

Doing Heideggerian hermeneutic research: A discussion paper

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Abstract

Background: Much has been published related to the epistemology of Heideggerian hermeneutic research. We seek to reveal insights from our experience of enacting such research.

Objective: To articulate the lived experience of ‘doing’ Heideggerian hermeneutic research.

Design: The authors of this paper shared their experiences with the primary author towards articulating the process of ‘doing’ such research.

Participants: The authors all have long experience with Heideggerian hermeneutic research and meet regularly at the Institute for Interpretive Phenomenology. They supervise student’s research and are mindful of the process of coming to understand how to work in a phenomenological/hermeneutic manner.

Methods: First the section on philosophical underpinnings was written by the primary author and then shared with all authors. There was published data related to the experience of three of the participants already available. This provided a spring board to further conversations when the primary author visited America, able to engage in daily conversations with three of the co-authors. In the spirit of phenomenology this paper represents a process of reading, talking, writing, talking, reading, re-writing, re-talking and so forth.

Results: The process of doing hermeneutic phenomenology is represented as a journey of ‘thinking’ in which researchers are caught up in a cycle of reading-writing-dialogue- which spirals onwards. Through such disciplined and committed engagement insights ‘come’. The researcher is always open to questions, and to following a felt-sense of what needs to happen next. However, it is not a process of ‘do whatever you like’ but rather a very attentive attunement to ‘thinking’ and listening to how the texts speak.

Conclusion: This paper argues that alongside a disciplined understanding of the methodology, both researcher and reader need to share a commitment to ‘thinking’ which is willing to question, and open to trusting the resonance of understanding that ‘comes’ without expecting answers that are declared ‘truth’ for all time.

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What is already known about the topic?

- Enquiry arising from interpretive phenomenological/hermeneutic philosophy is becoming more accepted and better understood by nursing scholars around the world.

- Step by step methods of doing such research reflecting from various philosophical commitments.
- Insights gleaned from such phenomenological/hermeneutic research contribute to disciplinary understanding of a wide-range of phenomena of interest to nurses and other health care providers.

What this paper adds

- A clear articulation of how the philosophical ideas of Heidegger and Gadamer can be enacted in ‘being’ a phenomenological/hermeneutic researcher.
- A showing that goes beyond the ‘theory’ or ‘method’ (procedure) of how to do such research to illuminate the process as it is lived—that is, to uncover the ontology.
- An argument that such research is a journey of ‘thinking’ rather than a specific, pre-determined process by which ‘findings’ can be pinned down.

Many authors have written about the epistemology of Heideggerian hermeneutic research. Early researchers revealed the ‘how’ of methodology and method and others eagerly engaged in such research. *Techné* (know how) from the wider qualitative domain informed questions of rigour, which was later renamed as trustworthiness. There was a sense that there was a method to follow. We, the authors of this paper, have enacted the methodology many times both in our own work and when guiding doctoral students. We call it by several names embracing a selection and combination of the following words: interpretive, phenomenology, and hermeneutics, drawing specifically on Heidegger and Gadamer. We do not situate ourselves within the writings of Husserl, or those linked to him such as Colazzi and Giorgi (Dowling, 2004; MacKey, 2005). That is, we seek to stay close to experience itself (ontologic) rather than try to articulate a more generalised analysis of essence (ontic).

In conversation with each other we perceive disquiet: there seems to be a gap between how our approach to enquiry gets reported in the few paragraphs that accompany a paper or manuscript and how we experience undertaking our enquiry. *Techné* (know how) that pre-defines a ‘way’ has silenced lived *phronesis*, the wisdom-in-action that knows in the moment, and finds the way day by day. In this paper, we return to the notions of Heidegger and Gadamer to articulate something of *phronesis* that resists being pinned down, refuses to be a set of steps, is enacted differently by each one of us, and yet shares a common quest. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the emerging, in-the-play event of Heideggerian phenomenology as-lived.

Let us put forward as a guiding light to this paper the statement: ‘Phenomenology means a way of staying true to what must be thought’ (Harman, 2007, p. 155). We argue that research is thinking ‘that which is pointed to as something to be thought about’. All is thought, which raises questions about ‘how do we think’ and ‘how do we understand the nature of insight which thinking seeks to uncover’? We draw from Arendt’s understanding: ‘We are so accustomed to the old oppositions of reason and passion, of mind and life, that the idea of a passionate thing, in which thinking and being alive become one, can be but startling’ (Arendt and Heidegger, 2004, p. 153). In other words, who one is as-researcher is fundamental to the thinking of research, for thinking does not happen as a mechanistic process divorced from being in the world. Rather thinking is lived, breathed, and dreamt, felt, run-with, laughed, and cried. It arises from all that has come before in one’s life, both the remembered and that which is known without knowing. Thinking reveals itself in the ‘ah ha’ of words jumping off a page, in conversation that gives insight, in writing where sentences seem to fall onto the page of their own demanding. Thinking is everything. The researcher is as-thinker, and so too is the reader who is called to think about ‘this’ and not so much about ‘that’. All is in-play, being played and sometimes out-played (Gadamer, 1982). There is little that can be pinned down without losing the salient nature of the quest. Nevertheless, a ‘showing’ requires that the pause button be pushed to allow us to see a still frame of being before the play button once again activates that which in the living can never be stopped.

1. At the heart

To be human, to be a researcher who lives life as articulated by the writings of Heidegger is to always already be in-the-midst of a specific situating that is constantly in flux. Heidegger (in Harman, 2007, p. 28) says that life is ‘thisly’: this life doing this research this way with these people at this time and place in this mood with these possibilities. Thus, any pre-conceived plan always rubs up against what ‘is’ which may or may not fit with pre-thought ideas of order or process. Specific knowing can only come in the moment. Time, past, present and future come together and are torn apart amidst such moments:

We find ourselves delivered to a situation that must be dealt with somehow (past). Yet we are not mere slaves to this situation, since we go to work on our current situation by glimpsing possibilities in it that we can try to actualize (future). Finally, every moment of factual life is a profound tension between what is given to us and how we confront it (present).

Life is a kind of *unrest*, forever torn between poles of reality. Life is movement, or “motility”. (Harman, 2007, p. 29)

Yes, we remember what we wrote in our carefully constructed research proposal of last year, and yes, we ‘still’ hold the sense of why this research matters before us, but ‘in this moment’ a new possibility arises. In the unrest there is ‘play’, ‘leeway’. Miller (1996) recounts a conversation he once had with Gadamer on the nature of ‘play’. Gadamer talked of the play essential to the wheel of a bicycle. If the nut is screwed too tight the wheel cannot turn, yet if too loose there is danger the wheel will fall off. In the leeway, the space between structure and freedom, there is room to play, to respond to the unrest and think again.

To research in a Heideggerian hermeneutical manner is to recognise that *phronesis* is the predominant mode of being:

All genuine *phronesis* is absorbed into action—action as an ineluctable movement that a person can never step out of ...we can never freeze our assets, nor is there ever a period of respite in which we might prepare ourselves for action as if that were something in which we were not already involved. Or, as Gadamer puts it: we are always already in the situation of having to act. (Dunne, 1993, p. 268)

As researchers of this methodology we are never outside our research, never planning ahead with full confidence that we know precisely how it will be; rather we are always already in the midst of the research, confronting the possibilities, making choices, wrestling with the restlessness of possibilities. Such a way of ‘being’ cannot be learnt from mere instructions. One must live the experience, drawing from who one is and is becoming. The choice to ‘do it this way’ is known as resonance, attunement, and a sense of ‘goodness of fit’. Everything from our past lies within the soil from which thinking arises and bears fruit. We feed the soil by reading again and again the writings of Heidegger and related philosophers so our thinking is already poised for the moment when the possibility of understanding opens. We talk with each other, sharing tentative thinking to create the interplay of ideas springing one to the other, gaining momentum, taking shape.

2. Our quest

From the very outset we put aside any claim that our research will produce objective, simplified, scientific concepts of truth. Harman (2007) suggests the rigorous scientific methods that have such aims ‘de-live’ and ‘dehydrate’ the experience of living events, producing caricatures, illusions, distortions and exaggerations in an ambience of antiseptic calmness. While we

agree that such scientific research is useful and fitting to many projects, we argue that to understand the complex nature of ‘being human’ questions must be addressed as to how we understand, and therefore how we think.

Heidegger takes the Greek word *aletheia*, choosing to name ‘truth’ as ‘unconcealment’, ‘drawing something forgotten into visibility’ (Harman, 2007, p. 92). Yet, that which we seek to understand will always be in flux between what can and cannot be seen, between what ‘is there’ and what ‘disappears’ just as we sense a hint of what we have not yet grasped. An interpretation of an experience is always also a withdrawal of all that still remains hidden, silent, unspoken. If we can free ourselves from the noise that tells us all that is already known as information then we may find ourselves amidst the clearing, the open space where thoughts are free to play and roam, where fresh insights emerge, shyly. In the clearing there will always be light and shadow. Just as the trees hedge the clearing one comes to on the forest path creating shadow, which draws back into darkness; so our fresh insights will find the place of withdrawal where ‘what we have grasped’ merges with the still-not-yet-known.

Our quest is therefore not to prove or disprove, not to provide irrefutable evidence but rather to provoke thinking towards the mystery of what ‘is’. In this way, thinking is ‘my’ interpretation of coming to understand which is always/already drawn from all of my experiences and conversations (via reading, writing, thinking and dialogue) with others. Thinking is not a ‘working out’ but rather a ‘letting come’ (Dunne, 1993) where in the midst of some unrelated activity of a nature that leaves us free to think, such as going for a walk, one finds oneself thinking, questioning, wondering and somehow strangely understanding in a new way. The thoughts we offer will always be imbued with who we are and those with whom we live our lives (in actuality or via literature, chance meetings, planned exchanges and so forth). It can be no other way, for our very understanding of the words we use has been born of our experience, our situatedness (Heidegger, 1995) which is always/already communal (Nancy, 2000). Further, the insights we offer will disclose who we are, expose us and abandon us amidst a world we can neither control nor master (Harman, 2007). We offer our thinking in humility knowing it is as good as could be, yet lacking. We will hope others will ‘think on’, as we do ourselves. There is unlikely to be a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer amidst our findings but rather tentative suggestions, hints of possibilities, discussion to open more questions to ‘wonder’. This approach to researching is complex; every experience has layer upon layer of meaning embedded within it. No one will ever get to the bottom or some kind of Archimedean point—the truth that is ‘all-that-there-is’ once and for all. The complexity and

mystery of what it means to be human will always have the last word.

3. Translation to method

3.1. *The phenomenological conversation*

The temptation is to accept the philosophical underpinnings of methodology and then move swiftly into a neat, pre-ordained, orderly method. That is the very reason we write this paper. Method, or ‘the way’ must also embrace Heidegger’s understanding of Dasein as being-there, being-open, being in-the-play, going with what comes, awaiting the moment of understanding. Gadamer (1982, p. 345) gives an example which shows how such an approach might differ from a textbook definition of a semi-structured interview:

We say that we ‘conduct’ a conversation, but the more fundamental a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a fundamental conversation is never one that we want to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way in which one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own turning and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the people conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows what will ‘come out’ in a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like a process that happens to us. Thus we can say that something was a good conversation or that it was a poor one. All this shows that conversation has a spirit of its own, and that language used in it bears its own truth within it, i.e. that it reveals something which henceforth exists.

We know from our experience of interviewing, for instance, that while we may take some written prompts, and attempt to cover similar ground, each conversation is uniquely itself. Even when we discipline ourselves to let the interviewee find their own way, still we hear our un-scripted ‘umm’s’ encouraging, affirming, leading-on. Every interview/conversation is an event that simply ‘is’. To try to minimise the play is to tighten the nut too tightly so the wheel cannot turn. To go to an interview with a mindset of ‘conducting’ is to freeze the phenomenological spirit. Our interviewing style is not structured in that we follow a pre-organised plan, nor unstructured, where we go with no clear sense of why we are there. Rather, we encourage an openness that trusts the ‘whole being’ of the researcher will be caught up in the play of the conversation in a manner that is in-keeping with the study. Thus it is neither too tight nor too loose, but always an interview about ‘something’.

What matters most is openness to what ‘is’—to the play of conversation

3.2. *Working with the data*

Research methods tend to reduce, categorise, synthesise; in other words to take a large mass of words as offered by interview transcripts and ‘do something with them’ resulting in a product that is succinct, clear and helpful. Harman (2007, p. 27) reminds us that Heidegger set about to articulate a ‘new kind of theorizing that somehow points to the facticity of life without reducing it to a set of surface qualities’. Instead of Husserl’s approach of bracketing out pre-understandings to articulate the essence of phenomena, Heidegger, in contrast, believes our understanding is always already there and cannot, nor should, be divorced from our thinking. Further, phenomena need to be examined in their existence, in the living world where people find themselves amidst twists and tangles, hopes and dread, doors that open and others that slam shut. To remove a story from its rich textual background is to remove meaning and thus the possibility of understanding the experience as it as lived, for we can only ever live in a context of time, place and situational influences.

Working with the data is an experience of ‘thinking’. We are called by a particular story, just as one ‘stops’ in front of a particular painting in an art gallery. Grondin (2001, p. 45) explains: ‘The play of art does not lie in the artwork that stands in front of us, but lies in the fact that one is touched by a proposition, an address, an experience, which so captures us that we can only play along.’ To play along is to go with the thoughts that excite, confuse, perplex. It is to let thinking find its own way, to await the insights that emerge. One can never teach another how to think, nor ‘show’ the nature of how one thinks, because meditative thinking, as described by Heidegger (1992) is an experience of being-lost-in-thought. The minute one tries to ‘describe’ how one thinks, one moves from being in-thought to a more ontic process that is different. Van Manen (1990, p. 79) says: ‘grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of ‘seeing’ meaning’. What we call ‘themes’ are not necessarily ‘the same thing’ said again and again, but rather an understanding we have seen something that matters significantly, something that we wish to point the reader towards. Harman (2007) cautions that to thematise is to objectify and remove the object or experience from its specific context. In our experience, the theme itself is not the ‘finding’ stripped out of the data, but a way to show what we ‘see’ or ‘hear’ in a text (from a participant) signalling for the reader of the region in which further discussion and thinking will occur. The ‘ah-ha’ of our research is not the theme in and of itself, but the understanding that is evoked by

thinking and re-thinking the experiences participants share always keeping new understandings in play and offering them to readers to further explore. Thus the ‘finding’ is a calling, an invitation to others to come and look and think along with us, rather than extracting a generalisable ‘this is true for everyone’ series of statements. To ‘find’ is to point towards that which already withdraws.

A research supervisor has the challenge of helping the student stay immersed in their data, to courageously persist in thinking and struggling to understand, yet to let the text (experience) speak (to offer new understandings). Students must learn to trust that understanding will come, but not without the circling discipline of reading, writing, talking, mulling, re-reading, re-writing and keeping new insights in play. Heidegger (1968) says: ‘The calling [to think] is not a call that has gone by, but one that has gone out and as such is still calling and inviting; it calls even if it makes no sound’. Crowe (2006, p. 186) clarifies: ‘In the ‘it calls me,’ there is no one and no thing that is doing the calling’. It is the already-there mood which announces the activity that calls. We find ourselves in a mood from which we ‘turn towards or turn away’ (Heidegger, 1995, p. 175). Such a mood draws us ‘to intuit understandingly and to understand intuitively’ (Crowe, 2006, p. 210). Students come to recognise the experience as different from ‘knowing things’ (Crowe, 2006, p. 210). On a given day one reads Heidegger with a sense of being captivated, or one puts him aside preferring to go for a walk. One is ready to write, or switches off the computer knowing that the time has not yet come. What made no sense last week suddenly leaps forward with clarity of insight that astounds. The plan of the day is cast aside when energy flags for one feels ‘stuck’ and ‘flat’. On another day nothing can stop the flow of thinking, reading and writing that just seems to enthusiastically know where it is going. Heidegger, in pondering the nature of thought, asks: ‘To what? To what holds us, in that we give it thought precisely because it remains what must be thought about’ (Heidegger, 1992, p. 369). We do not plan what must be thought about; rather we are held (or not held) by thinking that demands to be within us—as idea, as excitement, as heaviness, as an itch that will not go away. Thinking is a bodily being-in-the-world experience (Heidegger, 1995; Overgaard, 2004).

3.3. *Offering*

How does one offer thinking to another? We argue that for too long we have been captured by the remnants of rigorous science that create expectations that certain procedures underpin trust (Koch, 1996). But, for example, when we read a poem we do not ask ‘can I trust the process by which this has been written’ nor do

we consider if its meaning could have any applicability to our own life. We simply read the poem and await its calling. It may stop us, demand to be read again, linger in our thoughts and somehow offer us a gift of understanding; or it may not. We believe that the nature of Heideggerian phenomenology offers findings of a similar nature. What matters is not accuracy in the sense of reliability, or how the researcher came to make certain statements; what matters is what has held the thinking of the researcher and in turn holds the thinking of the reader; what calls, what provokes them to wonder. Any insight gleaned is not about the ‘generalised’ or ‘normalised’ person who is, in fact, no one, but what shows ‘me’ how better to understand human experiences.

3.4. *Inviting*

The quest of Heideggerian phenomenology is not to provide answers, for that shuts down and closes thinking. It is rather to invite readers to make their own journey, to be exposed to the thinking of the authors and to listen for the call on their own thinking. We seek to persist in questioning—always wondering about what still lies hidden, what was closed down in coming up with ‘this interpretation’, what else is to be thought. To invite is to gift without assuming one can pre-guess what the other will receive. Every person reading the research report will take away their own thoughts, already connecting their past experiences with future possibilities of the ‘thisness’ of their own situation.

We argue that to talk of limitations is to assume that research could/should achieve a pre-defined end. We say from the very beginning that we are simply ‘on the way’ (Diekmann, 2005). The thinking will never be done in the sense that it is complete. It will always be situated, and soaked in taken-for-granted assumptions. One could never peel back all the layers or possibilities or understand in a complete or ‘all at once’ way. This is not to be ‘limited’ but rather to be free in the openness of the clearing, where light and shadow play in a way that brings new insights and understanding.

4. The ‘experience’

The authors of this paper share their experiences. The method of this research is grounded in all of the philosophical discussion above. While it was first written by the primary author, it was written and re-written amidst many on-going conversations with all members of the team. Some of the interview data began in Smythe (2005) but discussion in relation to this paper most often moved on to offer a re-saying. Many conversations happened over cups of tea, with the quotes scribbled on scraps of paper and later transcribed. All data were

returned to the person who said it, who then polished, clarified and edited their thoughts. As interpretations were made the paper went back to the group time and time again. A second visit to America enabled further discussion and re-thinking. What is presented is for the intention of being ‘hand-holds’ to offer reassurance to the researcher who seeks something to ‘grasp hold of’ as they journey into the unknown.

4.1. *Beginning*

I don’t know if I have a research question. I certainly can write one as I begin a study or write a grant. But when I think about my research I don’t think about it as a series of the questions per se. It’s more my passion for the phenomenon. I’m just very interested in how is it for students and teachers to learn together, and that’s just fascinating for me. If I’m pressed I could say my overarching question is “How do teachers and students experience learning together?” that’s if other people need me to have a question. Phenomenology for me is about pursuing ideas, thinking together. It seems we have to be able to articulate that as a question with related findings. I can do that. But what gives me the passion for what I do is not the question. It’s pursuing a complex and compelling phenomenon so that hopefully we can create better/more engaging and compelling schools of nursing. (Pam Ironside)

While other methodologies pay close attention to the wording of a research question Pam reveals how for her researching is being-in-thinking. She is captured by a passion that ‘takes her thinking’. Yes, she can translate that to a question to meet academic requirements but the question is not ‘everything’. What matters is the quest to think more deeply about something that matters. To draw on Heidegger: ‘This initial ‘projection’ is not fixed or final, but instead a wholly revisable hypothesis about the meaning of that which is to be investigated’ (Crowe, 2006, p. 28). Such is the sustained open scholarship of Heideggerian hermeneutic research. Yes, the focus of the research is ‘held’ but the questions we bring to that focus will grow and change as our understanding builds.

4.2. *Captured by a thought*

I can be driving home, not thinking about anything much, when suddenly a thought comes that seems to resonate with whatever I’ve been grappling with in my writing. Suddenly I see a way forward. I let go of all the clutter and focus on this one clear insight. Thinking becomes energised, eager to be set free in writing. Often it sends me back to find a bit of Heidegger half-remembered that somehow seems to connect. (Liz Smythe)

To think phenomenologically is not to follow a structure, to solve, to work out; rather it is to let what ‘captures thinking’ stay in thought and speak to understanding. ‘You do not sit down and solve problems: you bear with them until they somehow solve themselves’ (Merton, 2007, p. 23). But the solving is never ‘done’. Thinking always takes one on to the next question. Phenomenologically, it is persistently thinking that matters.

4.3. *Enjoying*

Doing my PhD was hard, and I worked on it and it took a while, but I liked doing it, and I liked it when it was done. (Melinda Swenson)

When you’re interpreting data, pretty soon time just flies and four hours are gone; you are totally taken up by it, everything is just flowing. If I try to force it, it doesn’t work. I don’t know how to make it happen but I know it when it does. It’s exhausting but exciting at the same time. And when it happens I don’t want to quit. (Pam Ironside)

There is a way of being-phenomenological that ‘comes’. Rather than a grasping of pre-defined steps it is a letting-go and trusting that the thinking and that new understandings will come and will lead. In that thinking-space the researcher is captivated and ‘lost’. It feels like ‘being on a roll’. Pam says, ‘You have to learn to let stuff go, to let [thinking] happen’:

Easy is right. Begin right
And you are easy.
Continue easy and you are right.
The right way to go easy
Is to forget the right way
And forget the going is easy. (Merton, 2007, p. 206)

Even amidst the ‘difficulty’, for the people who connect with the methodology there is an ‘ease’ which imbues the process and almost without conscious thought, makes the going easy. They like everything about what they are doing. They lose themselves in thought, forgetting to worry about method, or where they are in a series of anticipated steps. Rather they delight in the sense of being ‘caught up’ in the thinking that leads them forward.

4.4. *Working*

Once I had the transcript, the thinking initially was relatively superficial. Things would jump out as seeming important and I would underline them to make a comment in the margin, but it was still pretty small thinking. Then I would brainstorm the main things that seemed to be talking to me. I would write about a page, pretty superficial. But it showed me what I noticed first. There is lots of backwards and

forwards reflexivity between thinking and writing and reading, but it is also between one interview and all of the interviews. The thinking goes in quite a lot of different directions. I don't think you can control that and I don't think you ought to control it. I think it happens and you have to realize it is happening and capture what is happening. That is where you keep on writing. (Deb Spence)

To work with the data is to listen for the ideas that jump out, to hear what is being said in one's own writing, to think and read and think again over the same ground, to go back and forth between 'everything'. The researchers let thinking go in whatever direction feels right but to somehow capture the thinking that emerges. It is to write and to re-write. It is to let the thinking emerge without knowing where one is going.

4.5. *Listening and responding*

We don't try to come up with a 'once and for all' statement, like we want to pin everything down and make it a 'thing' or an object. Like 'respect' 'love' 'caring': how do you ever pin them down? It all boils down to 'listening and responding'. You can never know what you are going to hear in the data and therefore what you are going to do, say or think in advance. You have got to wait and listen and know that understanding is always dynamic. The hermeneutic circle circles! (Pam Ironside)

There is no pre-thought plan in the phenomenological journey of analysis, nor is there a quest to define, to answer, to provide firm evidence. Rather there is an openness to listen to the thinking that emerges, and to respond to those insights with more questions, more reading, more wondering and an offering of interpretation to enable others to join the listening and learning.

4.6. *The unutterable circle of writing*

We had our stories and were looking at them, and looking at them. We tried laying some other frameworks on them and that didn't work. We were getting frustrated. I called Pam one day and she said "maybe it's about listening. You guys should read that Fiumara book" (Fiumara, 1990). It was amazing. It helped us to see what was already there. It gave us a language, a way to open the stories up a little more so that more of what was in there could show itself. It was like a key, leading us to a whole new way of thinking. Then it also opened up what other kinds of writing we could look at. We found we were connecting with the data. The process itself is unutterable but we know it takes concentrated periods of time. You cannot think like this in little spurts. Since there are no steps you cannot return to

them, you don't know where you are in the line. It's like being in a circle of writing. When you are in that phenomenological mode the writing becomes poetic, like it's coming from some different place. I look at that writing now and can't believe we wrote it. (Sherry Sims and Melinda Swenson)

No one can tell anyone else what to do with the data. One has to dwell with it oneself. Others, however, can be the conversational partners that offer keys to unlock doors previously closed. Philosophical writing brings a different language, takes us back to more primordial experience, and gets us thinking beyond our own horizon of knowing. As the thinking emerges as written word the phenomenologist is lost in something that feels somewhat mysterious. Writing comes, finding its own way, speaking in its own voice. Crowe (2006) suggests that Heidegger's passion for philosophy 'is not motivated by theory but by 'living concern,' by 'personal being'. Such is our experience of engaging in phenomenological interpretation: we live the reading-thinking-writing process within our mood of 'being' that calls, draws and reveals. The secret to achieving such writing is the gift of large spaces of undistracted time and the willingness to trust that the emergence will come.

4.7. *Openness*

It's about being open to (and/or ready for) something "surprising" to show up. When I think I know what I'm hearing and I'm struggling with it, I have to be willing to turn what I thought I was seeing on its head—of saying "that's NOT it because now I see something in a new way and there's no going back to what I thought it was." This openness seems to be key here. In many ways that's why we experience this kind of writing as "coming from a different place". I'm thinking the issue is that it "shifts" from being writing as "reporting" to writing as thinking. (Pam Ironside)

Writing as thinking does not start with a conclusion in mind as to what needs to be said. Rather, there is a listening to the insights that emerge, even when they shock, up-turn or disconcert. Heidegger talks of 'wakefulness' (Crowe, 2006, p. 222). Such wakefulness needs an openness and a stillness that expectantly awaits. Yes, perhaps more often the writing articulates what we already know yet have somehow forgotten. Writing brings the unsaid into the open space where ideas are exposed to interpretive gaze, to wonder, and to ask still more questions.

4.8. *Always an impression*

As a person of extreme near-sightedness, the world to me looks like an impressionistic painting, or more

like a Monet. If you are too close you cannot see it very well, nor if you are too far away. There is a place where the focus is as good as it can get. I am always feeling like this. You can change your stance forward or backward and it looks different. But it is still always an impression. (Melinda Swenson)

The findings of hermeneutic phenomenological research are always simply the impression gained. Stories of experience from a group of individuals, in which their own standpoints of time, place, culture and experience are embedded, are interpreted by researchers who bring their own prejudices (Smythe, 2007). It is only ever an offering of thinking to engage others in their own thinking experience. Merton (2007, p. 49) says: ‘What characterizes our century is not so much that we have to rebuild our world as that we have to rethink it... We need a profound questioning which will not separate us from the sufferings of men’ (sic). Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology strives to achieve such profound thinking.

4.9. *Discerning trust*

When I publish I write the same as everybody else about trustworthiness, and I suppose that makes it sound very linear or straightforward. But when you are immersed in the data, you get ideas, you bounce them off everybody. I try them out. I think my research is trustworthy when people say “I’ve never thought about it like that before” or “you’ve put into words what I’ve always known but couldn’t say”. If my work is really thought provoking, and engages the teachers and students in thinking and understanding their experiences in new ways, then I think it’s trustworthy. I also think the notion of resonance is important. If everybody is going ‘what!?’ then it is not trustworthy. But if it grabs you, hooks on, then you’ve ‘got it’ [trustworthiness]. (Pam Ironside)

We believe the researcher has a responsibility to listen in a manner that seeks to understand the meaning of what is said, and to respond with thinking that provokes and engages. The trustworthiness of a study is known first by researchers themselves who test out their thinking by engaging in everyday conversations with those who share the interest or who are living the phenomenon. Resonance, an attunement that is ‘known’ but cannot be pinned down, is the hallmark of trustworthiness. While research reports may list behaviours that fulfill pre-established criteria, we have not found it to be these behaviours that, in and of themselves, lead to trustworthiness or any uncontested description of ‘how it is’. We believe it is time to hold ontic requirements more loosely and to bring greater trust to the ontological spirit of ‘understanding’. As phenomenologists we live with the ‘restless to and fro between yes and no’ (Heidegger, 1959, p. 75). We do not ask the audience to accept

everything (or anything, for that matter) we say as truth, for we ourselves keep open questions of truth. We rather invite others to share a journey of exploration, to bring their own questions to each interpretation, and to arrive at their own understanding of meaning. ‘In the end, as in all phenomenologies, it must be left to the thoughtful reader to decide on the accuracy of the phenomenological description’ (Schmidt, 2006, p. 66).

4.10. *Graced moments*

I know I have got to the phenomenological heart of ‘experience’ when I read a story from the data aloud and a profound sacred silence takes hold of the room. (Liz Smythe)

Heidegger, in a letter to Elisabeth Blockmann in 1919 talks of ‘graced moments’ as experiences in which ‘we feel ourselves belonging immediately to the direction in which we live’ (Crowe, 2006, p. 30). We believe a hallmark of phenomenological research is graced moments, when there is a shared sense of belonging to the insight that seems to go beyond what was said, yet is felt and understood as ‘being true’. This is different from proffering answers. It is rather a calling-to-consideration.

4.11. *Being self*

For me phenomenological research is a way of thinking. It is just our way of being who we always already are. (Pam Ironside)

For all that the writing of Heidegger is complex and abstruse, what he was trying to do was articulate how we go about thinking in everyday life, and to challenge us to let that happen in a manner free from rules and pre-thought plans (Heidegger, 1996). That is the quest, simply to be who we are and to let thinking come, as it comes; to trust that ideas will call, to lose ourselves in the play, to listen to our moods, to respond to the resonance of insights. ‘Dasein’ is always/already, constitutively ‘thinking’: simply being-there in the midst of what is, where all that is melded into an inter-connected oneness. It is as hard and as simple as that.

4.12. *Conclusion*

We began this paper by grounding ourselves once again in the philosophical underpinnings of Heideggerian hermeneutics. We have sought to offer a tentative ‘wording’ of the unutterable process of doing such research. In our experience the research question arises from a passion that calls, holds and takes one on a journey. The question points the way but the way is a following of what comes. Phenomenological researchers engage with their whole being (Dasein) always already in the midst of what is, always listening and responding.

They listen attentively to the story gifted by real people living eventful lives, even in the ‘ordinary’. In dwelling with the data they trust that new understandings will come. They seek to provoke thinking from whatever ‘reading’ calls. They offer their whole selves to writing and thinking, freeing what is known to be surprised by the revealing of what comes. Let us not give a false impression that we are advocating a process in which ‘anything goes’. On the contrary, we seek to articulate the commitment and discipline required to sustain thinking that stays grounded in the data, while at the same time seek dialogue with philosophical writings, research colleagues, and those who live the experience. Infusing all of this is the already-there-ever-changing knowing in which the researchers themselves are always embedded, and which must be recognised as both enabling and limiting. To offer writing as ‘product’ is to share the thinking that is always still in the process of emerging.

Inviting others to share what emerges is to invite them into thinking. Trust resides in the discernment of each person, in the space between language and interpretation where ‘I’ am called to listen to ‘my own’ response. It is not a measure; it is a way of being. To think is to trust that one will ‘understand’ what is to be held, and what to be let go. It is to keep thinking in the face of disappointment, surprise and wonder. It is to remember that the shadow of all that is yet to be known closely hovers. Such is the research we embrace with passion. Writing hermeneutically is thinking. Research is thinking. All is towards ‘staying true to what must be thought’ (Harman, 2007, p. 155). This is who we are, and who we are becoming. It is such thinking we seek to offer to others to keep thinking alive and lively. We argue that hermeneutic phenomenological research is to engage in thinking about the experience of being human, and as such can only be achieved by recognising the gift and limitation that being human brings. As human beings we can bring commitment and discipline to our research activities. But always the experience will ‘take us’ beyond our pre-thought expectations. Our understandings, if we persistently, courageously attend to listening and responding to what shows itself, will ‘come’. We accept and celebrate such mystery.

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