A phenomenological hermeneutical method for researching lived experience

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This study describes a phenomenological hermeneutical method for interpreting interview texts inspired by the theory of interpretation presented by Paul Ricoeur. Narrative interviews are transcribed. A naïve understanding of the text is formulated from an initial reading. The text is then divided into meaning units that are condensed and abstracted to form sub-themes, themes and possibly main themes, which are compared with the naïve understanding for validation. Lastly the text is again read as a whole, the naïve understanding and the themes are reflected on in relation to the literature about the meaning of lived experience and a comprehensive understanding is formulated. The comprehensive understanding discloses new possibilities for being in the world. This world can be described as the prefigured life world of the interviewees as configured in the interview and refigured first in the researcher’s interpretation and second in the interpretation of the readers of the research report. This may help the readers refigure their own life.

Keywords: phenomenological hermeneutics, interview, lived experience, method, text.

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Researching lived ethics

From time to time nurses and physicians experience ethically difficult situations in the care work. They are able to talk about them, but they are not usually able to explain their ethical thinking. This is connected with the fact that human beings live and act out of their morals, i.e. internalized norms, values and attitudes, without necessarily knowing about them. For this reason you cannot just ask people what morals they have. Often they will not be able to answer. So if you want to investigate the morals of physicians and nurses, the object of investigation is not just openly there, ready to be observed. To gain access to this ‘object’, you may ask the nurses and physicians to tell stories about situations involving regrettable conduct, something they have done themselves, actions they have participated in or witnessed. This question will lead to exciting stories (1, 2). The situation related often happened years previously, but the interviewee may have talked very little about it. Sometimes, the telling is accompanied by tears. Thus it is possible to collect an interesting material that reveals the morals and the ethical thinking of physicians and nurses, but of course, these morals are not explicitly spelled out. So the challenge for the researcher is to analyse the material and make the morals and the ethical thinking visible.

Searching for a suitable method

In 1989 we decided to investigate how nurses and physicians reason in ethically difficult care situations. We wanted to do research within the field of ethics. Ethics in this context means moral theory, i.e. a perspective on morals, or a moral teaching. Morals then signify the internalized norms, values, principles and attitudes we live by in relation to other people, but do not necessarily reflect on to any extent.

The big challenge we had was to find a way to investigate the morals and the ethical thinking of nurses and physicians. We needed a research method suitable for our task. This method did not exist in a ready-made form we felt comfortable to adopt, so we had to develop the method. By doing this, we had to draw on the tradition of western philosophy, which, since the old Greeks, has been occupied with the problem of understanding, not only what is good and bad, but all kinds of phenomena. We could especially draw on the tradition of hermeneutics, i.e. the tradition of text interpretation, as it first emerged in protestant theology and then became a powerful tradition within philosophy and human studies, thanks to the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin
Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur and others. We could also draw on the tradition of phenomenology, as it was developed by its founder Edmund Husserl and his successors. And, of course, we were inspired by the many qualitative research methods developed during the last decades. However, these methods are often preoccupied with so-called qualitative data, whereas our task was to elucidate essential meaning as it is lived in human experience. Therefore the traditions of hermeneutics, phenomenology and phenomenological hermeneutics became so important to us.

In this paper we present the method we developed. It is a phenomenological hermeneutical method to be applied in healthcare research and in human studies, and we shall explain below its theoretical foundation and how it goes.

A phenomenological hermeneutical method

The morals and the ethical thinking of nurses and physicians came to expression in narrative interviews, which were tape-recorded as well as written down, thus producing texts that could be interpreted. Therefore the research method needed to be hermeneutical, i.e. a method based on text interpretation. However, we call the method we developed phenomenological hermeneutical. Why phenomenological?

When nurses and physicians talk about ethically difficult situations and incidents in healthcare, they are themselves interested in the ethics of these situations and incidents. They are questioning what is good and bad. As researchers we also want to understand this good and bad. It is not our task to describe and explain morals as a social phenomenon, but to understand the experiences of good and bad expressed in the interview texts. The interviews are about this specific good and bad. It is not the texts that are the subject matter to be investigated, but the ethics expressed in them, the good that may be absent.

To understand a text is to follow its movement from sense to reference: from what it says, to what it talks about (3). The ‘reference’ of a phenomenological study is not some object outside the realm of meaning, but the essence of the meaning itself. When the interviewees give expression to their lived experiences of ethically difficult situations in healthcare, the researcher does not want to seize on these experiences as something ‘factual’, as psychic, social or historical events that need explanation. As phenomenologists we want to focus on the understandable meaning of these experiences. When the interviewees experience actions, attitudes, relations or other human matters as ethically good or bad, we want to understand this good as the essential meaning of ethically good phenomena (or the essential meaning missing in ethically bad phenomena).

Emphasis on essential meaning

When Edmund Husserl (4) founded phenomenology about 100 years ago, his starting point was the experience that science was preoccupied with explaining natural objects or events, whereas the understandable meaning of these objects and events was taken for granted within the framework of natural research and received little attention. When, for example, a biologist investigates trees, they are objects to be scientifically explained, and their meaning, with which we are familiar in lived experience, needs no particular attention. Even mathematics, as a stream of mental events, was regarded as an object susceptible to natural explanation: How must the brain and psyche function to conclude that 2 added to 3 give 5? Husserl was a mathematician before he became a philosopher, and it was obvious to him that mathematics is about understandable meaning. The mathematician understands that in every single case of adding 2 and 3 the answer must be 5 and explanations of the functioning of brain, psyche, mind or intellectual behaviour are of little interest to him as a mathematician. If you investigate intellectual behaviour and collect evidence for the hypothesis that people will state that $2 + 3 = 5$, the arithmetic mean of all collected evidence will certainly not be 5, but may be 4.978, due to the fact that some people cannot master calculation. Such evidence-based research has no contribution to make to mathematics. Mathematics is not a science based on collected evidence for (or against) explanatory hypotheses, but a science expressing mathematical experience as lived experience, i.e. an experience from within, not from without, an experience of a logical coherence constituting meaning.

As mathematicians develop mathematics similarly phenomenologists develop phenomenology. The starting point is lived experience. Within this experience we are already familiar with the meaning of all kinds of phenomena. Take the phenomenon of a chair. As human beings we live in a world with chairs and we know the meaning of a chair, but normally, in our natural attitude, as Husserl (5) says, we already know about chairs in such a way that the meaning is taken for granted. To become phenomenologists we have to dispense with this ‘taking for granted’ and strive for a phenomenological attitude in which the phenomenon, e.g. the chair, is allowed to appear to the mind in its meaning structure. Having come to this meaning, we may ask for its typical or essential traits. What makes the chair a chair? What constitutes a chair as a chair? Observing the chair in our intuition, what characteristic must be retained in order for it to remain a chair? By raising and answering such questions we are able to investigate and discover what is invariable in all the variations of the phenomenon, i.e. its essential meaning, its ‘essence’.
Phenomenological hermeneutics

Essences are not ideal things, given in a world of ideas, ready to be grasped in our thinking. They are essential meanings. We have to assume the existence of such essential meanings, as long as communication refers to a common world. Meaningful communication about chairs implies a common understanding of the phenomenon of chair. It implies an essential meaning we must all be familiar with in order to be able to discuss chairs, but we do not have to be very conscious of this essential meaning. Regarding different kinds of caring activities and institutions, we may discuss what we mean by ‘caring’. In such a discussion we do not simply state a common definition of the word (which is very difficult to achieve), we draw upon a shared familiarity with the world in which caring takes place. This familiarity makes it possible to have a qualified and nuanced discussion about the essential meaning of caring. In the same way, our experiences of consoling or being consoled make us familiar with the phenomenon of consolation in such a way that we may discuss its essential meaning. Our experiences of good and bad actions, activities, reactions and so on make us familiar with the phenomenon of ethically good human conduct, and out of this familiarity we are able to discuss how to understand the (essence of the) ethically good. Such examples, and we could give an endless list of them, tell us about an original experience of the world (5, originär gebende Erfahrung). This original experience is a basic relatedness to the world. It is not a special kind of lived experience, but rather the foundation for all lived experiences, the prerequisite that lived experience reveals a world, that it has a meaning content. Human consciousness is intentional, as Husserl (4) puts it. It is always about the world, an openness to the world (and of the world). Human existence is being-in-the-world, as Heidegger (6) states. And this world, as it reveals itself to our consciousness, Husserl (7) calls the life world and Heidegger (6) simply the world, as different from the objective, outer world.

We may very well be less optimistic than Husserl appeared to be as regards the question of how easy it is to clarify the essential meanings of phenomena. In his description, the essence of a chair is grasped through an intuition of the chair. In this intuition we state which characteristics of the chair cannot be subtracted while the chair remains a chair. However, if we look and listen to our familiarity with chairs as part of our life world, we must also consider our sitting on chairs as a process of positioning. In some chairs we are enthroned, in others we rest, in a chair at the university we teach and sitting between two chairs is always unfortunate. Such experiences are also witnesses to the essence of the phenomenon of chair. And such witnesses cannot be heard without narration. To come to the meaning of chair positioning we have to tell stories, which express our experiences of such positioning. These stories reveal the meaning of chairs in our lives. In order to interpret the stories it is better to write them down. In other words, we have to produce texts to be able to thoroughly examine the meaning structure of chair as part of our life world – and thereby reveal the essential meaning of chair. And this will also be the case when we study other phenomena: the good, consolation, care, trust, rest – and the whole endless list of examples. Thus we see that phenomenology must be phenomenological hermeneutics. Essential meaning must be studied and revealed in the interpretation of text.

In stating this we (i.e. the authors of this article) place ourselves within the tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics as it was founded by Martin Heidegger and further developed in Germany by Hans-Georg Gadamer and in France by Paul Ricoeur. In this tradition (which has much in common with the philosophy of the late Ludwig Wittgenstein) it has become obvious that essential meaning is something with which humans are familiar in the practices of life, and this familiarity has to be expressed through the way of living, through actions, through narratives and through reflection. For research purposes lived experience has to be fixed in texts, which then always needs interpretation. We do not believe in ‘pure’ phenomenology in which essences are seen intuitively, uncontaminated by interpretation. Nor are we interested in ‘pure’ hermeneutics, i.e. in text interpretation that does not transcend the text meaning to reveal essential traits of our life world.

Refraining from judgement through telling

In Husserl’s phenomenology the shift from natural to phenomenological attitude is expressed in a rather technical and complicated way. In the tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics this shift is not so difficult to understand. The natural attitude is an attitude in which we judge – and have already made judgements – about the existence of phenomena. We already know, we conclude, we state the facts and take for granted what is meant. To shift to the phenomenological attitude we must refrain from making judgements about the factual. We must accomplish epoche or bracketing. The easiest and, so to speak, the natural way of doing this is to narrate from lived experience. Thus narrating, we naturally refrain from judging and concluding. We are not interested in stating facts, but in relating what we have experienced. Then the listener may also not judge: ‘What you say is right or wrong’, but rather participate in the story: ‘So this you have experienced, so that is what you thought’. In the telling, both the teller and the listener take part in the narrated meaning. Then they are free to consider: what are the important themes here, the essential characteristics of the expressed meaning? When we say that bracketing is
accomplished, what exactly is put within brackets? It is of course not the preunderstanding. In that case meaning and essence would also disappear. What we put within brackets is our judgements about the factual, about what is the case, in order to become open to our own experience and to the understandable meaning implicit in this experience.

**Critical understanding of discourse**

Why is it important to obtain knowledge of the essential meaning of lived experience? Why is it important to obtain such knowledge within health care, and thus to develop a phenomenological hermeneutical method? One could object that understandable, inter-subjective meaning does not need clarification as long as it functions in communication. The meaning or essence of caring does not have to concern us as long as we understand each other when carrying out caring activities. Then we should concentrate on these activities and not on their meaning. This objection has a point: when action is needed, too much reflection may be inappropriate. On the other hand, when we have emerged from a demanding situation, reflection may be of crucial importance. For two interconnected reasons: (i) To be able to understand and, if necessary, to improve our own practice, we have to start with our lived experience. We have to express it to become aware of its meaning, and often this awareness itself leads to improvements. If we miss the opportunity to reflect on our own experiences, we will hardly find a way to improve our practice, even if organizational changes supposed to be beneficial are implemented. (ii) The meaning we need to reflect on is a meaning we take part in. If we work within healthcare, we participate in the meaning of healthcare as it manifests itself in many actions, activities, considerations, helping measures, institutions, buildings, technology and so on. We call such a meaning that manifests itself historically, a discourse (8). We may engage in discourses with enthusiasm, we may suffer under our participation in them; we may work against them or step out of them. Frequently it is not in our power as individuals to change them. Nevertheless, discourses, such as the discourse of healthcare, are continuously changing and we also take part in this process of change. For these reasons reflection on lived meaning and its essential traits is important. Without such reflection on lived meaning it is difficult to become aware of unfortunate practices we are part of. And it is impossible to implement a fruitful discussion that may change such practices and lead to discourse improvements.

**Improving understanding**

When we narrate out of lived experience and write down the narration, we produce an autonomous text, a text that expresses its own meaning. The narrative thus produced has (in itself) no need of correction through a stating of facts. This, however, does not mean that the narrative is a fiction. It tells about our world, about being-in-the-world, about life world. This is not a factual world outside or lying behind the text, but rather a world in front of the text, a world revealed by the text. Through lived discourses we participate in this world – and through narratives we become aware of this participation. Narratives touch us and move us when they shed light on our lived experience of discourse participation. Thus being touched and moved may reveal the essential meaning of this participation, this being-in-the-world. Being touched and moved by essential meaning leads us to the truth, to lived truth as opposed to correctness, and it connects us to the ontological level of life world. However, this being in truth and connectedness to being must be fulfilled in understanding. Through narrating such fulfilment may begin. We have been formed by discourse and tradition (prefiguration) and by telling what moves us, our preunderstanding may be transferred into a liberating expression (configuration), an expression that opens up new possibilities in life (9, refuguration). A process of improvement in understanding may begin – a process that will need the authority of science to achieve something beneficial within the heavy traditions of discourse.

**Creating a text**

There are many different kinds of texts. Here we describe interview texts that are constructed in interaction between an interviewee and an interviewer. An interview occurs in a shared speech context, where both parties share an understanding of the interview situation. Furthermore the interviewer can stop and ask the interviewee to clarify what he/she has said when it is difficult to understand. Thus the speaking as an event and its meaning come close to each other (10). In writing on the other hand, the event of writing becomes separated from the meaning. The text becomes autonomous and open to anyone who can read. A tape-recorded and transcribed interview text lies closer to speech than to writing, especially if the interviewer herself/himself interprets it. It is fixated speech. The interviewee is the main author of the text and the interviewer is a co-author who has taken part in a more or less dominating way. In order to guarantee that the interviewee’s voice is heard in the interview text it is essential that the interviewee feels free to relate her/his lived experience.

The most basic way to gain understanding of our own experiences is to narrate them and to listen to others’ narratives. We can understand moral action when we listen to others’ narratives about the way they acted in various situations. Therefore narrative interviews (11) are an appropriate method for disclosing the meaning of lived experience.
Interpreting a text means entering the hermeneutical circle. This is done by means of a method called narratology, which was developed over a period of more than 10 years and has been used in several studies (e.g. 15–23).

Naïve reading

The text is read several times in order to grasp its meaning as a whole. To do this it is necessary for us to be open enough to allow the text to speak to us. We become touched and moved by it. During the naïve reading we try to switch from a natural attitude to a phenomenological attitude. The naïve understanding of the text is formulated in phenomenological language. It is regarded as a first conjecture and it has to be validated or invalidated by the subsequent structural analysis. Thus the naïve understanding guides the structural analysis. Given below is an example of the formulation of a naïve understanding of the interview text:

Feeling at home means feeling comfortable, relaxed, free from demands and alone, enjoying memories of a happy childhood. It also means enjoying contact with nature and a feeling of being loved by God.

Structural analyses

Structural analyses are the methodical instance of interpretation. There are several kinds of structural analyses. Here we describe thematic structural analysis, i.e. a way of seeking to identify and formulate themes. A theme is a thread of meaning that penetrates text parts, either all or just a few. It is seen as conveying an essential meaning of lived experience. In order to capture this meaning of lived experience we do not formulate the themes as abstract concepts, but rather as condensed descriptions We formulate them in a way that discloses meaning.

There are several ways of performing thematic analyses (24). We can, for example, ask questions to the text and gather sections of the text that answer those questions (e.g. 25). Here we will describe the method whereby the whole text is read and divided into meaning units. A meaning unit can be part of a sentence, a sentence, several sentences, a paragraph, i.e. a piece of any length that conveys just one meaning.

When dividing the text into meaning units there will be some parts that do not seem to be about anything related to the research question, e.g. remarks about the temperature in the room and parts that contain descriptions of context etc. These text parts are taken into consideration during the analysis but may not contribute to the formulation of themes.
The meaning units are read through and reflected on against the background of the naïve understanding. Then they are condensed, i.e. the essential meaning of each meaning unit is expressed in everyday words as concisely as possible. All condensed meaning units are read through and reflected on regarding similarities and differences. They are then sorted and all condensed meaning units that are similar are further condensed and sometimes even abstracted to form sub-themes, which are assembled to themes, which are sometimes assembled into main themes.

During the structural analysis we try to view the text as objectively as possible. We decontextualize the meaning units from the text as a whole, i.e. we consider the text parts as independently as possible from their context in the text. This is possible if the meaning units are long enough to contain one essential meaning. We sometimes find that a meaning unit contains more than one essential meaning, which entails a further division.

The themes are reflected on in relation to the naïve understanding and the question is whether the themes validate or invalidate the naïve understanding. If the structural analysis invalidates the naïve understanding, the whole text is read again and a new naïve understanding is formulated and checked by a new structural analysis. We repeat this process until we feel that the naïve understanding is indeed validated through the structural analysis.

As a text is multidimensional and there are many though not infinite meanings (3) several structural analyses may be performed in order to disclose various meanings.

An example of a structural analysis of the narrative above is given in Table 1. The limited space available in the article has resulted in very short meaning units, which are a little unrealistic. We hope, however, that the idea is clear. In practice a meaning unit may contain a whole page of text.

### Table 1 Example of a structural analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning unit</th>
<th>Condensation</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was sitting in my chair on the terrace. My chair was comfortable</td>
<td>Sitting comfortably</td>
<td>Being comfortable</td>
<td>Being connected to body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And it was quiet around me, I was all alone</td>
<td>Being alone in quietness</td>
<td>Being in privacy</td>
<td>Being connected to self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I took off my shoes and undid my button. It was very relaxing</td>
<td>Relaxing through loosening clothes</td>
<td>Being relaxed</td>
<td>Being connected to body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt I was free to do whatever I would like</td>
<td>Being free to act as one chooses</td>
<td>Being free</td>
<td>Being connected to self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one had any demands on me</td>
<td>Not being required to do things</td>
<td>Being free</td>
<td>Being connected to self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I looked at the trees in the garden and remembered how I had climbed them as a child</td>
<td>Enjoying nature and memories</td>
<td>Being rooted</td>
<td>Being connected to nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And how my mother had warned me about falling down. I smiled when I remembered her concern and love</td>
<td>Remembering having been loved and cared for</td>
<td>Being loved</td>
<td>Being connected to the memory of deceased other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They were the same trees as then</td>
<td>Comparing present and past</td>
<td>Being rooted</td>
<td>Being connected to nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thanked God</td>
<td>Thanking God</td>
<td>Being grateful to God</td>
<td>Being connected to God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For having given me such a happy life</td>
<td>Being happy in life</td>
<td>Being happy</td>
<td>Enjoying life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Comprehensive understanding (interpreted whole)

The main themes, themes and sub-themes are summarized and reflected on in relation to the research question and the context of the study, i.e. the field of human life investigated. An example is given below (inspired by Ref. 26):

Being at home as narrated by Swedish people in various ages and professions was explained as consisting of the following themes (sub-themes): being connected to body (being comfortable, being relaxed); being connected to self (being in privacy, being free); being related to the memory of deceased other (being rooted, being loved); being connected to God (being grateful to God), enjoying life (being happy). The themes seem to be connected and being at home could be regarded as the main theme.

The text is read again as a whole with the naïve understanding and the validated themes in mind, and with an as open a mind as possible.

We interpret out of our preunderstanding (6) and we cannot free ourselves from our preunderstanding. We are only aware of aspects of it. Through critical reflection, we can revise, broaden and deepen our awareness. Discourse with other people and/or texts, especially with those foreign to us, can also help us become aware of the aspects of our preunderstanding, e.g. phenomena that we take for granted, such as phenomena related to our culture and past history.

We try to use our imagination and think of associations with relevant literature. This can only be done in relation to our acquaintance with the literature. Often we have to consult colleagues, study suggested literature and thus expand our possibilities.

When we find literature that seems appropriate for helping to revise, widen and deepen our understanding of
the text, it is important to check whether its basic assumptions, such as outlook on life, are congruent with the perspective of our study. If there are differences, we must discuss how to relate to them. As this is a phenomenological hermeneutical study we think of literature about the meaning of lived experience. We do not force the literature’s perspective on the interview text but let the chosen literature illuminate the interview text and interview text illuminate the chosen literature. Sometimes we need several literature texts to illuminate various aspects or parts of the interview text.

An example of choosing a literature text or texts to widen our horizon for interpretation is given below:

Zingmark, Norberg and Sandman (26) described the experience of feeling at home in people aged between 2 and 102 years based on interviews. They found that safety, rootedness, harmony, joy, privacy, togetherness, recognition, order, control, possession, nourishment, initiative, power and freedom were important aspects (themes) of feeling at home. The essence of feeling at home seemed to be feeling related to significant others, significant things, significant places, significant activities, oneself and transcendence. When Norberg, Bergsten and Lundman (27) interpreted interviews about feeling consoled, they described suffering as not feeling at home, i.e. feeling disconnected and being consoled as coming-home.

When we read these studies and the literature they refer to, we decide to try to interpret feeling at home as an experience of being consoled.

The process of interpreting the text as a whole and arriving at a comprehensive understanding is the ‘nonmethodic’ pole of understanding (3). It is not possible to follow strict methodological rules. Imagination is important. We again come close to the text and recontextualize it. We try to perceive it in the light of the literature text/texts chosen and also see the literature text in the light of the interview text. The focus is not on what the text says but on the possibilities of living in the world that the interview text opens up. The focus thus is more on the future than on the past. An example of interpreting a text as a whole is given below:

Based on this literature we formulate a preliminary interpretation that feeling at home means feeling connected to self (body and mind), living others, the memory of deceased others, nature, activities, things, God. We regard this experience as analogous to the experience of being consoled.

When comparing our themes and the sense of whole with this picture we can see that our results fit with the picture but this does not give a complete picture. We either give up our picture of the meaning of feeling at home as a whole or decide that we need more interviews.

Formulating the results in a phenomenological hermeneutical way

The results are formulated in everyday language as close to lived experience as possible. Everyday language emanates from elemental lived experience. When we try to express the meaning of lived experience we therefore use everyday language rather than abstract well-defined scientific language (10). Verbs are better at revealing lived experience than nouns. Thus ‘feeling lonely’ is a more appropriate wording than ‘loneliness’.

Narrative language often involves poetic expressions. Poetic language makes the words mean as much as they can and creates mood, which reveals possible ways of being in the world and ‘shows a deeper mode of belonging to reality’ (28), while scientific language reduces the polysemy of language (29). Thus sometimes we use poetic expressions, metaphors or sayings in order to convey the interpreted meaning.

Using phenomenological hermeneutical interpretations

As the results of phenomenological hermeneutical investigations are about the meaning of lived experience, they can only be used to affect meaning of lived experience, i.e. as understood by the interpreter. It is not only the interpreter that interprets the text. The text also interprets the interpreter. Thus we use the results to help us and others gain insights about our world and ourselves and see our world and us in a new perspective. When our outlook on phenomena changes, our behaviour will also change. This process of applying phenomenological hermeneutical interpretations can be described as a process of appropriation. When we have gained a new perspective and insights about new possibilities to relate to ourselves and others, it is a challenge to help others to also gain new insights, e.g. by writing research reports in a way that can affect people.

Critical considerations

When performing a phenomenological hermeneutical interpretation, our aim is to disclose truths about the essential meaning of being in the life world. We do not expect to find a single fundamental truth; the whole truth can never be fully understood. We search for possible meanings in a continuous process. We move between the limits of dogmatism and scepticism (3). We avoid thinking both that we have the whole truth and that there is no truth to find. The truth is not hidden behind the text; it is disclosed in front of the text, when the interpreter meets the text (30). Here we will reflect on the challenges this effort implies.

First, as we search for ontological meaning, we want true narratives. We want the interviewees to talk
truthfully about their lived experiences. This presupposes that the interviewees are aware of their lived experiences. Sometimes interviewees may say that they do not remember, or they do not seem to understand the meaning of the questions we ask. The interviewees may not be willing or dare to narrate. They may not find the right words to express their lived experiences. Conducting a narrative interview is a delicate task, the interviewer should create a permissive climate and help the interviewee to feel free to relate, relying on the interviewer’s promise of confidentiality.

As the interviewees can only understand and narrate their lived experience in relation to their preunderstanding and the interviewers can only understand the narrative in relation to their preunderstanding, there is a risk of misunderstanding. Skilful interviewers check their understanding of the narrative or elements in the narrative with the interviewees during the interview and use questions such as: What do you mean?

In order to arrive at as truthful an interpretation of the text as possible the process of interpretation must be strict. Klemm (10) argues that the most probable interpretation of a text is ‘the one that makes sense of the greatest number of details as they fit into a whole and one that renders all that can be brought forth by the text’.

We understand in relation to our preunderstanding. We revise the preunderstanding while interpreting a text. When we feel a text is dead, it can be because our preunderstanding is too superficial or inappropriate, we cannot grasp essential meanings in the text. It may be necessary to broaden our preunderstanding by studying relevant literature or speaking to knowledgeable people.

A text never has only one meaning, i.e. there is not just one probable interpretation, according to Ricoeur (31). However, all possible interpretations are not equally probable to the interpreter or the community of interpreters. The internal consistency of the interpretation and the plausibility in relation to competing interpretations should be considered.

As results of phenomenological interpretation can only be used if they affect people’s way of perceiving life, the way they are written about is crucial. Ricoeur (3) highlights the aspect that phenomenological hermeneutics is an argumentative discipline. Phenomenological hermeneutics as described in this article lies between art and science. We use our artistic talents to formulate the naïve understanding, our scientific talents to perform the structural analysis and our critical talents to arrive at a comprehensive understanding.

Conclusions

The phenomenological hermeneutical method of interpretation described in this article can be used for research with the aim to affect people’s perception of reality and help them become aware of possibilities, i.e. alternative ways of being in the world. It is only when the reader can make the interpretation integrated into her or his world (reconfiguration) that it can become productive in human life, e.g. it can be used to improve care.

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