

The Role and Influence of Interpretation in Hermeneutic-phenomenological Research

Jo-Ann Vis

Abstract

This article discusses the significance of interpretation and its role within qualitative hermeneutic-phenomenological inquiry. The discussion begins with a critical historical overview highlighting how the subject of interpretation emerged and was debated among the work of Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer. Taken from historical as well as present day writings concerning interpretation, four interlocking elements; lived experience, meaning, understanding and language are presented as a way to add to the understanding as to how interpretation affects the conduct of hermeneutic-phenomenological research.

Introduction

Qualitative research supports a process of understanding that involves a continual development. Coming to understand something requires shifts and changes as new experiences emerge. Equally important to the qualitative researcher is the idea that the researcher and participant are part of a unique interaction that shapes and informs understanding which involves the practice of interpretation.

Many researchers in the area of qualitative research advocate for a method that involves creating a relationship through which description, interpretation and self-reflection can evolve (Gadamer, 2003; Kvale, 1996; Smith, 1994; van Manen, 1997). Qualitative research methods provide alternatives to historical quantitative options. Although human sciences in the past have relied heavily on quantitative methods to develop policies, theory and therapeutic interventions these types of research studies also have their limitations. Researchers advocate that qualitative research emphasizes process and meanings, noting the importance of the relationship between the researcher and the participant. The goal is not just to describe a phenomenon, but to live it, experience it, and to use the interpretation of this experience as a basis of knowing. Therefore, interpretation not only has its influence within everyday situations and interactions, but interpretation also influences our

understanding of our lived world and ourselves. How we come to understand what we know and what is important to know involves many levels of interpretation.

Interpretation is something that is frequently discussed in hermeneutic-phenomenological research literature, but is not easily translated into concrete action. The following discussion takes into consideration the historical significance of interpretation, how it had evolved, and how it continues to evolve in present day inquiry. The discussion ends with the author's perspective of how interpretation influences the conduct of research based on her own experience, as a way to add to growth and evolution of hermeneutic phenomenology inquiry.

Husserl's Idea of Interpretation as it Affects the Conduct of Research

It was Husserl's beginning work that inspired many different types of phenomenology. Smith (2002) describes Husserl as a key figure in hermeneutics. However, others knew Husserl as the originator of phenomenology and his work as leading the way to understanding the complexity of interpretation. Smith argued that Husserl was one of the first researchers to recognize the responsibility researchers have in recognizing and at times correcting false interpretations when they arise, challenging the researcher to be always vigilant to the influence of interpretation and the fragile state of self-understanding.

As presented by Husserl, phenomenology was a new method envisioned to influence or offer new possibilities to philosophy and science. According to Spiegelberg (1975), Husserl contended that "all being and even all meaning have their 'origin' in subjective consciousness" (p. XXII). This vision allowed Husserl to follow his own passion and challenge himself to work or conduct research within what he would describe as "pure phenomenology." Husserl attempted to develop the idea of phenomenology from a philosophical construct to that of a "rigorous science." He believed that phenomenology would provide a way to describe lived experiences scientifically. In the process, Husserl produced a method termed "Transcendental Phenomenology." This method was developed in an attempt to control, if you will, the researcher's subjectivity by placing it as a given reality. A "suspension of belief" by the researcher was required as a way to distinguish the researcher's subjective interpretation of the phenomenon from that which was described or researched ("epoché," or what was later termed "bracketing"). This method would require the researcher to challenge her/his otherwise passive acceptance (or denial) that the context or reality of her/his life will affect the interpretation of what was learned. As such,

the researcher is instructed to contemplate how the context of her/his life would influence what is seen or described (Spiegelberg 1975).

Of course, critics of Husserl challenged his ideas regarding transcendental phenomenology by stating that the very notion of being objective regarding one's own subjectivity was impossible, if not absurd. Jardine (1998) talks about how "Husserl's work fell prey to the old options of inquiry, the old extremes" (p. 25). He goes on to blame Husserl's own fixation with the development of phenomenology as being a rigorous science, in which he assumed too much. Jardine (1998) questioned whether Husserl's attempt to draw out essences and his belief that commonalities among experiences exist, led him to ignore the complexity of interpretation and subjectivity as it related to other possibilities. Jardine (1998) offers this quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein as an example:

As in spinning a thread, we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in that fact that one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres (Wittgenstein 1968, p. 32). Don't say: "There *must* be something common (some essence, some univocal core of meaning)" but *look and see* whether there is anything that is common to all – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think but look! (p. 26).

In this sense, Husserl's idea of interpretation is that it exists, but can also be controlled or defined. It could be argued that Husserl was caught between his vision of phenomenology and its potential to become a rigorous science, minimizing the complexity of interpretation. As a result, the idea of interpretation was recognized, but its presentation appeared limited by the assumption that interpretation could be controlled as a way to observe as well as describe life experiences.

Despite disagreements with some of Husserl's concepts, Spiegelberg stated that it was because of his interaction with Husserl's writings that his own ideas and interpretations of phenomenology began to emerge. Regardless of the critical reactions, Husserl's original thinking sparked many debates and expanded phenomenology to include many other types of phenomenological approaches used in qualitative inquiry.

Heidegger's Idea of Interpretation as it Affects the Conduct of Research

Heidegger did not see his role as defining phenomenology. In fact, he believed that doing so would hamper emerging possibilities and new

insights, and would stop phenomenology from growth and evolution. Spiegelberg (1975) noted and agreed with Heidegger that phenomenology cannot point to a single foundational moment; rather it undergoes a continuing growth process. He goes on to suggest that Heidegger would also agree that phenomenology could be seen more as a possibility rather than an actuality.

As noted by many sources, it was the work of Husserl that also inspired the work of Martin Heidegger (Palmer 1969; Spiegelberg 1975; Jardine 1998; Smith 2002). Through exposure to Husserl's work Heidegger began to question whether the "meaning of beingness" could be truly captured, or even should be captured by Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Through this questioning he began to develop hermeneutic phenomenology, a concept used by Heidegger to address the experience of being-in-the-world. It appears that Husserl would agree with Heidegger that "intentional consciousness" was a phenomenon worthy of further exploration. However, how they felt this exploration should transpire and the purpose in exploring this phenomenon differed. Although both scholars would agree that interpretation of a phenomenon was part of being in the world, and part of understanding this being, Husserl argued that this concept was one that could be "found" or "described" through the use of transcendental reduction (bracketing). Heidegger, however, appeared to move more towards the idea of the process of interpretation itself, as one experiences it, or rather "the position to interpret for us the meaning of human existence" (Spiegelberg 1975, p. 69).

In his work *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger used the term hermeneutics differently from interpretation of text or methodology, which were more traditional uses. He expanded this term to include interpretation as being a natural process of understanding, or as a way to understand or make meaning of the world around us. Through his work he developed an investigative model that was interpretive of both content and method (Palmer 1969).

Smith (2002) cites Heidegger's work as being influential regarding the idea of interpretation as it relates not only to being, or living, but also alludes to the challenges inherent in the language used to describe this being:

Because "language is the home of being," said Heidegger, attending to language, and our use of it, becomes the primary means for understanding the operation of being in the world. However, all attempts to describe my being-in-the-world themselves participate in a dual action of disclosure and

concealment; the more I think I understand something, the more it slips away from me (p. 5).

In this respect it appears that Heidegger too recognized the significance of interpretation. His idea of interpretation affected his approach in hermeneutic-phenomenological work, by involving the understanding or the acceptance that how one sees the world depends on how one interprets it. Heidegger goes on to discuss the complexity of interpretation, and includes language as another layer connected to interpretation used to describe our understanding, noting that understanding then is linguistic (Palmer 1969). Heidegger presents the concept of interpretation as something that cannot be captured. As a result, interpretation allows for an experience to be described in a research setting, but it is actually a new interpretation created between the researcher and the participant that is presented.

What discloses itself is the being of the object as it is disclosed to understanding. To speak of the being of a thing as it “actually is” is to indulge in metaphysical speculation: as it is for whom? There is not a human perspective from which one can say what a being actually is (Palmer 1969, p. 229).

Even in this regard, Heidegger continued to expose the many layers of interpretation. He noted that even when the researcher and the researched are engaged in understanding the meaning or experience of a certain phenomenon, they are not free from previous influences of others. In other words, our interpretations are not entirely our own, but influenced by shared and historical experiences.

The subject understands through the world of understanding already given in and through his language and the historical positionality in which his understanding stands. To call this subjective or to trace it back to the individual consciousness is untenable, since the individual did not create the shared understanding and language but only participates in them (Palmer 1969, p. 229).

Gadamer's Idea of Interpretation as it Affects the Conduct of Research

Hans-Georg Gadamer continued to build on the work of Heidegger regarding the concepts of history and language. Gadamer (2003), argued that what we experience as human beings depends on our history as well as our present; and that the language that is chosen to describe that

experience is just as significant as the experience itself (Smith 1994). Within this context Gadamer discussed the concept of prejudice or pre-judgment as a way to uphold the perspective that one can only come to understand or make sense of the world (interpret) through our own past. In conversation with others, through the use of language, the combined past and present experience and the language to communicate this experience to others creates a new level of interpretation or understanding.

For Gadamer, prejudice (pre-judgment) is not a swear word, but rather a sign that we can only make sense of the world from within a particular “horizon” which provides the starting point for our thoughts and actions. Understanding between persons is possible only to the degree that people can initiate a conversation between themselves and bring about a “fusion” of their different horizons into a new understanding, which they then hold in common (Smith 1994, p. 110).

Adding to this, Gadamer offers the concept of language as another layer of interpretation, arguing that not only is there interpretation involved in what we experience, but also in the language we choose in sharing this experience (Palmer 1969; Kvale 1996).

Gadamer, as described by Smith (1994), is “the last writer of a hermeneutics of continuity, a hermeneutics which attempts to hold the structure of understanding together within a language of understanding” (p. 111). Building on the ideas presented by Heidegger, Gadamer adopts a more finely tuned idea of how interpretation would affect the conduct of research in phenomenological work. Gadamer continually discusses the challenge of the researcher and researched to use interpretation as a way to develop new understanding. This is done through an intertwined, ongoing process versus a step-by-step procedure. First Gadamer challenges researchers to examine their use of language and their appreciation of its use in conversation. Then Gadamer discusses the need for recognition of interpretation and its place in our life. Understanding how we have come to be interested in the phenomenon, or recognition of prejudice, is part of this process. An equally important concept is the willingness to engage in a dialogue or a “dialogical journey” for the purpose of creating meaning as opposed to merely reporting it. Finally, Gadamer challenges the researcher to a continual commitment to deepen her/his own understanding throughout the process (Smith 1994).

As a result, interpretation challenges the researcher and researched to become involved in a co-creation of new meanings and possibilities

regarding the phenomenon of interest. In this way, interpretation is sought out and maximized to include past, present, and future.

The Possibilities of Interpretation: A Present Day Perspective

Phenomenology and hermeneutics in their pure senses offer different ways or aspects of obtaining knowledge. These methods also differ regarding what is worth knowing, or how to go about obtaining knowledge. Regardless of the differences, it is the similarities and complementary components that are worthy of further exploration. It is the similar elements that offer important insight into the complexity and importance of interpretation as it relates to hermeneutic-phenomenological inquiry.

Upon review of the historical and present day debates regarding interpretation it appears that there are four main elements that continue to emerge in the literature which are connected to interpretation: lived experience; meaning; understanding; and language.

When it comes to the idea of interpretation, this author argues that these four elements cannot exist without the other. Using the analogy as presented by Wittgenstein, (as cited by Jardine, 1998) how life is experienced influences the meaning that one attaches to those experiences. How one comes to understand those experiences include the influence of one's lived experience, as well as a continual evolving experience that emerges through communication with others. At times individuals may find one's experience affirmed, whereas at other times these interactions offer alternative views that one may choose to accept or ignore. This seems to be all a matter of interpretation. How one then chooses to communicate one's experience also involves a continuation of interpretation through the use of language or another means. How others accept an individual's communication involves further interpretation, based on their own lived experience, shades of meaning, and understanding of what one attempts to communicate.

Max van Manen (1997) provides an example of the above argument by using a phenomenon such as time:

A more famous philosophical example concerns the experience of time. What could be more easily grasped than time? We regulate our lives by time. We carry the time around on our wrist. We divide the day into morning, afternoon, evening and night time. And we reflect on past time and anticipate the time to come. We even talk about the time going by, sometimes fast, and at other times more slowly. And yet, when someone asks us

“what is time anyway?” we are quickly at wit’s end to describe it (p. 77).

Here van Manen talks about our “pre-reflective lived understanding” of the meaning of time. One could also add that the words chosen, or the dialogue through which the conversation of time is held, also includes a level of interpretation by both the giver and the receiver of that “text,” in whatever form it eventually emerges.

So how does interpretation affect the conduct of research in hermeneutic-phenomenological work? Smith (1994) asks the same question, but argues that the answer lies more in the experience of what interpretation has to offer us throughout the process of knowing versus absolute knowing.

One of the most important contributions hermeneutics makes to all contemporary social theory and practice then, not just to curriculum and pedagogy, is in showing the way in which the meaning of anything is always arrived at referentially and relationally rather than (for want of a better word) absolutely. The final authority of concepts, constructs, or categories does not reside in the concepts themselves but within the dialogically arrived at agreement of people to consent to them (p. 119).

Smith (1994) advocates for a practice that supports the reality of interpretation, requiring an outcome that is reflective of the people involved in the dialogue. He argues that by ignoring the influence of interpretation we run the risk of imposing our own views through the use of a privileged voice. As a result, we risk ignoring the many possibilities that combined knowing could produce.

Benner (1994) shares Smith’s (1994) perspective regarding respect for similarities and differences between the researcher and the participants. They suggest that while the interpreter can never ignore one’s own influence of understanding, the researcher is also challenged through dialogue and listening to include the participant in a way that allows her/his voice to be heard or noticed. This perspective describes the opening up of possibility that exists through interpretation at both the phenomenological and hermeneutic levels. This includes not only the study of phenomena through experience, which includes a natural interpretation, as noted by Husserl, but also the impossibility of bracketing or separating out our interpretations of our lived experience, as acknowledged by Heidegger. Heidegger challenged us as researchers not to control our sense of interpretation, but include it as part of an evolving knowing experience. Taking it one step further, Gadamer adds the

concepts of language, prejudice, and creation of new meaning as other considerations in the interpretative process. Together, these thoughts formulate a possibility that continues to evolve through interpretation and the experience of that interpretation.

Many other authors in the area of hermeneutics, phenomenology, interpretive research, or a combination thereof, utilize the unique ideas regarding interpretation as presented by past scholars (Palmer 1969; Spiegelberg 1975; Benner 1994; Jardine 1998; Smith 2002). In most cases it appears that contemporary authors themselves grapple with the distinction between phenomenology and hermeneutics, and focus on issues of interpretation as the glue that holds them together. David Smith (2002) states the obvious:

In a way then, engaging in hermeneutic activity is simply the ordinary work of trying to make sense of things we don't understand, things that fall out of our taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of experience. As Heidegger (1962) said in *Being and Time*, "Interpretation is the primordial work of Being," (p. 43); so really, everyone is a hermeneut" (p. 1).

How Interpretation Affects the Conduct of Research in Phenomenological-hermeneutic Work

So what does it mean to be a researcher in the area of hermeneutic-phenomenological work? Going back to Heidegger's vision, it appears that phenomenological research has and will continue to evolve. Hermeneutic-phenomenological research supports an approach that is more about being and experiencing, rather than harnessing methods that would produce a certain outcome or finding as absolute. However, regardless of the lack of direction in the link between being and experiencing, there are some consistent views about hermeneutic – phenomenological research work that have continued to receive attention.

Concepts such as lived experience, meaning, understanding, and interpreting all are noted in one way or another by various authors (Benner 1994; Kvale 1996; van Manen 1997; Smith 2002). These authors agree that coming to understand something involves a continual process, changing and shifting as new experiences emerge. The other agreement, as noted previously, is the idea that the researcher and participant are part of a unique interaction that develops this understanding or interpretation. Therefore the goal is not to just describe a phenomenon but to live it, experience it, and to use the interpretation of this experience as a basis of knowing. This approach challenges the researcher to conduct

herself/himself in such a way as to include herself/himself in the process, as apposed to an attempt to be objective through the bracketing of pre-lived experience, a concept that differentiates hermeneutic-phenomenological work from that of pure or traditional phenomenology.

Similarly, the researcher is challenged to look at the idea of interpretation as it relates to the relationship between the researcher and participant, as a way to understand how meaning is interpreted through language or other modes of communication.

Smith (2002) describes hermeneutics as being about understanding or, more specifically, understanding about life. According to him, this is a move away from the hermeneutic tradition of focusing on text.

As discussed throughout this essay, conducting hermeneutic-phenomenological research involves the researcher and the researched in a very personal pre-judged way. In this approach, pre-judgment is not seen to be negative or something to control, but a reality that is embraced and used to the full advantage, starting at the beginning point of the research question. In this way, researchers ask themselves what experience or interest led them to ask the question. Bergum (1989) offers this summary: "That is, I, as a researcher, cannot place myself outside the problem I formulate. For me, the posing of my question was not something I had to search out. It came from my life" (p. 45). It is within this perspective that the researcher begins the process by asking how she/he was drawn to or interested in this experience, as a way to understand the meaning of this experience as it relates to the research question.

Once the question has been formulated, the process of hermeneutic-phenomenological research continues through relationship with the phenomenon that is to be understood, as interpreted by those who have lived the experience. The "how to" regarding the conduct of this type of inquiry is also a bit paradoxical, as I question whether phenomenological-hermeneutics can actually be "conducted" in the traditional sense of the word in the context of research. It appears to me that the "how to" relates more to a process, an evolving experience that will unfold. Gadamer (2003) himself notes that the fundamental nature of a question is the openness to emerging possibilities related to that question. It seems that this is a debate that currently exists within the hermeneutic-phenomenological research field, similar perhaps to what Husserl and Heidegger would discuss. Is it possible to set up guidelines in such a way as to teach or provide a model through which hermeneutic-phenomenological research can be practiced, or would doing so limit the possibilities that could emerge? David Jardine (1998) offers an argument for the latter:

This is not to say that phenomenology has no desire. Rather, its desire is not redemptive. It does not want to redeem everyday life through the application of methods that will render it presentable according to some imagined form of clarity and distinctness. Its desire is not to render our experience of the world, but to give a voice to it (p. 19).

While following a step by step procedure for conducting hermeneutic-phenomenological research may initially appear to offer solace to the beginning hermeneutic researcher, to do so would undermine the integrity of the method itself. Attempting to apply a scripted process to a research method whose ontological quest is to open up possibilities and encourage co-creation of new ideas that emerge between unique individuals through the act of interpreting, is somewhat paradoxical. As such, many scholars have devoted their efforts to challenge hermeneutic-phenomenological researchers to pay more attention to the philosophy of the approach as method rather than the development of a method itself.

My Own Lived Experience: How I Believe Interpretation Affects My Conduct of Research in Phenomenological–hermeneutic Work

Many researchers, who have applied a hermeneutic, phenomenological, or a mixed hermeneutic-phenomenological methodology, agree that no specific method or procedure exists. Rather, it is the process itself that contributes to a method that evolves during the research process, based on a set of guidelines and principles developed throughout history (Colaizzi 1978; Smith 1994; Kvale 1996; van Manen 1997; Creswell 1998). Van Manen (1997) offers a brief but powerful statement repeated by many who have applied a hermeneutic phenomenology method:

So in a serious sense there is not really a “method” understood as a set of investigative procedures that one can master relatively quickly. Indeed it has been said of the method of phenomenology and hermeneutics that there is no method! (Gadamer, 2003; Rorty, 1979). And yet, phenomenology wants to claim that it can have it both ways. While it is true that the method of phenomenology is that there is no method, yet there is a tradition, a body of knowledge and insights, a history of lives of thinkers and authors, which taken as an example, constitutes both a source and a methodological ground for present human science practices (p. 30).

So how do I believe the idea of interpretation affects my conduct of research in hermeneutic-phenomenology? I have come to realize through my own process of understanding that the lack of a prescribed method is bitter-sweet: bitter in a sense for researchers, like myself, who attempt to take on a method that offers little direction and challenges one to leave her/his predominate culture and way of knowing at the door; sweet in the sense that this new way of inquiry provides new opportunities, ways of knowing and beliefs about what is worth knowing.

It is a different way of understanding ourselves and our place in the world, one which problematizes our aspirations to clarity, progress, mastery, and dominance as images of our relation to the Earth and to each other. It brings inquiry out from under the desire for the final Word; it opens us up for the rebirth and re-enlivening of the Word in the soul, with the full richness and ambiguity that such re-enlivening requires (Jardine 1998, p. 19).

Van Manen (1997) suggests that to engage in hermeneutic phenomenology one must be influenced by phenomena that seriously interests us and commits us to the world. This would include a sense of prejudice (pre-judgment), as described by Gadamer (2003) which welcomes and seeks to incorporate what the researcher her/himself brings to the process. Within this context, van Manen (1997) challenges us to conduct our research by investigating experience as we live it rather than how we conceptualize it. The challenge, discussed more clearly by Smith (1994), is to create meaning versus simply reporting on it. He states that this is what separates hermeneutic inquiry from that of other descriptive approaches. What I choose to discuss depends on a collective understanding between the participant and myself versus selecting ideas that are important only to me. This process creates a new understanding that promotes the uniqueness of each of us (researcher and participant), and what we have co-created. It is this dialogue, interpretation, feedback, continued dialogue, and interpretation that create a never-ending process of new information and possibilities. Kvale (1996) describes this best, not in words, but in a picture shown in each chapter of his book *InterViews* that depicts a flowing interface between the many different levels of involvement in any interpretative process, including the researcher, participant, and readers of the text.

Smith (1994) notes, that any type of hermeneutic inquiry must include some sense of the researcher's experience and transformation, throughout the process of the inquiry. The research method itself requires a commitment to the process of evolution rather than following a prescribed set of procedures (Colaizzi 1978; Smith 1994; Kvale 1996; van

Manen 1997; Creswell 1998; Patton 2002). Kvale (1996) talks about “conversations” or “wandering” with participants as a way to understand her/his lived experience. This conversation is a way in which text is created that provides a true reflection and uniqueness of the very persons involved in the conversation. It is within this text that new meanings and possibilities can emerge.

Smith (1994) states that a hermeneutic method of inquiry must be reflective of the context within which it is conducted. Data analysis or presentation of the dialogue has taken many different forms, again within the spirit of the respect for interpretation. Thematic moments (Bergum 1989), stories (McIntyre, Anderson & McDonald 2001), and music (Gadow 1999) are examples of how context has influenced the sharing of information within a “hermeneutic circle.”

Benner (1994) offers the following context that again supports the action of allowing interpretation to emerge:

Learning the skills of interpretive phenomenology comes much more easily once the ontological concerns are recovered and the researcher is able to shift from questions about what it is to know (epistemology) to questions about why and how we “know” some things and not others and what constitutes our knowing (ontology). The dialogical process of learning to create, understand, and interpret texts begins with preexisting abilities to understand world, read texts for meaning, and extend those everyday capacities with rigor and attentiveness to interpretive research (p. 103).

Once again, returning to the analogy of the fibers in the thread, I believe that the idea of interpretation will challenge researchers to *look* versus *see*. Although there are many ideas of interpretation which shape how research is conducted, interpretation in hermeneutic–phenomenological work supports a process, rather than a method. This process involves the fibers of lived experience, meaning, understanding and language. It is respect, belief in the process and consideration of the fibers that will allow interpretation to guide the process and allow new meanings and possibilities to emerge.

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Author's note

Jo-Ann Vis, PhD, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Lakehead University, 955 Oliver Road, Thunder Bay, ON. P7B 5E1