PHENOMENOLOGY - TELLING A STORY: AN INTERVIEW WITH LIZ SMYTHE

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Abstract

Phenomenology is probably the most common interpretive qualitative research methodology used in nursing and midwifery research in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This is the fifth article in a series based on interviews with nursing and midwifery researchers, designed to offer the beginning researcher a first-hand account of the experience of using particular methodologies. This article focuses on phenomenology as interpreted by Liz Smythe (RGON, RM, PhD) in interview. Liz teaches phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophies and methodologies at the postgraduate level at the Auckland University of Technology. She used Heideggerian hermeneutical phenomenology for her PhD thesis to explore the issue of 'safety' in childbirth.

Key Words: Research, methodologies, hermeneutics, phenomenology, Heideggerian Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Introduction

Phenomenology as a research methodology is probably the most well known of a group of methodologies that are listed under the term 'interpretive' or 'hermeneutic' qualitative research. This article, the fifth in a series based on interviews with nursing and midwifery researchers, offers the beginning researcher a brief introduction to this research approach (refer to Giddings and Wood (2000) for background information on the series). It will link with the article on radical hermeneutics (Giddings & Wood, 2001) and briefly explore the relationship between phenomenology and hermeneutics. An interview with Liz Smythe (RGON, RM, PhD), a midwifery and postgraduate teacher at the Auckland University of Technology, will then follow. Liz moved from Masters study directly into her PhD and used Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the issue of 'safety' in childbirth.

As noted in our article on radical hermeneutics (Giddings & Wood, 2001) there is a plethora of approaches that have been broadly termed 'phenomenological' or 'hermeneutic'. What can add to the confusion for a novice researcher is that they are also used as umbrella terms to describe all qualitative interpretive research. The context of

their use assists in understanding whether or not they are being used broadly or specifically in reference to a particular research methodology. In this article we are using the terms to describe specific research approaches or methodologies.

A useful starting point for a novice researcher is to understand that the underpinning philosophical assumptions and characteristics of the various phenomenological and hermeneutic methodologies differ depending on the philosopher who developed the approach (for more detailed discussion refer to Giddings and Wood, 2001, pp.4-5). Although they differ in some fundamental aspects (see below) it is their philosophical complementarity (Todres & Wheeler, 2001) that makes them useful as methodologies for nursing and midwifery research. Liz, for example, describes the methodology used in her PhD research as 'Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology'. She often jokes that the first thing a novice researcher has to learn is how to say these words! To translate: the use of 'Heideggerian' refers to Liz's philosophical position being influenced foremost by the writings of Martin Heidegger [1889 - 1976]. 'Hermeneutics' in this context means that Liz's work acknowledges the dynamic and historical nature of interpretation and the process of construction and deconstruction of ideas. Her work, however, is fundamentally 'phenomenological' which indicates that the underpinning assumption is that essences of experiences exist and can be interpreted from the 'lived experience' or stories of the participants. The aim of phenomenological research is to stay as close as possible to what actually is happening for the participant. Questions to the participant often begin with "Tell me about" or "Tell me a story about" It becomes hermeneutic when the researcher ask questions that move the focus away from the experience itself and seek to explore why something happened from the participant's perspective. So questions to the participant could be: "Why do you think that happened?" or "What do you think contributed to what happened?"

Liz's philosophical position influenced how she carried out the research, from the defining (and re-defining) of her research question through to data collection and analysis. For example, you will note in her interview that her data analysis process took the form of writing and re-writing as she attempted to come to deeper meaning and understanding of 'safety' in the context of childbirth. Liz, however, did not start her PhD thesis with a definitive philosophical positioning. This developed or emerged during her writing and re-writing process as she read and re-read the works of various philosophers, especially Heidegger. She began to apply Heidegger's philosophical notions of 'being' and 'being there' within her own interpretation of the texts (interviews or conversations) of her participants.

Liz is Principal Lecturer in the School of Nursing and Midwifery, Auckland University of Technology. Liz **(LS)** was interviewed by Lynne Giddings **(LG).**

Interview

LG: *Why did you choose phenomenology as your methodology for your PhD thesis?*

LS: I didn't choose phenomenology; phenomenology chose me! I was doing a Masters paper at Massey in 1992. It was quite a small class, and the teacher put up a list of about 10 different research methodologies with the instruction that we were to choose one that we didn't intend to use for our thesis. At that stage I had intended to use grounded theory. I liked the idea of having a nice tidy theory at the end. So while I sat thinking on this, my colleagues were quicker off the mark! There was only one left on the board and that was this big long word that started with "p". And I didn't have the faintest idea really what it was about, but it was mine.

But it so happened that the teacher of that module was Irena Madjar, who had just finished her PhD using phenomenology, so it was still very fresh in her experience. So I, being the smart student that I was, immediately accessed her work! I was really impressed. I thought it was stunning. And the more I looked into phenomenology the more I came to like it.

But looking back all these years later, at that time I really didn't have a clue what it was all about. After presenting my seminar on Husserl [1859 - 1938] and Heidegger to my class, I recall driving home and thinking 'but what on earth is the difference between Husserlian knowing and Heideggerian being?' I didn't have a clue. You know how you just write things down and they look good and everyone assumes you understand it. That was my first awareness that in fact I had no idea what any of it meant really.

LG: *How does phenomenology fit with your idea of doing research related to practice?*

LS: Phenomenology is about hearing the stories of practice and finding the meaning that fits within those stories. And I guess I've always loved the stories of practice. I was a midwife and on the quiet days in delivery suite, in those days there used to be some quiet days, we'd sit around in the tearoom with the midwives who had been there for years, just listening to their stories. I probably learned more from them than I did from most of the lectures I'd been to. Funny that. Stories have something in them that's very precious.

Also the stories in Irena's thesis were really powerful (Madjar, 1991). You just knew that as a nurse she'd been

there. Also that you'd done that very thing portrayed in the story but through the stories you were seeing the experience in a whole new light.

LG: *How did phenomenology fit with your research topic and question?*

LS: I know the rules say that this is the wrong way to do it, but I chose my methodology first (laughing)! I knew that I wanted to use phenomenology, and so I looked for something that would be phenomenological.

I was going to a conference called "Birth in the 21st Century", an inter-disciplinary conference. Before I went one of the professors of O&G said to me, 'There's nothing about safety in that conference'. So I went with that question in my head. Some of the presentations at the conference were right out on the edge, and I sat there thinking to myself 'this is not safe' and then I thought 'but what is the meaning of safe'? And so when I sat down to write the research proposal the two came together and I had 'what is the meaning of being safe'. If I hadn't had that phenomenological mindset I might have gone to 'well, what is safety? How do we define safety? What are the parameters of safety?', and gone into that whole defining sort of mentality of saying 'well, this is high risk, this is low risk, this is safe, this is not safe'. But phenomenology didn't take me there at all. It took me into 'what is the experience?' When as a midwife you are having a busy day, how do you go about being safe, which was quite a different sort of question.

LG: *So phenomenology means more to you than just a methodology?*

LS: Yes. It's a worldview that sits very comfortably with me. It sort of is my way of being in the world. It's a very listening sort of approach. You listen to the stories of 'the other' with recognition that that is their story, and because it's their story, that is how it was for them. And it may be that it's totally different from any story that I've ever heard in my life, but that doesn't make that story wrong, it just makes it a different story. And what I need to do is to listen to that story and see what there is in it that I can learn, that will bring me new understandings about my story.

That sounds like it is getting more into a sort of post-modern stance, that is that we all have our own narratives. I think what keeps me in phenomenology rather than the post-modern paradigm is the sense that there is something universal that runs across experiences. So if ten or 20 people have had the same experience of losing a child, if you listen to all these stories, while they will be unique and different, there will be some things among them all that are about being human. Now I think if we can tap in and find that resonating chord that's in all the stories, then that is something that we can hang onto as a profession or as a culture or as a group of people. But always there is a tentativeness. Not saying 'this is the truth', 'this is the theory', 'this is how it is...', but rather saying 'hey, watch out for this, because it seems like this is what that experience is about'.

LG: *So if you had to describe phenomenology, how would you describe it?*

LS: If a student comes to me wanting to do a thesis using phenomenology then the key defining thing is when they do the interviews they want to hear the stories about when that thing happened in the person's life. They don't want to hear what the person thought about it, or why they thought it happened that way. They want to know, for example, the story of 'having the baby'. They want to hear the story itself. Because that's the nearest you can get to the thing in itself. But the phenomenon Heidegger says is always covered over. It's not there for us to see and to grab. We've got to peel back the things that hide it. We've got to delve into the darkness, we've got to try and bring it to light. And the further we get away from the experience, the more things are likely to get in the way, and perhaps be the semblance of the experience. The thing that seems to be the experience, and we take it for granted is the experience, may not in fact be the experience itself. It's something that we've come to believe, but it's not representative of the thing in itself.

LG: *You used the word 'semblance', could you explain that a little bit more?*

LS: Imagine the phenomenon of being courageous. As a phenomenon it's covered over. We have an understanding of what we mean by it, but what does it really mean? It's covered over. And so, if we go to look for it, Heidegger says, we'll find it in two ways.

First of all there'll be 'appearances'. And appearances are where a person is being courageous, and they describe it or they show it to us in a way that really is about being courageous.

But sometimes someone might describe something, and the label of 'courage' is put on it. But when we look really close, we see it wasn't courage at all. It was someone pretending to be courageous, someone putting on a brave face. When you peel back the facade you find that in fact that person wasn't being courageous. We often get fooled by those semblances and think that that is the thing that we're looking for.

LG: *Okay. So how do you go about doing phenomenology?*

LS: The first thing you've got to have is a clear sense of what the phenomenon is you are looking for. So you've got to start by putting a name to the phenomenon. Mine was being safe. Anything that's got the 'ing' on the end. It's also got to be about 'the experience of something'.

You then find the people that have had that experience; the people who can talk about it really well. That doesn't necessarily mean that they are going to be really articulate people, but they're going to be able to find words that describe what it was like for them.

LG: *Do you call that purposive sampling?*

LS: Yes. In my study some people came to me because they were friends

of friends who told them about the study. There's no-one who's not going to give you something. And you're often surprised by who gives you what.

But sometimes you know someone who has had such an amazing experience of the thing in itself, so you really do want to talk to them. And that's fine. Because there is no pretence in this methodology that you the researcher don't bring your own biases. You do. You just make them really explicit.

LG: *How do you do that?*

LS: I always encourage postgraduate students to get someone else to interview them about that phenomenon. So what does it mean to you? What was your experience of it? By telling their own stories there's not such a risk that they'll get in the way of their hearing the stories of other people that are different. Their personal understandings are still going to be there, but they're going to be more in the background.

LG: *So during the interview, or conversation, what sort of questions do you ask?*

LS: You start off with this little list of topics, because initially you never quite trust that the person is going to be able to talk and talk. You want to go with the participant's flow so you steer the person to talk about certain things rather than asking them specific questions.

Often they will go on to interpret them - which is more hermeneutics, and that's fine. But you want to keep bringing them back to the stories because when you come to do the analysis you learn that there is so much in the story. A story is much richer, and much more pregnant with meaning, than someone's discussion about why they think it happened that way or whatever.

LG: *So how many interviews would you do with a participant?*

LS: I only did one. Because once you've told 'the story', you've told the story. I think it's different if it's something that's happening over a long period of time, like for example, experiences of people with chronic illnesses. But basically I think in the first telling they're going to tell you the things that matter to them. But if you think, 'they began to tell me that story and I cut them off', you might want to go back. So rather it is 'keeping the door open', rather than wanting more stories.

LG: *Do you use other methods of data collection like journaling or diarying on the part of the participant?*

LS: Yes, you could. Anything that captures the experience would be fine. One of my students (Henare, 2001) worked with people who had chronic pain. She worked in a group setting where they drew pictures or made collages of the experience of being in pain. Then she used those pictures for her data.

LG: *So once you've collected the data, then it's got to be transcribed. In phenomenology is this by the researcher or a transcribing person?*

LS: I did both. I agree that when you transcribe them yourself the data becomes embodied within you. But because I'm not such a good typist I found that incredibly stress generating. And I didn't enjoy the experience. It took up a huge amount of time that I believe I could invest in a more productive way. So the latter interviews someone else transcribed them.

In phenomenology, unlike other qualitative methodologies like grounded theory, it is not so critical that the transcription is word for word accurate. Often the stories are spread throughout two or three pages. The person starts to tell a story, and then they go onto something else, then they come back and pick it up again. And so I pluck the data out of the transcript and re-craft it into a little package that is a complete story in itself.

LG: *And that's okay in phenomenology?*

LS: Yes. You don't change the meaning. You've got to be really careful that you're not creating something that they didn't say. But you're trying to make the meaning stand out and show itself more clearly. And so the process of doing that is a really good way of immersing yourself in the data.

At the end of your analysis of a transcript you may have six, ten or maybe 20 individual stories. And they stay in your mind. So when you read another transcript you think, 'ah, that story is like that story', and so you're linking stories with stories.

LG: *How many participants do you have in phenomenology?*

LS: You don't have a huge number of participants. In a Masters study I would say anything from five to ten is about right. In my PhD I had 20. You can keep that many stories in your head. And so for me I didn't feel I needed a computer programme to help me do that. A story is something quite easy to hang on to. It's not just a little phrase; it's a whole story.

LG: *In the textbooks they talk about writing and re-writing as the way of analysing the data. Is that what you are referring to?*

LS: Yes. I re-wrote mine several times. For a novice phenomenologist I would suggest that when they get a story, they sit down and write about what that story means for them. That's the first layer of unpacking. So you're not writing a chapter in a thesis or anything. You're simply writing the meaning of that story. And if you do that for every story, by the time you get down the track, you're getting a real clear sense of what are the meanings that are coming out. Then you start to group the stories together from all the participants that are saying the same sorts of things.

Once you group them all together you've got to start deciding which of the stories say it best . And so then you're doing some of that culling which is always the really hard part of research. So then you think, 'okay out of these ten stories I can choose at least three'. And then you have to do another write, because you want to bring out everything that's come out

of all those ten stories. You often don't see them all the first time you did the writing for story number one. And so I think it's best if you then start with a clean sheet of paper and do the writing again. At that stage you are probably writing a chapter. You get deeper and deeper into the meaning of the story. The metaphor 'peeling back the layers of an onion' fits here. Every time you start with a clean bit of paper, you're getting to a deeper layer of the onion, peeling back another skin. And you could never have got to that place if you hadn't done all the rewriting beforehand.

LG: *Do the stories fit under themes?*

LS: Yes, they can come together as themes. But it is actually a process. You've just got to trust that the process will lead you and show you. To name the themes too soon could mean you miss something.

LG: *Where does the literature on the phenomenon fit in the process of analysis and writing?*

LS: If I go back to my study about being safe. There is not a lot of literature in midwifery or obstetrics talking about safety per se or about 'being safe'. But in fact everything that was written was fundamentally about being safe. It just didn't use that language. Therefore I needed to go to literature and read each article or each book and ask: 'What are they saying about being safe? How are they defining safety? Where are they coming from? What's their world view about this?' It's doing the same sort of analysis as you do with the stories. It's uncovering the meaning that's sometimes hidden. And so you're not doing the literature review as for a quantitative study. You're trying to get much deeper, to find the underlying meanings that have been influencing the understandings that we take to practice.

LG: *When do you do that?*

LS: You start at the beginning of your study and you keep reading right through. It's shaping, and it's shaped by, your thesis. It's an interactive process with the journey, really.

LG: *When do you know you've finished?*

LS: You just know. You start feeling overwhelmed by the data. And the more data you collect the less you can do with any one person's data. You know, sometimes I felt with my study there was one particular participant that I could have done my whole PhD on.

In terms of the writing and the re-writing, the thing with phenomenology is you never get there. You never get to the truth. You never get to the end. You always are left with more questions. But again, there's a time when you think 'I've really taken this to a much deeper place than when I began. I've polished up the writing in a way that I'm showing people what I've come to understand. It's ready to go out there and be received by others.' And then it can continue its journey, in another place and another phase, and another time. The journey is never over, but there is a time when the showing and telling is very appropriate.

LG: *What are some of the difficulties with phenomenological research? I know we have talked in the past about the difficulties of publishing.*

LS: There's someone, I cannot remember who now, who said 'You can't summarise a poem.' A phenomenological thesis feels a bit like that. If you try to cut it down into something much smaller ...you lose the heart of it.

And I guess that's one of the concerns I have about phenomenological research. To make it fit for a journal article one can only name the themes and give examples. They don't pick up the phenomenological flavour. They don't create the sense of the mystery, the hidden whisper, and the beauty. There's something that's missing for me in a lot of phenomenological research articles. When I submitted from my thesis I tried to retain the whole philosophical intent of phenomenology. The reviewers of journals have struggled with that, because it's not what they are used to. And so you feel in a bit of no-man's-land. And yet there's a reluctance to turn it into something that isn't phenomenology simply to keep the reviewers happy and get it published. But one can publish a book or a monograph.

LG: *Are there any particular ethical issues related to using phenomenology?*

LS: I think you've got to be aware that when people tell you stories, they are often very personal stories. And they often take them to places where the people didn't realise they were going to go. The participant may cry, when neither of you were expecting that would happen. You have to remain mindful of that. Phenomenology tries to work in a very respectful way. In my head when I am interviewing I have this little thing going around all the time that is reminding me that I need to be respectful of their stories. So you never want to put someone down, or belittle them.

LG: *What helpful hints would you pass on to a beginning researcher who decides that they like the sound of phenomenology and they'd like to use it for their masters thesis?*

LS: Try and read phenomenological theses. See the whole thing and get the feel of it as much as read the words. You also need to go back to the ideas of the philosophers. Heidegger's really hard to read, so go to a secondary sources like Max van Manen (1990). You need to understand what being is about. If you don't, then it's not phenomenology but descriptive qualitative research. So if you call it phenomenology you need to know that it really is being true to the whole tenet of phenomenology.

LG: *You mentioned Max van Manen's work.*

LS: That would be the first port of call. Max is an educationalist so he's not talking about nursing or health care. But he tells his story of how he does his research in a very accessible way. And it's the sort of book that every time you go back to, you learn something new from it.

LG: *Are there any other books that you'd suggest as well as theses?*

LS: I'd recommend the book written by Irena Madjar and Jo Ann Walton (1999). That gives examples of about six different pieces of phenomenology and that's good phenomenology.

LG: *Are you going to write a book, Liz?*

LS: Who knows? Who knows? (laughter)

A quote I like. It's about stories. Joy Cowley says, "The story teller is a liberator, knocking down walls with a note of her flute and reaching wide open pod, seed, egg, stone, grit, heart, word, to set truth free."

I really like that notion of opening up the pod or the seed or the stone or the brick or the heart, to find the truth that's already there. That's what phenomenology does. It uncovers; it releases truth. That's when you set it free. You present your findings to an audience; they sit there and nod their heads because they already knew that. But they had forgotten it, or it had been covered over, or it had not been said out loud. But the knowing is already there. It's not something new, but it's a new saying that can inspire us to new things.

LG: *The phenomenological nod.*

LS: Yep. But that's what Heidegger's basic tenet was... that there is so much in our world in the being of who we are that we take for granted. It's there in our everyday lives, and we go about not stopping to think about it, because it's already there. But those are the very things that he would call us to stop and think about.

LG: *Okay. Have you got any other thoughts or comments?*

LS: I didn't really talk about the dwelling. Other methodologies have quite a clear step-by-step process, so you just sort of follow what you have to do, and you get there. Phenomenology once you've got the stories you let them dwell within you. And so that might mean putting it all away and going for a long walk. And in that long walk the ideas come to you, and you suddenly think 'yes, that's what it's about!'

I like the metaphor of the loaf of bread. Making a loaf of bread you've got to do the hard work. You've got to do the kneading. But then you've got to put it away and let it do the rising. And then you come back to it and you do some more kneading and then you put it away again, and let it rise some more. And you need the balance of the both.

LG: *Can anybody be a phenomenologist?*

LS: In fact it's easier for some people more than for others. Some students who have chosen to do phenomenology have surprised me. Once they've got into the spirit of what it means, they've done it very well. Some people do it almost naturally. It's almost how they are in the world. But you can learn to be that way. People have commented at the end of their research how valuable it had been for them as person, in terms of

how they now are in the world. They listen more closely; they think more deeply; they're sort of slowed down almost.

Conclusion

Phenomenology as a qualitative research methodology has a great deal to offer as a way of uncovering and understanding the complexity of nursing and midwifery practice. Broadly speaking it fits under the umbrella of the hermeneutic or interpretive paradigm and is in a complementary relationship with hermeneutic methodologies. The primary assumption that differentiates phenomenology from hermeneutics is that essences of experiences exist and can be interpreted from the 'lived experience' or stories of the participants. Unlike hermeneutics the aim is to stay as close as possible to the experience or story itself and not move into asking why and seeking explanations. For a summary of basic information about phenomenology refer to Table 1.

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Table 1. Basic information about phenomenology

Paradigmatic approach	• Hermeneutic (interpretive).
Origins	• Biblical exegesis. • Husserl [1859 - 1938]. • Heidegger [1889 - 1976].
Purpose	• To uncover meaning that lies hidden. • To find the common sense of essence that reveals a phenomenon.
Focus	• To stay focused on the story of the experience.
Research question	• What is the meaning of being xxxx?
Sampling	• Purposive sampling - participants' lives and stories reflect the phenomenon of interest. • One to one conversations involving story telling.
Data Collection Methods	• Unstructured, audio taped interviews. • Written stories /journaling. • Visual representations of meaning.
Analytical strategies (systematic and procedure-oriented processes)	• Finding and crafting the stories. • Writing the meaning of the story. • Seeing the themes emerge. • Writing again to gather meaning together at a deeper level (pages and pages of writing). • Writing again, choosing the gems, showing the meaning that has been revealed, refining from the complex to the simple (fewer pages). • Showing (not telling) in a way that provokes the phenomenological nod of agreement, yet yields more questions and wondering (succinct, captivating).