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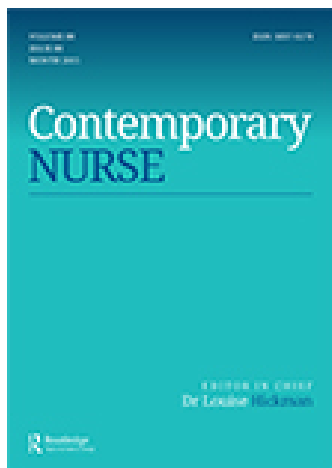
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Peeling the Onion: understanding others' lived experience

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Title: **Peeling the Onion: understanding others' lived experience**

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Author contributions

MM was responsible for the study conception and design.

MM was responsible for the drafting of the manuscript. YC, KF and MM made critical revisions to the paper for important intellectual content.

KF and YC supervised the study.

Peeling the Onion: understanding others' lived experience

Abstract

Background: Society and some healthcare professionals often marginalise pregnant women who take illicit substances. Likewise the midwives who care for these women are often viewed as working on the edge of society. The aim of this research was to examine the lived world of these midwives to gain insight into the world of their work.

Design: A phenomenological study informed by Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty was chosen to frame these lived experiences of the midwives. Using face-to-face phenomenological interviews data were collected from 12 midwives whose work is only caring for women who take illicit drugs.

Results: The 3 fundamental themes that emerged from the study were: making a difference, establishing partnerships: and letting go and refining practice.

Conclusions and impetus for this paper: Lived experiences are unique and can be difficult for researchers to grasp. The stories told by participants are sometimes intangible and often couched in metaphor. This paper aims to discuss lived experience and suggests that like an onion, several layers have to be peeled away before meaning can be exposed; and like peeling onions, each cover reveals another layer beneath that is different from before and different from the next. Exemplars from this midwifery study are used to explain lived experiences.

Keywords

Lived experience; nursing; midwifery; hermeneutic phenomenology; qualitative research

Revised manuscript

Introduction

There is a plethora of contemporary articles reporting on studies that claim they examine the 'lived experience' of a particular phenomenon. Inspired by our recent study into the lived experience of midwives who care for pregnant women who use illicit drugs we naturally delved into the literature to seek out what lived experience really means. Our search proved unhelpful so we set about finding the answers to the question 'what is lived experience' by turning to the work of others (for example, Benner, 1994; Heidegger, 1962; van Manen 1990, 2014). As lived experience is associated with phenomenological enquiry we employed the writings of philosophers and researchers within this genre to extract solutions. This article uses the study to illustrate the various interpretations of the meaning lived experience. These elucidations provide novice and seasoned researchers with a context to demonstrate our explications

Midwives want to explicate the interactions they have with women who are on their childbearing journey and seek methods to generate understandings of the specialised work they do. As researchers who find themselves in the midst of stories, having to interpret and analyse the lived experiences, we ask ourselves, "What is lived experience?"

The midwife's role is to be 'with women' during their childbearing journey, a place of many unforgettable lived experiences. Midwives are invited to be present and active participants in women's pregnancy, birth and the early postnatal period when meaningful relationships are to be forged with women and their families. Partnerships with women and midwives are based on 'woman centred care' and established on mutual respect, trust and understanding that facilitates the midwife being open to women's stories, their own experiences and understanding of what it means to be (Munhall, 2007).

Researchers interested in women's experiences of child bearing may appreciate the tenets of phenomenology as we argue they align with the values espoused by the midwifery profession. Hermeneutic phenomenology, underpinned by Heideggerian philosophy, offers a mode of enquiry that has as its most essential components interpretations and descriptions of lived experiences (van Manen, 1990). The beginning and end point of phenomenological research is lived experience, because its aim is to explore being-in-the-world. Hermeneutic phenomenological researchers transform participants' lived experiences into textual expressions of the essences or themes as a

means to interpret the meaning of their own being in the world (Benner, 1994; Crist & Tanner, 2003; Heidegger, 1962; van Manen, 1990) and thereby illuminate understandings of human experience.

The search by the beginning phenomenological researcher to reveal lived experience can be daunting especially when lived experience is described in thick, rich stories delivered by participants. In this paper we employ a peeling of the onion metaphor to signify the image of carefully stripping each layer of the participants' stories to facilitate the researchers' deeper and deeper understandings of the individual's lived experiences. Understanding these lived experiences is the work of the analysis and interpretation phase of the research.

Hermeneutic phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology methodology is an engaging method of enquiry (van Manen, 1990), seeking to reveal and understand the experience of another (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000). The philosophy of phenomenology emanates firstly from the work of Husserl (1859-1938) followed by his former student Heidegger (1889-1976), who significantly transformed phenomenology to incorporate hermeneutics (Morse & Richards, 2002). Rather than one philosophy superseding the other, both have value and are dependent on the research question being asked.

Contemporary hermeneutic phenomenology research in midwifery has been most influenced by Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer and the French existentialists, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre (Cohen & Omery, 1994; Thomson, Dykes, & Downe, 2011). Clearly, differences do exist between these traditions. Followers of Husserl favour the more eidetic description, looking to the things themselves to provide meaning. Husserl wanted to understand and learn about the structure of the *life-world* or lived experience (Husserl, 1931). Those who embrace Heideggerian hermeneutics focus on interpretation, and the hermeneutic phenomenological approach that combines aspects of both descriptive and interpretive phenomenology. In his seminal work *Being and Time* (1962) Heidegger describes his attempts to simply interpret Dasein's being, being-in-the-world. His approach is

premised on a relational view of the person and it is this characteristic that distinguishes Heidegger's phenomenology from that of his teacher and mentor Husserl. Heidegger was consumed with ontology, the meaning of being, and took on an important shift that looked at existence itself and the quest for understanding (van Manen, 2014).

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is seen as a theory of interpretation (Munhall, 2007) and was originally used to translate or interpret religious text. Hermeneutics originates from the Greek verb *hermeneusin* (Palmer, 1969), meaning to interpret or decipher. The historical work of Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Dilthey (1833-1911) introduced hermeneutics to Heidegger and Gadamer (Palmer, 1969). Whilst both Heidegger and Gadamer in later life became critics of Dilthey's work, his hermeneutic concept was furthered in the life's work of Heidegger *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962) and *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1975). In his seminal work *Truth and Method* (1975), Gadamer (1975) acknowledged his starting point as an extension of Dilthey's hermeneutical inquiry on the methodology of the human sciences (Palmer, 1969). Gadamer perceives hermeneutics as an interpretive process that brings knowing and discovery of phenomena through language. The process of the 'hermeneutic circle' is always in motion, always back and forth and round (Gadamer, 1975) to uncover interpretations that are new and meaningful (Lavery, 2003, p. 9). Gadamer (1975) and Heidegger (1962) both assert there is no single truth; rather hermeneutic philosophy embraces the belief that there are many truths. Life worlds are in constant cycle of construction and reconstruction (Koch, 1995; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

Heidegger purports that interpretation occurs in every encounter and this interpretation is influenced by the social context, that of background and history in which the individual resides (Heidegger, 1962) and importantly their capacity for reflection. Heidegger calls this understanding fore-structure. In his opinion all our understandings are connected to a given set of fore-structures. He found the process of the hermeneutic circle suited his ontological enquiry, as this methodology

supported not only the ability to become aware of fore-structure influences but deep understanding of the phenomena. This mirrored Heidegger's desire to enter into the world of another and uncover the meaning that they give to their experiences and their interpretations of those experiences (Heidegger, 1962). Heidegger's early work and Gadamer's expansion of this and his own work, postulated three central elements of the hermeneutic approach: the fusion of horizons, the hermeneutic circle, and the temporality of truth.

Fusion of Horizons

Gadamer (1975) called the 'fusion of horizons' the event where the merged experiences of the other and researcher weave together to produce a shared understanding of phenomena. Fusion of horizons occurs in everyday conversations where language is used as a mediator in understanding two points of view. Gerrish and Lacey (2006) argue that researchers are required to possess tolerance and freedom for significant insights to emerge. In hermeneutic phenomenological research fusion occurs when the researcher, immersed in the analysis of the text has a surprising awareness of the other horizon (Taylor, 1994).

The process of interpretation or understanding (fusion of horizons) is not static as there is a movement that is infinite. When fusion takes place, the coming together of horizons and a mutual understanding occurs, there is capacity for extended interpretation and understanding to occur.

Hermeneutic Circle

The hermeneutic circle, Heidegger (1962) states is symbolic as it describes the analytic movement between the whole and the part, in which each gives the other meaning. The circle metaphor provides an image of infinite and perpetual possibilities (Dowling, 2004). Benner (1994) explains that this interpretive process is circular, or spiral (Taylor, 2010) moving inwards and outwards, and between in the attempt to reveal what is in the data. The hermeneutic circle illustrates the circular motion in the analysis of the text, for some researchers such as Benner (1994), Roberts and Taylor (2002) and Parse (1995), they see it not as circular but spiral in movement.

Heidegger (1962) asserts human beings are already in the 'circle' of understanding as they make sense of their world; this primary understanding comes from the 'fore-structure' of understanding. Human beings' original history and culture and the shared human experiences enables interpretation of everyday activities. Benner (1994, p.72) states that these provide meaningful experiences, which in turn enrich understandings. Human beings share knowledge and understandings to make sense of being in the world (Benner, 1994). Benner (1994, p. 72) concludes that 'all human life, including research, takes place within the ontological circle'.

Temporality of Truth

Heidegger (1962) distinguishes between two different notions of truth, *veritas* and *aletheia*. For Heidegger, *veritas* was the type of truth that was distinguishable from the notion of false and on the other hand *aletheia* was linked to meaningfulness. It is the kind of truth that appears when attuning to the things that present themselves and reveals themselves in its self-showing (van Manen, 2014). Heidegger and Gadamer propose this action is in constant play of showing and hiding, it is not an all or nothing affair and it is constant; it happens over time; it is relational. In much the same way as knowledge cannot be separated from the knower; truth cannot be separated from the one who is purporting it.

Revealing the Lived Experience

It is usual for phenomenological researchers to ask participants to describe their lived experience of a phenomenon. For example, in Fitzgerald's (1995) thesis she asked: 'what is the experience of rural dwellers of their chronic illnesses'. Chapman (1994) explored with nurses 'their experience of nursing dying or dead people'. Su and Chen (2006) sought to uncover from women their experience of being infertile and terminating treatment after in vitro fertilization failure. Beck (1992) asked about the experience of postnatal depression and Healy (2011) sought insights from women about postnatal care in Ireland. Rather than defining the actual phenomenon these research studies reveal lived experiences of the phenomenon in question (Benner, 1994; Cohen et al., 2000; Morse &

Richards, 2002; van Manen, 1990). In their analyses these researchers meticulously and metaphorically peel back each experience of their participants so they can reveal another horizon of that experience. The recalling of experience illustrates how a phenomenon of interest is acted out or occurs. The rich, deep and often convoluted data from participants provide salient points for researchers to interpret the phenomenon under examination within its own context.

Roberts and Taylor (1998, p. 273) explain that lived experience “is the knowledge humans have of how it is to live a life in regard to being someone or something unique in everyday situations”, thereby suggesting that every human interaction in any place is a lived experience. Whereas for Max van Manen (1990), lived experience is more active, requiring participants to have consciously acknowledged that the experience, not necessarily an extraordinary experience, is an experience that made the participant take notice. He agrees with Dilthey (1985) who stated that “the most’ basic form of lived experience involves our immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life” (p35).

Researchers are warned by Heidegger (1962) that it is easy to fall into the trap of being too literal with the data or seeing what one wants to see whilst interpreting data. Gadamer (1975) suggests that diligence must be applied when examining one’s own fore-structures, and own understandings in terms of what emerges from the data as they attempt to drill deeper into the interpreted meaning (Gadamer, 1975) and declares that what does emerge is not influenced by hidden bias and prejudice. Rather, researchers employ a hermeneutic process allowing for these biases to be challenged and often overturned. Analysis of the data in hermeneutic phenomenological studies demands a substantive period of reflection, as the researcher reflects, reveals meanings and begins to understand what is both hidden and uncovered, thus opening infinite interpretations (Whitehead, 2004).

For researchers and phenomenological philosophers, lived experience is a reflective act, a recalling of past and near present events that have some meaning. A lived experience is more than a fleeting awareness however intense. In the process of selecting a memory it becomes resonant or a lived experience. These resonant moments provide understandings for the past, the present and the future. Understandings are like the layers of the onions, as we peel each layer, the deeper and more meaningful is the understanding that is revealed. To make it meaningful, the individual has to make sense of the experience in a reflective mode, and this ability enables us as humans who experience being in the world to recount stories, reflect on and of experiences, often providing interpretations and self-guidance for the future. In the study of midwives experiences of caring for pregnant women who use illicit drugs, the midwives recognition, acceptance of others, their own and the women's past experiences provided an opportunity to develop knowing and understandings.

Heidegger (1962) postulates that we experience the world both ontically (as a world of objects through our five senses) and ontologically (as an inner awareness available only through existence). Yet it is the latter experience that is constantly pushed aside in favour of the former in mainstream scientific research. van Manen (1990) suggests that much richness about the world is denied by negating the 'subjective' side of life and that it is in, and through our complex relationships (internal and external to self) that our worlds (our reality) are sufficiently revealed. Dilthey (1985) emphasised the importance of making meaning of lived experiences by comparing it to the breath required for the body. Just as our body needs to breathe, our soul requires the fulfilment and expansion of its existence in the reverberations of emotional life (p. 59)

Understanding our existence is a constant process of revealing and re-evaluating (like the hermeneutic circle) our different layers of feelings that are infinite as long as we exist. It is as if our experience as a feeling-emotional-intellectual-embodied-whole is mustered from our multiplicity of past, present and future influences (akin to Heidegger's notion of totality of experience). In keeping with Heidegger's convoluted discourse, which suggests that we understand because we understand,

Gadamer (1975) observed that experiencing comes from feelings. Memory is a feeling of past feelings. Anticipation is feeling of feelings not yet concretely real in our experience.

Researchers, however, are often not comfortable in presenting lived experience in this somewhat erratic manner. Some researchers have looked for and found frameworks on which to base all lived experience. For example, Merleau-Ponty's four existentials is a useful approach for researchers to adopt to describe lived experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). We will illustrate this framework by using exemplars from our study lived experience of midwives caring for pregnant women who use illicit drugs (Blinded xxx, 2012).

Merleau-Ponty (1962) identifies four essences to assist in the understanding and interpretation of lived experiences. He defines this framework as essences of experience; spatiality or lived space, corporeality or lived body, temporality or lived time and relationality, or lived human experiences. These essences not only provide both insights into relationships to history and social timetables, but also have the ability, even if somewhat removed, to be able to walk alongside another and experience an interpretation of what that experience was like for this person. In turn, van Manen (1990) purports that these four essences provide a useful reflective guide in the research process.

In the phenomenological literature these four foundational essences are seen as the cornerstones to the structure of all human lifeworlds (Benner, 1994; Gadamer, 1975; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). There are infinite numbers of lifeworlds, but these four existential essences can be applied to all. They are dynamic in phenomenological research in asking the question, reflecting and revealing understandings of lived experiences (van Manen, 1990).

Lived space, lived body, lived time and lived human experiences

Lived space (*spatiality*) is often difficult to communicate, but we know that space can affect the way we feel. A pregnant woman walking into an antenatal clinic in a hospital setting for the first time may experience anxiety, excitement and vulnerability; whereas, if the same woman was to walk into

her local café to meet friends, she may feel familiarity, comfort or safety; and in feeling this comfort she becomes comfortable - thereby becoming the space she is in (van Manen, 1990). This realisation is not only afforded to places but activities too. Where is a good space to study, why use the dining room table instead of the formal study room? The lived space has meaning for us to understand our life world. If we think about home and lived space, we might think of being safe, a place to be ourselves, warm and inviting, a safe haven. For others, their experience of lived space at home may be very different. When asking midwives what is their experience of working with pregnant and birthing women who also take illicit drugs, they may express that space as sometimes hostile yet hopeful. Most of the midwives in the authors' study worked in small offices, hidden from view and off the beaten track within the hospital. On further revelation the midwives, however, felt safe and free to do their job for the women. They felt they were cocooned in an environment that allowed them to provide the time required for the women, free from surveillance and the critical gaze of others, while still being able to summon help if required.

The essence of lived body, (*corporeality*) is phenomenologically understood as being bodily in this world. When we meet another we always meet bodily and Heidegger assures us we both reveal and conceal something of ourselves (Heidegger, 1962). van Manen (1990) purports that under a critical gaze the body can become unnatural, but depending on who is doing the gazing, many other reactions may take place. The body may make assumptions about what is happening and react in inappropriate ways. For the midwives in the study corporeality is illustrated as assuming a posture of genuine regard, which enabled the pregnant women to begin to trust the developing relationship. They spoke about wrestling with their prejudices and dispelling societal myths about illicit drug users in order to make themselves available to the women in such a way that partnership became central to the relationship. They were peeling back these biases themselves.

Lived time, *temporality*, is not about linear time, but a temporal way of being in the world. Both time (*temporality*) and space (*spaciality*) were pivotal to Heidegger's thinking. The events in our lives give

us meaning as well as presenting to others an understanding of our landscape from where we come, our present, and how we will move forward into the future. When reflecting on an event it is often useful to mark that time by something special that occurred at the same time – for example, asking what were you doing on Black Saturday or Prince William and Kate’s wedding 29th April 2011, or alternatively you could ask what were you doing when man first walked on the moon? In uncovering lived experiences, the participants’ narrative is almost always contextualised in time. It is not only the major events of life, but can be the simple small occurrences of things that create the context. A person saying ‘hello’ on a busy day when no one had spoken, for example, or seeing a rosella flying through a clear blue sky signalling what being in the world means denotes a special time in a person’s life. Heidegger (1962) insists that humans are absorbed in their lives and their world, and their experiences of their truthful contact can weigh heavily on both the way they experience their world but how they act in their world. For midwives in the study (Miles, 2012), their experiences were time delineated. They spoke of being with certain women at a certain time, which may have been linked to the women’s own stories or those of the midwives. The truth as they saw it was based in temporality of time and space.

Lived other, *relationality*, is the relationships we have with others (van Manen, 1990) and how as entities or Dasein (being) relating with others reveals to us what it is like to be in our lifeworld. Being-in-the-world to demonstrate that we are not entities that exist alongside our world; rather, we are embedded in our world (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2011). The intention is to clearly define the bond between our world and our being (Dreyfus, 1991; Munhall, 2007). A precursor of relationality is, according to Heidegger (1962), linked to our ability to care for others (*Sorge*). Our caring of others helps us towards understanding ourselves. It is the way we connect to our world and allows us to transcend ourselves (Benner, 1994, p. 36; van Manen, 1990). To find purpose and meaning in our lives Ferguson (2006) concludes humans require both the ability to interpret their life world and their role in it. Midwives within the study found that the relationships that were forged with the women who take illicit drugs were both challenging and enlightening. As their interest in

the women's lives grew, and these experiences were uncovered, moments of meaning readily emerged for the midwives. The relational and meaningful knowledge of human reality brought the midwives into a different space that enabled them to see the woman first and not the illicit drugs. Identifying with the woman empowered the midwife to make a difference in their professional lives and freed them to present opportunities for the women.

Collecting lived experience

How we collect/generate data is intimately linked and shaped by the methodological position chosen (Benner, 1994). Data collection is mostly performed through interviews and observation. Lived experience is reliant on how data are allowed to emerge and will largely depend on the questions asked and the guidance the researcher gives to the informant (Cohen et al., 2000). However, any form of data collection provides us with only a partial view of reality. Chapman (1994) describes this view as a temporal snapshot, a moment in time.

As researchers begin to engage in their analysis they are required to have a firm grasp on their chosen methodology (Dew, 2007) with insight and justice. Without either, the data are simply interpretations with preconceptions and prejudice and as Crotty argues lead to inappropriate and unsatisfactory understandings of the phenomenon of interest being proposed (Crotty, 1996).

Analysing and interpreting the lived experience.

Researching lived experience enables illumination of another's life world. In phenomenological research it is natural to describe, explore and interpret the life worlds of others and their experiences of it. The complex circularity of reflection is recognised by Merleau-Ponty (1962) as a space that embraces the distinction between self and world as well as providing continuity between self and world. Reflection does not occur without the knowledge of what to reflect upon; it is a known entity but it can take on different structure when presented to self in a different consciousness. Merleau-Ponty (1962, pp. x-xi) warns however that,

... Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them: The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions.

It is untenable to ignore our own experience of the phenomenon in question as our experience of the phenomenon arises out of our world position, which is informed from experience of the phenomenon, a circular event. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1993) postulate that if the beliefs about one's own experiences are rejected or put aside it would render any qualitative study without validity. Others, for example, Cohen et al. (2000), suggest that fundamental to rigorous research is the reduction in the researcher's bias. Cohen et al.'s (2000) notion of bracketing based on Husserl's philosophy highlights a reductionist's view (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2009). However, the hermeneutic phenomenologist would reject this position and instead embrace the preconceptions of the researcher (Gadamer, 1975; Heidegger, 1962). Rigor, the hermeneutic phenomenologist would assert, comes from being able to illustrate the connections between the philosophical framework and findings (van Manen, 1990).

Our essential locus in the world is to question and this questioning propels us through life. The phenomenologist upholds the belief that knowledge, meanings, understandings and existence do more than coexist, they are interrelated and merged (Roberts & Taylor, 2002; Smythe, 2011; Taylor, 1994). There is however, danger in our pursuit of lived experiences, as we can become "one eyed" in our focus and detached from reality as we pursue a single truth, a dualistic view – it is *this* and not *that*. Heidegger's openness to multiple truths (Johnson, 2000) asserts that we construct our reality in line with own situatedness (Heidegger, 1962). It is through our own experiences and ideas that we interpret an understanding of being-in-the-world. Heidegger hyphenated these words to highlight that we are always within our world.

Conclusion

In our search for 'what is lived experience?' we found, explored and explicated hermeneutic phenomenology as the methodology of choice to inquire into and understand human beings experiencing phenomena. The use of the metaphor of peeling an onion was used to expose central understandings of those experiences. An exploration of Heidegger's philosophy was undertaken and revealed a theory that underpins the peeled layers of the onion, while Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty provide a direction for researchers interested in understanding lived experience as it relates to a phenomenon of interest. This methodologically approach we argue, is about carefully and mindfully exposing the layers of the onion so that deeper understanding is achieved.

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