

Phenomenological nursing research: methodological insights derived from Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology

Sandra Mackey*

PO Box 789, Albury 2640 NSW, Australia

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Abstract

The phenomenological approach is increasingly being utilised as the method structure for nursing research studies. However, the nursing literature is beginning to reflect a concern with nurse researchers' adoption of phenomenological methods without, at the same time, laying the philosophical and methodological foundations on which the method is built. It is important for nursing knowledge development through research that the choice of research methodology can be argued for, and is judged to be coherent with, both the philosophical tone of the research and the nature of the research question. In this article the concepts underpinning Heidegger's interpretive phenomenological philosophy are examined and discussed in terms of the methodological insights they provide for the conduct of nursing phenomenological research.

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1. Introduction

Nursing research is conducted with the aim of developing the knowledge base that underpins the stability and growth of the discipline. Nurse researchers have adopted and adapted a range of research methods from the human, social and natural sciences to examine questions of relevance to their practice (Streubert and Carpenter, 1995; Kozier et al., 1997; Lawler, 1998). The different approaches have been broadly classified as quantitative and qualitative or, more recently, positivist and interpretive. Many nurse researchers have found the interpretive approaches more likely than the positivist approach to reveal the depth and diversity of nursing knowledge. This is because interpretive approaches allow for research which aims for understanding, rather

than explanation, of human phenomenon; they allow for research which is conducted in a natural, uncontrolled setting; and for research which utilises the knowledge embedded in experience.

Phenomenology is an interpretive approach which has provided the methodological structure for an increasing number of nursing research studies (Crotty, 1996; Lawler, 1998). Phenomenology is not only a research approach however. It is fundamentally a philosophy, with both epistemological and ontological branches influencing knowledge development throughout its evolution in the twentieth century. Paterson and Zderad (1976) introduced phenomenological philosophy into nursing with their Theory of Humanistic Nursing (1976). These theorists took an existential view of nursing and the phenomena of interest to nursing, rather than a rationalist, positivist view. They referred to the work of the original phenomenological philosophers, Husserl and Heidegger, and their theory reflected their

*Tel.: +61-2-60516874; fax: +61-2-60516772.

E-mail address: smackey@csu.edu.au (S. Mackey).

understanding, or interpretation, of these philosophers' works.

Philosophical ideals and structures are crucial to research, providing continuity and coherence to its conduct and outcomes. Philosophy determines the appropriateness of methodological processes for research and guides the researcher's approach to data analysis. It determines the relevance of various issues and concepts to the research topic and the way in which the discussion is presented. This is particularly important for qualitative research, which is more diverse and less controlled by traditional research methods than quantitative research.

The nursing literature is now beginning to reflect a concern with nurse researchers' adoption of phenomenological methods without, at the same time, laying the philosophical or methodological foundations upon which the method is built (Leonard, 1989; Lowenberg, 1993; Walters, 1995; Lawler, 1998; Draucker, 1999). Maggs-Rapport (2001) suggests that it is common practice to adapt phenomenological techniques to particular research questions without justifying their appropriation, leading to the misuse of methodological notions. Draucker's (1999) review of Heideggerian hermeneutic research in nursing found reference to the philosophical basis of this approach varied greatly. In his critique of phenomenology and nursing research, Crotty (1996) presented evidence from the nursing literature for what he calls a 'confusion' (p. 17) in nursing phenomenological research as to the distinction between phenomenological philosophy and methodology.

There is wide variation in the extent to which nursing phenomenological researchers ground the methodological processes of research in the philosophical ideals of phenomenology. Most authors refer to the philosophical origins of the selected research approach. Some authors simply name their study's philosophical origins and concentrate on describing their phenomenological research method (see for example Dickson, 1994; Bell and Millward, 1999; Atsalos and Greenwood, 2001; Thonlinson, 2002). Increasingly, however, authors are discussing both the fundamental philosophical background to their studies and the conceptual elements which underpin their phenomenological methods (see for instance Kvigne et al., 2002; Koivisto et al., 2002; Sadala and Adorno, 2002; Whitehead, 2002).

This variability in approach reflects the complex and dynamic nature of phenomenology. The philosophy has continually been reinterpreted and comprises several related, but not homogenous, parallel streams (Spiegelberg, 1965) stemming from the work of German philosophers, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). Additionally, there are many differences in the way that these philosophical streams have been understood and applied, not only by nurse

researchers but by researchers in the human and behavioural sciences. In this article, the conceptual basis of Heidegger's phenomenological philosophy is discussed and some of the methodological insights and processes embedded in the philosophy are revealed. The aim is to identify sound, coherent and useful methodological structures for the conduct of Heideggerian phenomenological nursing research.

2. Background

The early nurse phenomenologists drew on primary phenomenological sources, the original writings of the philosophers, in developing their phenomenological theories and research methods [see for instance, Benner and Wrubel (1989) on the value of Heidegger's phenomenology to a nursing understanding of stress and coping; Leonard's (1989) exposition of the Heideggerian phenomenological perspective; Thompson's (1990) work on hermeneutic phenomenology]. However, each presented the philosophy of phenomenology a little differently, according to which of the philosophers most strongly influenced them. For instance Benner (1984, 1985) was drawn to Heidegger's phenomenology, yet Omery (1983), writing at much the same time, does not refer to Heidegger at all.

It must be noted that these nurse researchers were applying phenomenology to an existing discipline, thus the philosophy came to the discipline of nursing through the 'filter' of existing knowledge and beliefs. This variety in the interpretation of phenomenological philosophy is mirrored in other disciplines. For instance, the phenomenological psychologists Giorgi and Colaizzi, who are frequently acknowledged in the nursing literature, developed quite different methodologies as a result of their interpretations of the philosophers' works.

The methods devised by Colaizzi (1978) and Giorgi (1985) have been applied in many nursing research studies since being introduced to nursing by Omery in her seminal paper, *Phenomenology: a method for nursing research* (1983). Their methods were derived from the philosophical ideals, assumptions and concepts proposed by the German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who is acknowledged as the founder of phenomenological philosophy. More recently nurse researchers have also drawn on the interpretive methods of Gadamer (1975) and van Manen (1990), which are derived from Heidegger's phenomenological philosophy.

Heidegger's philosophical focus was fundamentally different to that of Husserl, whose focus was epistemological. Husserl's aim was to reveal knowledge which transcended human experience (Thevanetz, 1962). Heidegger's philosophical concerns were ontological, he aimed for understanding of 'Being' itself. In his major work, *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger sought to

expand the influence of phenomenological philosophy from epistemological questions into the realm of Being, or the ontological nature of existence (Taylor, 1994). Heidegger considered that philosophical inquiry must seek answers to the primordial ontological question, 'What does it mean to be?' (represented by Being with a capital B), before looking to examine what can be known about existence, truth and the nature of reality (Heidegger, 1962; Thevanetz, 1962; Gelven, 1989; Crotty, 1996).

Heidegger challenged Husserl's construction of phenomenology as a purely descriptive philosophy. Heidegger considered the actuality of any description being without interpretation, either in the way of its telling, its recording or its re-telling, to be impossible (Heidegger, 1962; Benner, 1985; McKeever, 1988; Koch, 1996). Heidegger introduced interpretation as both a concept and method of phenomenology (1962, p. 61). He referred to phenomenology which seeks to uncover understanding of the meaning of Being as 'hermeneutic', designating it an interpretive rather than descriptive process (1962, p. 62).

It is at this fundamental level of difference that methodological insights for the conduct of research appear. In choosing to utilise a Heideggerian or interpretive method for research, the researcher commits to an ontological approach. Heidegger's philosophy requires the researcher to seek for understanding of the meaning of Being, rather than for what can be known. The researcher influenced by Husserl's philosophical ideas will take an altogether different approach—different research questions will be asked and concepts will be explained and analysis undertaken from an epistemological perspective. This is because Husserl's emphasis was on revealing what he called the 'essence' of phenomenon which exist independently of conscious experience, but could only be known through examination of such experience (Husserl, 1962). Thus, researchers utilising Husserl's phenomenology will seek answers to questions about the world and the objects within it, rather than the nature of existence or Being.

Methodological insights for research are also revealed in the conceptualisation of philosophical ideas. In his philosophy Heidegger conceptualises Being as being-in-the-world, and this requires the researcher to approach the understanding of Being in a certain way. Heidegger conceptualises time and space from the perspective of being, such that time is experienced as temporal and space as situated. Heidegger's particular perspective on these philosophical elements is what makes his philosophy his own, and Heideggerian or interpretive phenomenological nursing research should demonstrate these, and other conceptual understandings in its conduct and analysis, for the purpose of methodological consistency.

It must be stated that Heidegger has been criticised for politicising his philosophy, due to his perceived support

for Nazism. Heidegger was active in the National Socialist Movement while Rector of the University of Freiburg during 1933 and 1934. Although he was only active during this short period, he did not resign from the party until after the Second World War, and he has been criticised for not renouncing Nazism and condemning the Holocaust (Holmes, 1996). His speeches supporting the ideals of Nazism are on public record, and this support has been enough for some critics to discount Heidegger's philosophy, including Being and Time which was published in 1927, some years before he joined the National Socialist Party (Gelven, 1989; Holmes, 1996). Others criticise his politics, yet claim it did not influence his philosophy (Crotty, 1996). He has also been criticised for not maintaining the stance of the philosopher, for not himself examining the influence of his politics on his philosophy, both at the time, and in later years (Crotty, 1996).

Controversy exists as to whether Heidegger's philosophy reflects this political ideology (Gelven, 1989; LeMay and Pitts, 1994). Holmes (1996, p. 579) has suggested that nurses are 'either unaware of, or unmoved by' this controversy. Certainly it has not been raised as a possible threat to validity in any Heideggerian nursing research that I have read. One of Heidegger's central tenets is that existence is embedded in-the-world and our being-in-the-world cannot be separate from the world. Heidegger's existence is no exception, and his philosophy reflects both the time and place of his being-in-the-world, as does the work of all philosophers. This is not grounds for rejection of Heidegger's philosophical ideas, rather a reminder that all scholarly work must be read and considered with awareness.

Below I consider four philosophical concepts from Heidegger's phenomenology—being-in-the-world, fore-structures, time and space—and discuss the methodological insights they provide for the conduct of phenomenological nursing research.

3. Being-in-the-world

Heidegger (1962) rejected the notion of the person (subject) as a viewer of objects, separated from the world. He considered the object and subject were inseparable, and he represented this in his use of the term being-in-the-world. Heidegger considered being-in-the-world to be a priori, 'it is not pieced together, but is primordially and constantly a whole' (1962, p. 65). Human beings cannot exist except in the framework of an encompassing world, although that world does not entirely constitute or determine the human being (Heidegger, 1962; Spiegelberg, 1965; Sadler, 1969).

Heidegger believed there were many ways for the human being to be-in-the-world but the most significant way was in being aware of one's own Being. That is,

capable of inquiring into one's own Being, capable of wondering about one's own existence (Heidegger, 1962; Gelven, 1989). He named this state *dasein*. In Heidegger's terms, for the human being to exist as *dasein* is to exist 'authentically' (1962, p. 68), because this gives access to awareness of one's own Being (and also the potential for not being) (Gelven, 1989).

Heidegger's major work, *Being and Time* (1962) is not only a philosophical work, it also is a research work in so far as it reveals Heidegger's process of working out of the meaning of Being. While he does not explicate a method for phenomenological research, Heidegger provides some insights for the researcher in sections five to eight, the 'Second Introduction' of *Being and Time* (1962), which are devoted to discussion of the 'method and design of our investigation' (p. 36). Here he suggests that access to Being is to be achieved through an account of *dasein* in their 'average everydayness' (p. 38). Gelven (1989, p. 34) describes this state as simply the uncritical mode of daily life. It incorporates Heidegger's notion of fore-structures, which are usually unnoticed and left undescribed. Heidegger considered that in describing *dasein* in their everyday state of being, essential structures which are 'determinative for the character of its [*dasein's*] Being' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 38) can be revealed.

For phenomenological nurse researchers this is only the preparatory step, one that opens the way for interpretation and understanding, which is to be achieved through the hermeneutic process (Heidegger, 1962; Gelven, 1989). Thus, the process of conducting research guided by Heidegger's phenomenology requires the researcher to engage in both descriptive and interpretive activities.

Heidegger's approach emphasises the rich description to be found in everyday living, and the interpretive basis of all understanding. Utilisation of an interpretative approach requires the researcher to accept and value the descriptions given by the participants as their reality, their understanding of the phenomenon (Koch, 1999). Interpretive research requires more from the researcher than simply taking the role of recorder. Interpretation begins when the researcher engages with the phenomenon, as the researcher's prior awareness, attention and anticipation is directed toward the phenomenon. Interpretation continues as the researcher listens to and reads the participants' descriptions of their experience of the phenomenon, and becomes immersed with this data. In order to achieve understanding, however, interpretation requires the researcher to go beyond the literal meaning of the participants' words to pursue the fore-structures and thematic meanings held in the data.

4. Fore-structures

The process of interpretation is always built on, or operates in, what Heidegger, (1962) called fore-struc-

ture. Fore-structure is what is understood or known in advance of interpretation. It is prior awareness. It is the anticipation of meaning. Some phenomenological researchers refer to fore-structure as pre-understanding or background (Benner, 1985; McKeever, 1988; Plager, 1994; Andrews et al., 1996; Geanellos, 1998b), and use these terms to mean the context-dependent knowledge, opinions and experiences which the researcher and participant brings to the research study. Heidegger meant the term in a much more comprehensive sense, to acknowledge that interpretation already exists fully formed, but in need of expression.

Heidegger states, 'interpretation functions as disclosure' (1962, p. 198). That is, interpretation discloses what is 'already there' in its totality. Interpretation allows that which is already understood, to be revealed. When things in the world have been understood through interpretation we can say that they have meaning (Heidegger, 1962, p. 192). When meaning is achieved the reality of what is already there has been made manifest (Gelven, 1989, p. 97). Thus, the phenomenon is revealed (Heidegger, 1962).

Heidegger (1962) conceived of interpretation as a circular process whereby the fore-structures of understanding are made explicit, then considered in terms of the whole of the understanding of something, and then re-considered in new ways. Methodologically, this is seen in the concept of the hermeneutic circle (Leonard, 1989; Thompson, 1990; Geanellos, 1998a). Heidegger described a 'circle of understanding' (1962, p. 195) as the process for expression of the fore-structures. The hermeneutic circle refers to the flow of understanding that takes place through being-in-the-world. It refers to the back and forth movement between partial understandings and the more complete whole. Thompson (1990, p. 243) describes the hermeneutic circle as 'a process of moving dialectically between a background of shared meaning and a more finite, focused experience within it'.

The interpretive strategies identified by Benner for drawing the interpretation from the descriptive data (Benner, 1994) provide a methodological link between Heidegger's ideas and the research method or process. Patricia Benner has been applying phenomenology in nursing research for about 20 years, and has built up a substantial body of work in support of its use in nursing (see for instance Benner, 1984, 1985, 1989, 1994). Her articulation of an interpretive phenomenology is particularly her own, although derived from Heidegger's phenomenological philosophy and the work of the existential phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty (1962).

Benner's interpretive phenomenology (and that of many nurse phenomenologists) has recently been criticised by Crotty (1996), primarily for wrongly claiming to be Heideggarian. This has produced some lively responses in the nursing literature (see for instance Benner, 1996;

Lawler, 1998; Darbyshire et al., 1999; Giorgi, 2000), and the issue is far from resolved. There has also been criticism from within the nursing community which challenges Benner's work on both philosophical and methodological grounds (Padgett, 2000). Nevertheless, Benner's long experience as a phenomenological nurse researcher has provided her with opportunity to sharpen her methodological understanding. Her interpretive strategies are actual techniques for analysis, for doing something with the data which is phenomenologically coherent.

In the conduct of research, interpretation is facilitated through identification of what Benner (1994) calls paradigm cases and exemplars. The paradigm case is where the text is read and analysed as fully as possible for overall understanding, as well as detailed understanding, of the phenomenon. Exemplars are 'clear and vivid examples' (McKeever, 1988, p. 56) which provide qualitative distinctions within and between themes, and are illustrative of identified patterns (Benner, 1994, p. 117). They reveal the particular meanings held in a paradigm case. Heidegger's influence is evident in Benner's suggestion that analysis involves moving between the parts and the wholes of multiple paradigm cases and exemplars, in cycles of understanding, interpretation and critique (Benner, 1994, p. 116).

A methodological technique suggested by van Manen (1990) for developing these cycles of interpretation is the process of hermeneutical phenomenological writing. Through a circular process of writing and re-writing the researcher clarifies, promotes reflection and allows for deeper meaning to be revealed. This is because it both distances the researcher from the phenomenon, encouraging perspective; and draws them towards it, allowing focus on the phenomenon alone (van Manen, 1990, p. 127–131).

Curiously, phenomenological writing begins with reading and listening to the data, in order to engage with it. The researcher interacts with the data through highlighting sections of transcripts, transcribing text in notebooks, asking questions of it, proposing ideas about its meaning, considering what really stands out from the descriptions and pondering on what might be absent. Writing involves reflecting on the experiences as described, with phenomenological concepts in mind. It also involves stepping back from the experiences of the individuals to look for the characteristics in these experiences which might reveal aspects of the phenomenon being investigated. Writing is well advanced before the analysis and synthesis, the interpretive processes, reveal the final thematic forms, or the elements without which the phenomenon could not be experienced.

5. Time

Heidegger's phenomenology dictates that understanding through interpretation cannot be achieved unless the

interpretation is grounded in a consideration of time. Time is one of the fundamental structures of human existence and it has been conceptualised in many forms. For instance clock time is a shared form of time, which is measurable, and used to structure daily life. Public or world time is essentially action-oriented, that is, we do things in world time (Heidegger, 1962; McInerney, 1991). Calendar time is important to women who monitor their menstrual cyclicity (Boughton, 1997). Heidegger's (1962, p. 39) philosophy conceives of time as 'the horizon for all understanding of Being and for any way of interpreting it'. Interpretive phenomenology considers that all human experience is grounded in time, and that the experience of time is fundamental to an understanding of Being, and ways of being. Time is experienced and given meaning within the life of the person in-the-world (Gelven, 1989).

Heidegger considered the person to be temporally situated in-the-world. Temporality refers to awareness of time through the experience of being in time (Heidegger, 1962). Heidegger understood temporality as the ground for our awareness of our existence. Temporality allows past, present and future to be experienced as a unity. The experience of this unity means that what is experienced in the present is coherent with what was experienced in the past and is expected to be experienced in the future, such that awareness of them is as one, in the present (Heidegger, 1962; McInerney, 1991; Turetzky, 1998).

This philosophical conceptualisation of time as temporal must be reflected in the conduct and outcomes of interpretive phenomenological nursing research. The researcher must situate themselves, the participants and their experiences in time, and so reveal the experience of time, in the search for ontological understanding.

This can be achieved through the researcher being alert to the participant's rich descriptions of their experience because these descriptions situate the participant in-the-world. To be situated is to recognise involvement in-the-world as having significance, but that each situation of involvement is necessarily limited by its temporal horizon (Heidegger, 1962). Heidegger described as temporal horizons the range of possible ways for the experience of time to be disclosed (1962, p. 416). Awareness of this situatedness or 'temporal determinateness' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 40) must also permeate the interpretive processes and be evident in the discussion of the phenomenon.

An example can be seen in the phenomenological nursing research investigating the experience of illness. This research has shown that illness can be highly disruptive to the experience of time. In Boughton's study of premature menopause the present stood out as 'the time when things change, cease to be what they were and become something different' (1997, p. 208). Madjar (1991) studied the experience of clinically inflicted pain

in burns and cancer patients. For these people lived time was disrupted initially by their injury or diagnosis, so that the previously 'smooth flow of life was suddenly arrested and the taken-for-granted future seemed both distant and unclear' (Madjar, 1991, p. 201). In living with their illness and its treatments time was experienced as 'moving very slowly' despite the participants' desire for 'time to speed up' (Madjar, 1991, p. 204).

Phenomenological nursing research which investigates the experience of illness has shown that illness situates the person by making experience stand out in, and disrupt, the flow of time (Kesseling, 1990; Fitzgerald, 1995). The experience of time is through the things which stand out from the flow of time, and Heidegger referred to this as the 'ecstatic character' (1962, p. 377) of temporality. The interpretive phenomenological researcher is alert to those things which stand out in participants descriptions, which situate their experience in time in order to enhance understanding of the experience of time and the nature of Being.

6. Space

Being-in-the-world means existence is not only temporal, but spatial. Spatiality grounds the person in a location. Being-in-the-world has this characteristic because everything in the world 'belongs somewhere' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 136). Heidegger calls this spatial situatedness 'the there' (1962, p. 171). From the position of 'the there' the person is always either bringing something close to them ('here'), or experiencing it as remote ('yonder'). Heidegger called the tendency of *dasein* to closeness, 'de-severance' (1962, p. 138), and emphasised that this is not about a measurable distance but about what matters to the person, that which is of concern.

Heidegger used the term *sorge* (most commonly translated as care, but also as concern) to refer to the most essential and unifying of the human being's ways of being-in-the-world. To be situated in-the-world in a state of concern or care is revealing of Being. The concept of horizon identifies the situatedness of the person in-the-world, in both time and space. Just as there are temporal horizons (Heidegger, 1962), space can also be experienced in terms of horizons (Gadamer, 1975). What is brought into the foreground of the horizon of space and what is relegated to the background, depends on the unique situatedness of the person in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962; Pollio et al., 1997).

Thus it is important that the interpretive nurse researcher situate participant experiences in space. This does not mean describing the geographical features of the participant's world. Rather, it requires the researcher to listen to participant's descriptions of the phenomena,

situations, experiences that are brought close, or into the foreground of their attention. It is also important to listen for what is experienced as remote, or in the background of the horizon of awareness as those things which are of concern are not always situated on the spatial horizon so that they are present to awareness. Through the interpretive process the researcher aims to describe, analyse and reflect upon the state of concern existing between the person and the phenomenon experienced. In revealing the situatedness of the person in this way the researcher links the particular phenomenological method with the philosophical concepts and ideals of phenomenology.

7. Summary

Nurse researchers have found that phenomenology allows for ways of doing research which are consistent with nursing ideals and theoretical conceptualisations. Phenomenology's philosophical premises accept human experience as a valuable source of knowledge, and its methodological approaches allow, and indeed encourage, the complexity and depth of human experience to be expressed. Heideggerian phenomenology provides a way of approaching research which focuses on the person and the context of their existence. Heidegger's approach emphasises the rich description to be found in everyday living, and the interpretive basis of all understanding.

Issues concerning application of Heidegger's phenomenological concepts in nursing research studies have been discussed in this paper. Methodological insights derived from Heidegger's philosophy have been presented for consideration. Further discussion of the philosophical origins and ideas and methodological applications of phenomenology is needed in order to strengthen the consistency and credibility of phenomenological nursing research.

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