Article

Philosophical Hermeneutic Interviewing

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Abstract

This article describes, exemplifies and discusses the use of the philosophical hermeneutic interview and its distinguishing characteristics. Excerpts of interviews from a philosophical hermeneutic study are used to show how this particular phenomenological tradition is applied to research inquiry. The purpose of the article is to lay out the foundational background for philosophical hermeneutics in a way that clarifies its unique approach to interviewing and its usefulness for advancing health care knowledge. Implications for health care research and practice are addressed.

Keywords: hermeneutics; Heidegger; interviews; research, qualitative; phenomenology

Introduction

Philosophical hermeneutic phenomenology is a way of thinking and an intellectual tradition that lends itself to inquiry. As a scholarly tradition, it has been applied to research processes as a guide for the generation of meaning and the understanding of experience, adding to extant knowledge and raising new questions about phenomena, both complex and familiar. The essential nature of a phenomenon of interest is sought and may be revealed through the conduct and analysis of interviews that permit participants to share their stories. Although interviews are used

extensively in research and practice, and are used as primary data gathering tools for many forms of qualitative analysis, there are distinctions in interview purposes and styles. Understanding, enacting, and teaching these distinctions are important to maintain the rigor of qualitative inquiry as a research approach. This article explores the background and purpose of the interview in the philosophical hermeneutic tradition, demonstrating some of the characteristic features of this particular form of interview and using excerpts from a philosophical hermeneutic study in progress. Implications for practice, teaching and research are addressed.

Historical Foundations of Hermeneutics

The term *hermeneutics* has been used in ancient and modern times to mean 'interpretation.' In Greek mythology 'Hermes,' son of Zeus, was a messenger of the gods as he interpreted hidden meanings for the mortals. Thus, the Greek verb *hermeneuein* (to interpret) and the noun *hermeneia* (interpretations) suggest this mythological association. In the middle ages hermeneutics referred to the interpretation of biblical text, often called 'biblical exegesis.' Translation of ancient texts required an interpretive element to render them understandable to the public. This translational component became a part of the phenomenological movement of the 1800-1900s, when Continental philosophers (Franz Bretano, Carl Stumpf, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) began writing about the essence of experience as it shows itself (from the Greek *phainomenon*, 'what shows itself in itself'). This period, which introduced a way of translating the meaning of common everyday experience to writing has extended to the current day. Writers such as Maly (2008), Polkinghorne (2004), Rorty (2000), Butler (2002), and others (see Brogan and Risser's (2000) collection of writings by American 'Continental' philosophers) continue to describe and use phenomenological approaches to thinking.

Scholars have applied phenomenological thought to research inquiry and used textual analysis of story to inform, inspire and transform current thinking and practice in the healthcare and education disciplines. Such scholars have explicated their particular philosophical foundations and ways of applying such traditions to research methodology (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000; Coliazzi, 1978; Diekelmann & Ironside, 2006; Giorgi, 1985; van Manen, 1990).

Philosophical Hermeneutics

Initiated by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who is often considered to be the founder of the phenomenological movement and transcendental phenomenology, philosophical hermeneutics derived from the 'German Phase' of phenomenology. In response to his disillusionment with the world of science, Husserl described a way of thinking and method of inquiry to study experience in the life-world (Dahlberg, 2002; Crist & Tanner, 2003; McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2009). He had an epistemological view of the world, inheriting Cartesian dualism as a scientific concept in which the mind and body are mutually exclusive (Benner, 1994; Cohen et al., 2000; McConnell et al., 2009). However, he stressed the importance of discovering the truth as derived by understanding the human (lived) experience and exploring it systematically in the form of a rigorous inquiry or research. He was known as an advocate of phenomenological 'bracketing' or reduction, by which researchers placed their preconceptions and beliefs aside with the intent to expose the true essence of the lived experience of another (Cohen et al., 2000; McConnell et al., 2009). Thus, aspects of the Cartesian approach, the foundation of empirical analytic science, were retained.

Following Husserl, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) took a phenomenological 'turn' in his own

writings, whereby experience was viewed ontologically and not as a subjective activity. His seminal work, *Being and Time* (1927/1962), introduced a conversation about the nature of being that questioned and countered conventional thinking. Heidegger rejected Husserl's epistemological mind-body split and wrote about *being-in-the-world*, an integral, temporal, and dynamic activity that comprises what it means *to be*. He stressed the importance of interpretation as engaging a pre-understanding of *being-in-the-world* and an always-already engagement of making meaning, a common human experience. Heidegger's work underscores humans' foresight, or ability to make interpretations based on background practices. Fore-conception is the part of interpretation that allows anticipation of what might be (possibility). This past, present and future oriented understanding is an all-inclusive circular process that characterizes humans as self-interpretive beings and represents what could be described as the hermeneutic circle (Diekelmann & Ironside, 2006).

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) was a student and stalwart supporter of Martin Heidegger. He expanded on Heidegger's ontological views of what it means *to be* by reminding readers that understanding is achieved only through language and openness to the perspectives of other beings (McConnell et al., 2009). Phenomenology grounded in the Heideggerian-Gadamerian tradition represents a shift from an epistemological emphasis on understanding essences and seeking universal truths to an ontological understanding of a person's being in the world. The hyphenated term *being-in-the-world* refers to the idea that knowledge of our everyday existence is intersubjective, temporal, and relational (Evans & O'Brien, 2005; Gadamer, 1975).

Heidegger and Gadamer asserted that people cannot refrain from preconceived notions and that attempts to eliminate these preconceptions are not only unachievable but absurd (Annells, 1999; Gadamer, 1975). In taking such a stance, the researcher becomes an involved agent of the interpretive process and cannot 'bracket' understandings as data is gathered via interview or analyzed in the interpretive tradition. This departure from Husserlian phenomenology is distinguishing. Thus, the philosophical hermeneutic interview is a distinctive form of questioning that, if applied to research, is different from other forms and requires fidelity to the philosophical assumptions consistent with Heideggerian and Gadamerian thought.

The Philosophical Hermeneutic Interview in Research

 A philosophical hermeneutic interview is a common source of gathering data for qualitative research that is grounded in the philosophical hermeneutic tradition (Diekelmann & Ironside, 2006). That is, the interviewer seeks to uncover what it means *to be* as it shows up or reveals itself through story. As the stories are elicited, the interpretation begins. Simultaneously, the practical interconnected experience of the world is revealed (Johnson, 2000). A shift away from positivist thinking is inherent in the process as the researcher must remain open to unexpected or unfamiliar responses, making space for an interactive exchange to manifest (Vandermause, 2008). An important goal of this method is to understand (come to know) meaning and to make sense of experience. Often this reclaimed language bears a resemblance to conversational dialogue. An exchange of language emerges/evolves as the narrative text is co-created between the researcher and the participant (Crist & Tanner, 2003). Heidegger's idea of language, as something different from question and answer exchanges, has been expressed in a number of his works, including his essay, *On the Way to Language* (Heidegger, 1971). In this essay he uses a story about a conversation about Japanese art to demonstrate that being open to the 'other' allows a dialogue that is fluid and dynamic, and that uncovers and generates, rather than re-presents, understanding.

Types and Structure of Interviews

Interviews vary in their form from structured to semi-structured to open ended to eliciting. They may be conducted in public or private, and with groups or individuals. Numerous articles and books have been written on the subject. Discussion ranges from the reasons for using repeated interviews (Cohen, et al., 2002; Seidman, 2006), to the nuances of various types of interviews (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2002), to the challenges and conflicts in research interviewing (Eide & Kahn, 2008). These writings, however, cannot be ubiquitously applied to research questions; interviews must be consistent with the research question and methodology.

Common characteristics of interviews across qualitative research methodologies can make it difficult to discern from an interview which methodology is used. Conversely, the interview should be discerned by the methodology, since there are many ways to shape language and, thus, acquire data. A more trustworthy acquisition of the interview results requires a systematic and disciplined approach to the research plan and the interview itself, which is the primary data source for many qualitative research approaches. Many interpretive approaches require a feeling of trust between the researcher and participant(s), and use unstructured questions to elicit description. This is true for the philosophical hermeneutic approach as well. Additionally, there are common data gathering practices among interview types. The philosophical hermeneutic interview shares characteristics with interview forms that are more interpretive than reductionist in nature.

During the recruitment process, the researcher discusses with the potential participant the phenomenon that is the focus of the research. This allows time for the participant to think about the experience more deeply. The investigator and participant jointly select a naturalistic setting that is free from constraints and where the participant can feel at ease to share his or her story (Benner, 1994). Immediately after informed consent is obtained, the interpretive process begins. The goal of the investigator is to co-create the findings with the participant through an engaged conversational process (Crist & Tanner, 2003). A 'fusion of ideas' takes place and a narrative text emerges. This idea that there is a dialogic intersection (fusion of ideas) is taken from Gadamer's (1975) work and is used to describe the integral interaction between two worlds, perceptions or stances. It can describe any engagement with another, whether the other is in the form of a conversing person, a text, or an idea. This give-and-take process requires openness and flexibility, characteristics of philosophical hermeneutics as methodology or method in all its stages.

The open, unstructured interview is audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with identifying features removed. Field notes and demographic information provide additional sources of data for analysis. Field notes often denote events that are observed, such as vocal intonations and physical gestures, which might not be clear from audio-recordings (Crist & Tanner, 2003). Such affectations may add to understanding though they are not needed to ascertain an objective representation of fact. They simply facilitate deeper consideration of meaning related to the narrative expressed.

Pseudonyms that are Meaningful

The naming of participants in a hermeneutic study is important because of the attention to language and meaning particular to such a study. There are various approaches researchers use to add interpretive meaning. Pseudonyms may be chosen to protect the participant's identity, but they may also be symbolic relative to the phenomenon of interest. In the case of a current study of

Therapeutic Drug Court (TDC) graduates (Vandermause et. al., 2009), the researcher asked participants to choose their own pseudonyms. They did this after being told about the study and thinking about their contribution to the goal of the study, which was to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of mothering. Many of the participants chose pseudonyms that reflected their idea of their 'best' self, such as a favorite name or person, their own middle name, or the name of a mother or sister. This was an interesting occurrence in a study about mothering, particularly because it contrasted with previous studies that focused on addiction (Vandermause & Wood, 2009) and where women sometimes chose names such as 'Jane Doe' (the unknown dead). Thus, participant pseudonyms can reflect meaningful real-life identities that enliven the research project and represent lived experience. Although the origins of the self-chosen pseudonyms cannot be overtly described in the study findings (to protect identities), they can anchor the participants' investment and enhance the thinking that leads to deeper levels of interpretation.

The Art of Listening

One of the most refined skills a researcher can cultivate when conducting an interview is listening (Seidman, 2006). The capacity to listen attentively while remaining appropriately silent is useful during the elicitation. This can present as a challenge for many researchers. Understanding what is being said and what may be hidden, responding sensitively to the cadence of the interview, and actively acquiescing to the participants' direction is important to the process of moving the interview along with inquiring questions as the narrative text is co-created. This interviewing process corresponds to the philosophical writings of Heidegger (1971) and Gadamer (1975), where phenomena occur in a dialogic context that is reciprocal, multi-faceted, historical and dynamic.

Framing the Questions for the Participants

Christine Dinkins (2005), a philosopher and educator in the Socratic and phenomenological traditions stated, "The manner in which interviewers call forth participants' thoughts and feelings related to the phenomenon has a direct impact on the quality of the data obtained" (p. 111). Questions that are engaged and focused on the participants' experience are required in the enactment of the hermeneutic interview. Often *how* a question is posed about the phenomena of interest takes precedence. Furthermore, it is crucial for the researcher to ask in a way that draws out the story without leading the participant into a set answer. Benner (1994) described the 'critical incident' approach to questioning: participants are asked to tell a story that stands out for them because of what it means about the phenomenon in question. When questions are framed in this way, a participant will often remember an experience that was profound in some way and one related to deeply influential experiences (Dinkins, 2005). This approach is frequently used to initiate an opening question that takes the form illustrated by the following: "As a woman who has graduated from drug court, will you tell me what it means to be a mom in these circumstances?" (Vandermause et al., 2009). When understanding is unclear, paraphrasing what the participant has shared can clarify any uncertainties and avoid putting words in the participants' mouths (Benner, 1994). Often participants feel the desire to give facts and opinions in the story that they share. The investigator takes a stance as a facilitator and translator of the shared meaning that is generated. Of the remaining questions that follow, the investigator should remain focused on the participant's account by posing questions that are open and reflexive. Thus, the framing of questions in a hermeneutic interview is distinctly different from other qualitative interviews in that the researcher and the participant work together to generate an understanding as narrative text emerges and language is interpreted.

Critical Analysis of a Hermeneutic Interview

Interviewing is an integral part of the analytic process. To better understand the process, the following examples are offered from an analysis of interviewing done in the aforementioned study of women who had recently graduated from TDC. Participants included professionals who currently worked with women in drug court and women who had recently graduated from the TDC. For this particular analysis, interviews were initially read for content, followed by an intensive review of the questions, and finally a thorough review of the responses in the context of the conduct of the interview.

The following areas of distinction are characteristic of the philosophical hermeneutic interview: 1) setting the tone of the research, 2) using incomplete sentences, 3) looking for assent, and 4) returning participant to the story.

Setting the tone of the research

Participants are likely to know the topic of the research because purposive sampling is used; they have been selected because of their particular life experience and they often come ready to tell their story. Thus, they have had time to mull over their experiences and think about the phenomenon in question. At the time of the interview, it is important for the researcher to help participants recall storied events and to relate their experiences of the phenomenon without an overlay of conscious explanation but, rather, an ontological expression. The researcher can set the tone of the research by generating an opening question that is representative of the phenomenon and asking it using a reflective affect or voice quality. This opening question is a starting point that can elicit a response from participants, inviting participants to think along as they articulate their experiences. Not only must the opening question be open and reflexive, but this must also apply to the questions that follow.

> Interviewer: …..as you know, I'm interested in what it's like for moms who have used methamphetamine and/or other drugs and have gone through drug court and are in recovery and are dealing with life. And what it means to be a mom in that situation is the focus of this study. And so I just wanted you to think generally, to begin with, about what comes up for you when you think about what it's like to be a mom and be in recovery right now. Is there a situation that stands out for you that you might want to talk about?

Using this conversational introduction, the interviewer sets the pace and the tone for the rest of the interview. The participant is invited to talk about 'what stands out' or comes to mind most readily. In this way, the dynamic established is participant driven and the interviewer can take the lead from the participant rather than structuring the content or presuming the focus. What stands out to the participant is often a meaningful event, whether or not the facts of the story change over time. A participant may not be overtly aware of the meaning of the events prior to the interview experience. This is distinctively different than other forms of interviews, where representation of events in a journalistic fashion is sought. The hermeneutic interview, by contrast, relates to a phenomenon that has meaning in itself, may be variously interpreted, and elicits understanding by its very nature as a description of significance.

Using incomplete sentences

As the interviewer engages in an evolving dialogue with the participant, it is important to guide, rather than lead the discussion, thus allowing the data to be uncovered in a naturalistic fashion

(Dinkins, 2005). By using incomplete sentences the participant is allowed time to respond, to add to the dialogue without feeling the pressure to respond in a particular manner. Consider the following example:

> Interviewer: Tell me about it being their fault.
>
> Interviewee: Um, well, I wasn't accepting any responsibility for my actions and my inability or unwillingness to follow through the program.
>
> Interviewer: So…not……
>
> Interviewee: I wasn't going to group. I was still testing positive. I was very manipulative because I have tons of people skills. So the judge liked me and the counselors liked me. And I, you know, pushed and pushed and pushed and manipulated until they were finally done. And there was no if's, and's, or but's. They were done. They kicked me out. I was sentenced.

Using this technique, the interviewer draws the participant into the conversation without signaling a presupposed response. The participant is allowed to tell the story that is most significant at the time and not related to cause-effect, explanation or subject matter. The story that is forefront in the participant's memory is the story the interviewer facilitates. Thus, the representation of experience evolves from the aspect of experience that is meaningful, that which the research process evokes. This is the unique aspect of hermeneutic interviewing grounded by an ontological orientation.

Looking for assent

As the interview continues, the interpretation of the text needs to be credible, an explication about a phenomenon that 'rings true.' It is plausible because it honors an experience that is genuinely told because of its meaningful representation of a human experience. The reader should be able to trust the interpretation and does this only if the interview is a skilled elicitation rather than an acquisition of responses to leading questions. Therefore, the interviewer should question her own understanding periodically, looking for a participant's affirmation that the growing understanding is correct.

> Interviewee: Um-hum. I went to [location reference]. And got back and didn't learn a thing. Well, I stayed clean for about – I think maybe six months. And –
>
> Interviewer: So you were trying.
>
> Interviewee: I was trying. I have tons of people in recovery, in the program, that I've known for – well, at this point, you know, 27 years.

In this example, the researcher expresses a beginning understanding affirmed by the participant. The interviewer is bound to assess the response and determine whether the participant is affirming weakly, going along, or is asserting an idea and clarifying an understanding of the story with the interviewer. If an interviewer suggests an idea softly, it is often the case that the participant will correct a question or assumption, being familiar with the cadence of the give-and-take that has been established in the interview style.

Returning participant to the story

Lastly, it is helpful to keep the story proceeding forward. If the participant starts leaving the story, the researcher should evaluate whether this distraction is relevant to the story taking place or if the participant needs to be gently brought back to the story of the phenomena being explored.

> Interviewer: So the second time you had – you were pregnant and you had 2 children that your mom was taking care of by this time –
>
> Interviewee: Three. Um-hum.
>
> Interviewer: And how was that – during that time? What was that like for you in relation to your kids?
>
> Interviewee: Well, of course, as soon as I went to jail, I started trying to call them. (Laughter.)
>
> Interviewer: Okay. So you were in jail trying to call your kids.
>
> Interviewee: I was in jail trying to call my kids.

If the interviewer perceives that the participant is diverting the conversation because it is uncomfortable, she may keep the conversation more focused, as in this example, where the attention to calling from jail is the issue at hand. However, if the participant becomes unduly anxious or uncomfortable, the interviewer would exercise judgment as to whether a particular line of inquiry should be pursued. Thus, the hermeneutic interviewer is a guide who takes cues from the participant as the interview ensues.

Implications for Practice, Teaching and Research

Often in a practice-driven health care discipline, question and answer exchanges are critical aspects of diagnosis. Assessing patients' understanding of their condition and their care is important to wellness and recovery. Such questions may be very detailed and require accurate, fact-based responses. However, if the intention is to understand ancillary aspects of a particular condition, to expand upon a practitioner's view of an overall situation, or to seek possible clues to health care challenges, a more open-ended approach to questioning, similar to the type of questioning in a hermeneutic interview, may be adopted.

Although patient wellness and safety take priority over research endeavors, it is important to note the differences of purpose between research and practice-based questioning. Eide and Kahn (2008) have written about some of the dilemmas that arise when research is done in naturalistic settings. Research interviews, such as those described here, can be very personal and evocative, and are therefore often therapeutic; for the same reason, they can be harmful. Thus, hermeneutic research interviews must be a thoughtful undertaking. Ethical considerations, for example, are integral to the process. But the value in listening deeply and exploring topics initiated by persons of interest (patients or research participants) cannot be understated if understanding is desired.

Finally, it is possible to teach hermeneutic interviewing by modeling and practice. In our research classes we demonstrate a hermeneutic interview by asking the class to identify a topic of interest. Students list several priority questions relative to the topic and pose questions for which they seek answers. After an interview is demonstrated, usually by asking one broad, open ended question, such as "Tell me about *x*," students find that many of their original questions are answered in the

short hermeneutic interview. In addition, students find that they have learned more about the phenomenon than they had expected. This exercise teaches reticence in questioning and is an excellent source of discussion as to how health care providers advance, elicit or modify their agenda when working with patients or research participants.

Conclusion

In summary, hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology is a scholarly approach that can be used to interpret meaning of everyday lived experiences. Capturing the essential nature of the phenomenon is sought as the researcher and participant co-create the story during the interview. The analytical process in hermeneutic phenomenology is not the focus of this article, although the philosophical foundations that ground data collection apply also to the process of analysis. Further, textual analysis of the interview process as a discrete activity is a useful undertaking that may precede or coincide with textual interpretive analysis. Such attention to the interviewer/participant dialogue contributes to the researcher/research team's analysis of meaning because the components of interpretation (observed in the interview) may be better understood. A deconstruction of the analytical process relative to an analysis of the interview process itself is a subject for another discussion. By focusing on the interview itself, this article seeks to simplify and clarify distinctions in qualitative data collection modes.

The manner in which the philosophical hermeneutic interview process is conducted is vital in generating rich data. Distinguishing characteristics and developing skills as an interpretive phenomenological researcher can be done by 1) setting the tone of the research, 2) using incomplete sentences, 3) looking for assent, and 4) returning the participant to the story. Thus, meaning can be generated as participants share their experiences, articulate new understandings, and respond to researcher interrogatives that generate interpretation and add to extant knowledge. As novel explications and understanding of experiences unfold, clinical health care practice is advanced.

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