Interpretation and increased understanding of self

New world of the Interpreter

Will affect future discourses in which they are participants. As interpreters they will bring a new world to future interpretations

Figure 1. Ricoeur's theory of interpretation

Ricoeur's theory of interpretation: A framework for analysis

A simplified description of the overall process of interpretation, as Ricoeur (1981) proposed it, is presented in diagrammatic form in Figure 1. The key concepts of distanciation, appropriation, explanation, and interpretation, which are shown in this diagram, are discussed in more detail below.

Text and distanciation

Fundamental to Ricoeur's (1981) theory is his understanding of text and, in particular, his concept of distanciation, a standing separate from or being objective in relation to the text. Ricoeur begins his argument by stating that "text is discourse fixed in writing" (p. 145). In an essay Ricoeur (1973) stressed that, in his view, text displays "a fundamental characteristic of the historicity of human experience, namely that it is communication in and through distance" (p. 130). He organized his discussion of this concept around four themes: (a) text as a relation of speech to writing, (b) text as a structured work, (c) text as the projection of a world, and (d) text as the mediation of self-understanding.

Ricoeur's (1981) discussion of the nature of the relationship between speech and writing, and the role of the writer and the reader compared to that of the relationship between participants of a spoken discourse, leads to the conclusion that the distancing of text from the oral situation causes a change in the relationship between language and the subjective concerns of both the author and reader. He pointed out that in the case of speech, those who are involved in the discourse are present both with (in the psychosocial circumstances of the dialogue) and to each other (conscious of the nonverbal aspects of the dialogue). This is no longer achieved when text takes the place of "live" discourse (Ricoeur, 1981).

Ricoeur (1981) endeavored to make clear which traits of discourse are altered by the passage from speech to writing. He argued that discourse, being an event occurring at a particular point of time, is not preserved entirely unchanged when committed to written form such as interview transcripts. He also pointed out that discourse refers back to its speaker; it has a world (the world of discourse, a particular context) and an "other," a hearer to whom it is addressed. A discourse committed to text no longer necessarily coincides with what the author wanted to say; the language they use even in live dialogue does not necessarily convey to the listener what they intended to say. This is even more likely when the discourse has become text.

Ricoeur (1981) also argued that live "text" converted to writing now has a different audience (potentially anyone who can read), so the audience is also now distanced from the social and psychological context of the original intended audience. It is important, however, not to confuse distanciation with objective knowledge because Ricoeur's theory, although acknowledging the distance between the self and the other also affirms that the knower and the known are linked (Geanellos, 2000).

How does this relate to the practical task of data interpretation? When analyzing the transcripts of interviews with the participants, it is not possible to entirely recreate the event. What remains is an impression only of the language of the interview. Some of the inflections of tone and nuance may be recaptured in listening to the audio recording, but nonverbal cues are certainly absent, leaving the interview transcripts as the only concrete link to participants' expression of their experience. In coming to an interpretation of the participant's experience, therefore, the researcher is dependent on the text from which, to a degree, they have become distanced, even when they personally conducted the interviews.

The second theme of Ricoeur's (1981) discussion of distanciation is that of discourse as a work. He identified three distinctive traits of the notion of a work: (a) a work is a sequence longer than a sentence, (b) a work is submitted to a form of codification that is applied to its composition or we can say it has a literary genre, and (c) a work has a unique style that relates it to the individual. Ricoeur is adamant that distanciation of discourse in the structure of a work does not obscure the fundamental purpose of the discourse, which is, "someone saying something to someone about something" (p. 138).

This, then, leads our discussion to Ricoeur's (1981) third modality of distanciation, text as the projection of a world, which he calls "the world of text" (p. 140). Live discourse expresses the world, but it does this in the context of a reference or a reality that is common to the speaker and his or her audience. Ricoeur argued that if hermeneutics can no longer be defined as a search for another person and their psychological intentions, which are hidden behind the text, and neither is it understanding merely reduced to identification of language structures, then "to interpret is to explicate a sort of being-in-the world which unfolds in front of the text" (p. 140). Here his theory joins with Heidegger's (1967), which suggests that understanding is not understanding of others but, instead, becomes a structure of being-in-the-world. This is closely connected to Heidegger's hermeneutical circle in that the interpreter's inner world meets the unique world of each text to create a new picture or understanding of a possible world in the consciousness of the interpreter.

In the interviews, or discourses, where the interviewer was also the facilitator of family meetings, the interviewer and the interviewee share a common experience of being present at a family meeting at the same time, although their roles were different, as no doubt was their experience. There is, therefore, some degree of commonality in the world of text (Ricoeur, 1981) that is the subject of the discourse. However, even though this same degree of commonality in the world of text applies to each of the interviews, each discourse remains unique because what each speaker attempts to express is related to their own unique experience and preunderstanding. The process of interpreting each text (or discourse) ideally creates in the interpreter a new understanding of, in this case, the experience of being part of a family meeting of the type implemented in the reported study.

The fourth, and what Ricoeur (1973) described as the most fundamental distanciation, is what he called the "distanciation of the subject [the receiver of the discourse]) from himself" (p. 141, If we are to take seriously the distanciation by writing and by the structure of the work, as discussed above, then we can no longer, as Ricoeur has suggested, hold to the notion that understanding is a grasping of an alien life expressing itself through writing. Ricoeur's conclusion is that "in the last analysis the text is the mediation by which we understand ourselves" (p. 141). This leads to his concept of appropriation.

Appropriation

Ricoeur (1981) defined the term *appropriation* in the following way: "By 'appropriation' I understand this: that the interpretation of text culminates in the self interpretation of a subject [the interpreter] who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself (p. 158). He argued that if the objectification of meaning is a necessary mediation between the writer and the reader, then this mediation calls for a process which he calls the "appropriation of meaning" (p. 159). A process of understanding, which includes appropriation, is an event, set in a particular time frame. This knowing oneself is the emerging of a new self compared to the old self that existed prior to the encounter with the text, so to understand is not to project oneself into the text but, rather, to open up to an enlarged self, to incorporate into your world other possible worlds as portrayed by the text.

This implies a hermeneutics of I am rather than I think (Ricoeur, 1974). The practical implications of this are twofold. In the first instance, in a study such as the example described, there is reason to hope that the participants of the family meeting, to the extent that they appropriate their experience of the meeting, come to know themselves in a new way and hence are able to be "new" in their relationships with each other. Second, the researcher, in appropriating both his or her experience of the family meeting and the new world of possibilities created in their interaction with the world of text, also becomes someone new with the potential to relate and act in new ways.

Explanation, interpretation, and understanding

Together, the concepts discussed so far form the paradigm of text interpretation. Most significant is that this is a fresh approach to the relationship between explanation and understanding, the unfolding of which involves the movement back and forth between the parts of the text and a view of the whole, during the process of interpretation. Ricoeur (1981) used the term *hermeneutic arc* to describe this movement back and forth between a naïve and an in-depth interpretation. In relation to Figure 1, this arc is represented by movement back and forth between the world of text and a new understanding of the world of discourse as shown on the right-hand side of the diagram. In coining the term *hermeneutic arc*, Ricoeur did not discount the hermeneutic circle as proposed by Heidegger (1967). On the contrary, he claimed, "Ultimately the correlation between explanation and understanding [which incorporates the process of appropriation*]*, between understanding and explanation, is the hermeneutic circle'" (p. 221, italics in original).

Ricoeur (1981) indicated that there are two ways of looking at text. The first of these he described as considering only the internal nature of the text. From this perspective it has no context, no external world, and there is no consideration of its having an author or an audience: "On the basis of this choice, the text has no outside, but only an inside; it has no transcendent aim" (p. 113). What arises from it in this case is explanation, which is possible because of the objectivity of the text (distanciation), which has been discussed above. At this level understanding is relatively immature. It takes into account, for example, the meaning of the words as the reader understands those, which, of course, might not be the exact meaning intended by the writer or the interviewee.

The second way of looking at text proposed by Ricoeur (1981) is to restore it to a living communication. Through interpretation the world of text combines with the world of the reader to form something new. At first this interpretation, although adding to the interpreter's understanding, is still fairly superficial. However, as readers continue to explore the text, they begin to take into account a number of other factors. The first is what they know of the author, or in this case the interviewee as they are informed by the field notes about the context of the interview and the interviewee, and by what the interviewees reveal of themselves in the interview text. Therefore, interpretation moves from immature understanding to deeper understanding.

Ricoeur (1981) summarized the relationship between explaining and interpreting in this way:

> To explain is to bring out the structure, that is, the internal relations of dependence which constitute the statics of the text; to interpret is to follow the path of thought opened up by the text, to place oneself *en route* towards the orient of the text. (p. 161)

Hence, Ricoeur's theory of interpretation acknowledges the interrelationship between the assumptions made from the interpretation and that which is already known, possibly by the interpreter.

The application of Ricoeur's theory of interpretation

Level 1 analysis: Explanation

In this process the internal nature of the text (interview transcripts, as well as the researcher's journal notes on observations and experiences of the family meetings and interviews, which would not have been apparent in the interview transcripts), as discussed above, was examined. The transcripts and notes were analyzed, each one being individually coded to free nodes (unorganized or emergent ideas) using in vivo coding. This involved coding any word, phrase, sentence, or group of sentences that said anything at all about the individual's or family's experience of being recruited, the family meeting, or the interview. Any information about the individual's or family's history, culture, ways of relating, or past experiences that might have any relevance to their experiences in being involved in this study were also coded to free nodes. More than 1,000 free nodes were created. A few examples of these are "brought us closer," "benefit from it," "calmed down," "a bit teary," and "nervous." At this level words were taken at face meaning, and no attempt was made to interpret. Unless identical words were used to express an idea, a new free node was created. This is a relatively mechanical process and does not involve interpretation or decisions about whether two different sets of words have the same meaning.

Before we proceeded to level 2 of the analysis, the documents were reread to ensure that no ideas had been missed or inaccurately assumed to be identical to another.

Level 2 analysis: Naïve understanding

The first stage of this process involved examining the free nodes that had been coded in level 1 analysis and coming to an understanding about which ones referred to the same or closely connected ideas. Those with common meanings were grouped into four main themes. Each theme was given a description identifying the main idea of the data coded to it, as it was perceived at that point. For example, the free nodes that talked about the individual's experience of the meeting and its outcomes for them were collected under the theme Personal experience and outcomes, which was described as "anything that talked about how the speaker experienced the meeting and any outcomes it had had or was expected to have for them." The other themes identified related to the speaker's observations of the experience of other individuals and the family as a whole, the speaker's observations about the general applicability of family meetings of this type within the palliative care service and to issues of individual and family history, culture, and personality that might have influenced their experience of the family meeting.

Attention was then focused on the collection of ideas within each theme. In each case a number of subthemes were identified. For example, the subtheme entitled Outcomes for the speaker was described as including "anything that gives information about the outcomes of the meeting for the speaker – things that have continued on from the meeting or anything that is new for them since the meeting, that they connect to their experience of the meeting."

Each subtheme was then examined individually to identify how the free nodes coded to it could be grouped into categories, with each category speaking of some aspect of the subtheme. Each category was also given a description. For example, one category informing the subtheme entitled The speakers' experience of the family meeting was called How they felt and was described as including all free nodes that gave information about "how the speaker felt during the family meeting or as a direct result of it." Data coded to subthemes that talked about the family culture, history, relationships, and communication habits was used in the preparation of family profiles.

To this point of the analysis it can be argued that the process is virtually identical to the technique of thematic analysis (Luborsky, 1994). The naïve level of understanding achieved in level 2 analysis is still to a large extent based on the internal nature of the text but does include making decisions about the similar or near identical meaning of particular words and phrases. At this point interpretation begins, and the process is to some degree influenced both by the readers' understanding of the meaning of particular words and by their experience of the individuals involved. The latter would include their impressions of these participants in the family meetings, the interviews, and things that they said about themselves and their background in both settings. It is in level 3 of the analysis that the process takes on a more unique and accountable quality.

Level 3 analysis: In-depth understanding

The process of arriving at an in-depth understanding involves moving back and forth between explanation and understanding (the hermeneutic arc). The acts of interpretation that are a part of this process are informed by areas of knowledge. First, there is the experience and beliefs that the researcher brings to the task (preunderstanding), which were documented. The second type of contributing knowledge is the researchers' knowledge and experience of the individuals and families taking part in the study, as expressed in the family profiles compiled as indicated in the description of the previous two levels. This interpretation of factors that are external to the text restores it to a living communication.

Level 3 analysis can be demonstrated clearly in the management of another relevant matter for consideration in the interpretation of data at this level, which is the handling and resolution of apparent contradictions or ambiguities in the data presented by the same patient, identified as P1. Parts of the interviews with members of his family, identified as F1A, F1B, F1C, and F1D, are also considered along with the interviewer's notes on the family meeting (FM notes).

> I didn't see it [he family meeting] as being anything that was going to make my situation change for the better or anything like that. I did not think that by and large our family has got—I don't think it will make any changes. (P1 para. 5(1))

> But what I did find that was really quite interesting was that F1D who was previously outside of our family and is now inside had so much courage to open up, particularly because her family situation has not been the best, and I was very, very pleased that she was able to be as comfortable with it as she was. (P1 para. 5(2), two sentences after para. 5(1))

> She was here yesterday and whenever she comes in now as soon as she sees me she comes up and gives me a big hug. "Hello, Big Fella. How are you getting on today?" and so on and I just love that from somebody who was I guess . . . I didn't see a great deal of them, but to see her now and the way in which she responds to not only just me, because I've got this illness, but to other members of the family I think it's just wonderful. (P1 para. 9)

In summary, these passages seem to be saying the following:

> Para. 5(1): There will be no changes in the family as a result of the meeting.

> Para. 5(2): He has not changed his mind about outcomes from the meeting but acknowledges that there were some surprises in a family member's behavior during the meeting.

Para. 9: He describes a big change in the behavior of this family member since the family meeting, which he thinks "is just wonderful."

The following steps were taken in investigating this apparent contradiction:

- The researcher listened again to this section of the recorded interview. It was noted that the speaker was somewhat clinical in his initial summation but became more animated and enthusiastic in his expression in the third excerpt quoted above.

- Evidence relating to the speakers' situation, personality, and ideas about family, was reviewed. The following were key factors: "thinks the family has got it all together" (P1 para.5); "females show their emotions outwardly – that's expected" (P1 para. 5); "definitely head of the family" (Int. notes—preliminary meeting); "they know what I feel, I don't need to say it" (FM notes); "a little bit military in his precision" (F1C para. 13); "only once seen him get emotional or tearful" (F1B para.49); "likes to be in control and not leave anything in a mess" (FM notes); "strict with children" (FM notes).

- Any comments made in interviews by other members of the family about the response of F1D (the family member whose behavior had changed) to the meeting were reviewed and the following evidence noted: "she is now part of the family" (F1A para. 48); "felt a bit apart before" (F1C para. 7); "she hasn't been a member of the family as such compared to the rest" (F1B para. 46).

- Comments made by F1D herself were closely examined. Her experience is summed up by the following key points: "I know where I stand now with the family," "I was struggling with it for quite a while," "I sort of never quite felt I am part of the family," "I've been able to relax a little bit more," "it's a lot better," and "it's fantastic"(F1D).

Comments such as those quoted above stimulated the primary researcher to review her own experience and beliefs, and to consider if they were influencing the interpretation of this apparent contradiction. She was aware of the following in this regard: Her family background was strict, male dominated, and lacking in more than minimal abilities to express feelings and verbalize intimate thoughts. Having grown away from that point of view significantly, and learned that others do not usually know what you think and feel if you do not tell them, she was cautious of responding negatively to some of the views expressed by P1. Consequently, all the relevant information was reviewed to come to a conclusion about what P1 really meant.

It was concluded that there were significant changes in F1D's relationship with the family unit as a result of the family meeting. This is supported not only by P1's later statement but by the views of other members of the family and, most of all, by F1D herself. It was also considered that the reason for P1's change of view between paragraphs 5 and 9 of the interview transcript might have been influenced by a number of factors. Perhaps he initially felt a bit apprehensive about the unfamiliar process, being a person who likes to be in control of family matters and is used to a dominant role in relation to females (the interviewer was female). To admit that the meeting had brought change might be to admit that his family was not as together as he would like to believe. As the interview proceeded, however, he realized the interviewer was not threatening, and he relaxed and was able to acknowledge and express his delight about the change in F1D following her coming out as a family member during the family meeting.

The account provided above of how the interpreter progressed from naive to in depth understanding of this patient's experience, demonstrates how a process of moving back and forward between explanation and understanding eventually achieves in-depth understanding. This

account also incidentally demonstrates how the patient appropriated his experience of the family meeting, enabling him to appreciate a new relationship with a member of his family.

However, this in-depth understanding can be taken seriously as evidence only if it can be demonstrated that the process conforms to accepted standards of rigor. Issues of rigor in the use of Ricoeur's (1981 theory of interpretation will now be discussed.

<div align="center">

**Issues of rigor in the use of Ricoeur's
theory of interpretation**

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Rice and Ezzy (1999) have described five main areas of consideration to ensure the rigor of qualitative studies. These are theoretical (having a theoretical underpinning and methods which are consistent with this), procedural, interpretive, evaluative, and reflexive rigor. Although the main area of impact of Ricoeur's (1981) theory in supporting the rigor of a study is in the domain of interpretive rigor, it also demands processes that enable the achievement of procedural rigor and rigorous reflexivity.

Procedural rigor is achieved through the careful documentation of how all decisions are reached (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). In the reported study, this was achieved by the establishment of an audit trail that included all processes conducted during the research. Although in no way can Ricoeur's (1981) theory be pressed into an accountability regime, the three levels of analysis that arise from his theory provide an identifiable process that can be documented and repeated by others. It needs to be kept in mind, however, that others repeating the process will not necessarily arrive at the exact same interpretations, something which is certainly consistent with Ricoeur's ideas about distanciation on four levels discussed above. This is, of course, a relevant issue in relation to interpretive rigor.

An account has interpretive rigor if it accurately represents the understandings of events and actions within the framework and worldview of the people engaged in them (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p.36). The significant question is, On what grounds can a particular interpretation be considered accurate? As explained, proponents of Ricoeur's (1981) theory of interpretation would accept that because of the interaction between the world of the text and the world of the interpreter, each interpreter's account of the same text is likely to be at least slightly different from others and, in fact, an account made by the same interpreter at a later date might differ from the first one as that interpreter's world might have changed in the interim. However, adherence to the process of three levels of analysis, as outlined by Ricoeur, which includes conscious awareness of and consideration of the experience and worldviews of all participants, including the researcher, the use of direct quotes and the documentation of all analysis decisions (procedural rigor), supports our aim to faithfully represent a text by providing every opportunity for its truths to be revealed.

Rigorous qualitative research that takes into account the role of the researcher in the research process (Rice & Ezzy, 1999) involves honest reflexivity. This needs to include an awareness and openness on the part of the researcher about how his or her background, beliefs, life experience, and political views affect their involvement in the research. In rigorous research this is declared as part of an accurate recording of the process. Integral to Ricoeur's (1981) theory of interpretation is the acknowledgment that the researcher is a part of the environment of the study and that his or her impact needs to be constantly assessed and taken into account along with the other data. This is part of the process of Ricoeur's hermeneutic arc in which an interpretation arises out of the moving back and forth between the parts (including the impact of the researcher) and the whole. The use of this theory as a tool for data analysis, therefore, enhances the likelihood of achieving rigorous reflexivity.

Conclusion

In this article we have summarized the development of hermeneutic phenomenology, including Ricoeur's (1981theory of interpretation. The three levels of interpretation that arise from this theory have been outlined, and their application to a study informed by hermeneutic phenomenology has been demonstrated. The degree to which this process of interpretation conforms to accepted standards of rigor in qualitative studies has also been considered.

The firm foundation on which Ricoeur's (1981) theory of interpretation has been developed, which includes congruence with the work of both Heidegger (1967) and Gadamer (1989), makes it a very useful model for the analysis and interpretation of text in a manner that enables rigorous outcomes. We recommend Ricoeur's theory of interpretation as a tool for the interpretation of data collected in studies whose philosophical underpinning is hermeneutic phenomenology. It deserves consideration by human sciences researchers who seek to provide a rigorous foundation for their work in interpreting the social world of human beings.

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