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## **Hermeneutics and Nursing Research: History, Processes, and Exemplar**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Through understanding the history of hermeneutics and the use of hermeneutics as method, nurse scholars may contribute to the unique knowledge base of nursing by expanding understanding of lived experiences. This paper provides a discussion of the background of hermeneutics, the description and exemplar of the human becoming hermeneutic method, a rationale for selecting the method, the protection of human rights, and the details of living the processes of the method.

**Keywords:** hermeneutics, qualitative research, nursing research methodology

## **Hermeneutics and Nursing Research: History, Processes, and Exemplar**

There are many qualitative research methods that nurse scholars may use to enhance understanding of human experiences. One such method and philosophy is hermeneutics. Hermeneutics has been used by various disciplines as a theory and method of interpretation. To understand the method and the rationale in selecting hermeneutics as a research method, it is important to understand the history and processes of hermeneutics. This paper will provide an examination of the background of hermeneutics, a description and exemplar of the human becoming hermeneutic method, the rationale for selecting the human becoming hermeneutic method, along with a hermeneutic study's design and findings.

### **Background of Hermeneutics**

The origins of hermeneutics began centuries ago. Hermes, the messenger of the Greek gods, transmitted the messages of the gods to the mortals. He not only

announced the messages verbatim, he also acted as an “interpreter” who rendered the gods’ words intelligible and meaningful.<sup>1</sup> Bleicher<sup>1</sup> writes of how the Greek educational system still uses literary interpretation in the study and critique of Homer and other poets, tracing hermeneutics back to the interpretation of profane texts in the Renaissance, where classical literary works were critiqued. But the force for the development of hermeneutics as a method lies in religion and the interpretation of Biblical texts.<sup>1</sup> Hermeneutics reached its major formulation in the course of and the after-effects of the Reformation.<sup>2</sup> During that time, Matthias Flacius, a Lutheran, insisted on the possibility of a universally valid interpretation of the Bible through hermeneutics.<sup>2</sup>

Schleiermacher,<sup>3</sup> a nineteenth century philosopher, argued for the significance of hermeneutics for the human sciences. As for method, Schleiermacher,<sup>3p97-98</sup> writes that linguistic expression, that is, text and living speech, has a twofold reference: (a) “to the objective meaning in the context of the entire language, and (b) to the specific thought in the entire life of the speaker or author”. Hence, the methodology here arises within two processes of the hermeneutic circle. According to Schleiermacher,<sup>3p5-6</sup> the hermeneutic circle is explained as “The whole is understood from its parts and the parts from the whole and means that interpretation is at the base of a referential procedure”. The processes of the hermeneutic circle are (a) *grammatical interpretation* in which the interpreter seeks to reproduce the “sphere of language” shared by the author and the original audience. Hence, each word, sentence, section, and work is placed as it belongs to the whole,<sup>3</sup> and (b) *psychological* interpretation in which the author’s command of the language as a style emerges. The interpreter seeks to come to know the work through an author’s particular style, which is a distinctive use of language. Schleiermacher,<sup>4p83-84</sup> says that “the interpreter must put himself both objectively and subjectively in the position of the author. . . this requires knowing the language as the author knew it. But this is more than putting oneself in the position of the original readers, for they, too, had to identify with the author”. Furthermore, he,<sup>4p84</sup> adds that “this requires knowing the inner and the outer aspects of the author’ life . . . the vocabulary and the history of an author’s age come together to form a whole from which his writing’s must be understood as part, and vice versa”.

So for Schleiermacher,<sup>3</sup> the two forms of interpretation are meant to supplement and check one another. Moreover, he conceives of both as applying the hermeneutic circle of part and whole. With grammatical interpretation attempts are made to determine the meanings of words in terms of sentences of which they are a part and the sentences in terms of the work as a whole. Also, with grammatical interpretation there are attempts to place the work itself within the context of its linguistic usage and the literary genre to which it belongs.<sup>3.5</sup> With psychological interpretation there is an attempt to place the work in the context of the author’s life and the history of the time while simultaneously attempting to “find the truth”<sup>3p42</sup> in what the author writes. For Schleiermacher,<sup>3</sup> hermeneutics

is a means to objectify the “true” meaning of a text. The interpreter attempts to find the author’s original meaning.

In the nineteenth century, Dilthey,<sup>6,7</sup> a student of Schleiermacher’s, proposed hermeneutics as the method of inquiry for the human sciences. As a method, hermeneutics is concerned with studying a text to understand how life is humanly lived.<sup>6,7</sup> In this sense, hermeneutics is a means to understand human projects. Epistemologically, Dilthey posits that a person’s lived experience is “the fundamental datum of human science”.<sup>8p270</sup> He proposes that human life itself is best studied through media that express persons’ lives. These media of expression include literary works, cultures, and social institutions. Through these and other media, the lived experience of another can be understood.<sup>6,7,9</sup> Although Dilthey believes the experience of another can be understood, he believes an interpreter’s own present situation biases interpretation and thus directly may hinder complete understanding of another’s human project.

Dilthey<sup>7</sup> uses the hermeneutic circle as the “necessary condition for the possibility of understanding historical expressions”.<sup>10p210</sup> Emphasis is placed on shared language and a shared background of meaning identified as part of the hermeneutic circle. Dilthey<sup>7p439</sup> says that the hermeneutic circle uses every word or sentence as a means to examine the whole, and the whole is examined by an analysis of each part – words and sentences. He writes, “Structure is everything! And we cannot avoid the circle: From the complex of data given to me I generate the total nexus of a psychic structure in which I interpret the particular on the basis of the whole, and the whole on the basis of the particular”. The hermeneutic circle arises with the dialogue between the individual lived experience and the realm of historical expressions. The meaning or meanings derived from the hermeneutic circle are findings about life as it is humanly lived in truth. This is the contribution of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, who laid the foundation for Heidegger’s<sup>11</sup> work.

Heidegger<sup>11</sup> moved hermeneutics from epistemology, as found in Schleiermacher<sup>3</sup> and Dilthey,<sup>6,7</sup> to the level of ontology in which he proposes that a fundamental form of human existence is understanding. Heidegger<sup>11</sup> also uses the hermeneutic circle as a means to gain understanding. However, as he moved hermeneutics to ontology, he also moved the hermeneutic circle from an epistemological issue, to an ontological one. Heidegger writes of the hermeneutic circle with a focus on “interpretation of human being”<sup>11p26</sup> with the presence of one’s fore-knowing. Heidegger’s work is different from Schleiermacher’s<sup>3</sup> and Dilthey’s<sup>6,7</sup> in that for Heidegger interpretation is not a search for objective truth. The hermeneutic circle is to be used to understand what it means to be-in-the-world. The three processes that emerge with Heideggerian hermeneutics are: (a) a search for an overall meaning of the text as a whole; (b) an interpretation of the parts of the text and a comparison of the two interpretations looking for meanings of the whole to the parts and the parts to the whole; and, (c) a moving beyond what is interpreted in phase two with the revealing of what is unknown.

Extending Heidegger's<sup>11</sup> view, Gadamer<sup>12,13</sup> focuses on the idea of "fusing horizons", the interpreter with the text. In this sense, hermeneutics is a way of understanding human existence. Hence, Gadamer's<sup>12,13</sup> "hermeneutic situation" emerges in light of one's present as it is influenced by the past in an infinite number of ways. Consistent with Heidegger,<sup>11</sup> Gadamer<sup>12,13</sup> furthers the discussion of the hermeneutic circle when he writes of prejudice as an integral component of hermeneutic understanding. Gadamer<sup>13p71-72</sup> writes,

The person who wants to understand a text is ready to be told something by it. So a hermeneutically trained mind must from the start be open to the otherness of the text. But such openness presupposes neither "neutrality" about the objects of study nor indeed self-obliteration, but rather includes the identifiable appropriation of one's own bias, so that the text presents itself in its otherness and in this manner has the chance to play off its truth in the matter at hand against the interpreter's pre-opinion.

The hermeneutic circle for Gadamer<sup>12,13</sup> is composed of the interpretation of the whole text in light of its parts, and interpretation of the parts in light of the whole. However, with each interpretation a deeper understanding of the previous part or whole emerges. From this, the interpreter enters another layer of the circle, which may be thought of as a spiral with deepening layers of understanding and interpretation. As mentioned before, Gadamer<sup>13p302</sup> describes this understanding as a "fusing of horizons." Horizon is defined as "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point". A horizon then is the interpreter's experience, which includes prejudices and biases.

Ricoeur<sup>14</sup> retreats from the works of Heidegger<sup>11</sup> and Gadamer<sup>12,13</sup> in that through his hermeneutics he seeks to treat the text as an autonomous discourse and focal point of interpretation.<sup>10,14</sup> The purpose is to present the text objectively within its historical condition so that understanding emerges from the present in light of the past. The objective meaning of a text is something other than the subjective intentions of its author. Ricoeur<sup>15</sup> says that the alleged intention of the author cannot bring about right understanding. The meaning of a text must be construed as a whole and, if more than one meaning arises, then Ricoeur recommends using his process of interpretation-distanciation-appropriation.

Ricoeur's<sup>14</sup> method of interpretation-distanciation-appropriation is as follows. First, interpretation is reading the text for surface meaning and structural analysis so that the interpreter can be critical for depth, semantic sense, and reference rather than for syntactical sense alone. Second, distanciation is a deliberate critique to overcome immediate naïve misunderstandings of the text.<sup>14</sup> Within distanciation, the interpreter may take on one of two attitudes: suspending judgment about the referential dimension of the text, leaving a worldless and self-enclosed entity or seeking to unfold the less obvious references of the text. He writes, of the second attitude, "from that which it says to that which it says it about".<sup>14p161</sup> Finally, appropriation is "making the familiar of what seems

foreign”.<sup>10p216</sup> That is to say that to appropriate means to make one’s own “what was initially alien”.<sup>14p18</sup> The act of appropriation does not seek to “fuse horizons” of meaning as Gadamer<sup>12,13</sup> writes, but to expand understanding. This means that Ricoeur<sup>14</sup> believes an interpretation of a text results in an actual meaning of the text that expands understanding of the text.

The five preeminent philosophers, Schleiermacher,<sup>3,4</sup> Dilthey,<sup>6</sup> Heidegger,<sup>11</sup> Gadamer,<sup>12,13</sup> and Ricoeur,<sup>14,15</sup> all expanded on hermeneutics for the human sciences. All of these philosophers believe that interpretation is essential in understanding texts and meanings within texts. Also, they use the hermeneutic circle, in some way, as a means to move from the parts to the whole of the textual interpretation. However, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Ricoeur believe that an objective truth arises from interpretation; while, Heidegger and Gadamer say that the meaning of a text arises with the perspectival interpretation of the reader.

### **Hermeneutics and Nursing**

Within the discipline of nursing, Benner<sup>16</sup> explicates a hermeneutic method, which she says is Heideggerian<sup>11</sup> in nature. The method uses the hermeneutic circle and three strategies: paradigm cases, exemplars, and thematic analysis. These strategies “are useful for allowing the particular claims of the text to stand out and for presenting configurational and transactional relationships”.<sup>16p310</sup> A paradigm case is “a strong instance of a particular pattern of meanings”.<sup>16p310</sup> An exemplar case is useful as “recognitional tools and presentation strategies. An exemplar is smaller than a paradigm case, but like a paradigm case is a strong instance of a particularly meaningful transaction, intention, or capacity”.<sup>16p310</sup> And lastly, thematic analysis happens when “the interpreter identifies common themes in the interviews and extracts sufficient interview excerpts to present evidence to the reader of the theme”.<sup>16p310</sup> The goal of Benner’s methodology is to discover meaning terms and to achieve understanding of everyday skills, practices, and experiences.

While Benner<sup>16</sup> calls this Heideggerian<sup>11</sup> hermeneutics in nature, the phases by her own description differ in that Heidegger<sup>11</sup> posits ontology as central to understanding what it is to be human. The question to answer, from a Heideggerian perspective, is “what does it mean to be a person?”. Benner’s hermeneutics is concerned with epistemology rather than ontology. Her concern is with “how do we [nurses] know what we know?”. She attempts to answer this question through the phases of her hermeneutic method. The method is an attempt to show what nurses “do” so that nurses know the “how” of what they do. In light of those who use hermeneutics from an epistemologic perspective Thompson,<sup>17</sup> writes, “they link the act of interpretation with conditions of knowledge, they maintain that everything in the world that can be known is known by people through acts and interpretation”.<sup>17p237-238</sup>

Diekelmann , Allen, and Tanner<sup>18</sup> also describe their hermeneutic method as Heideggerian<sup>11</sup> in nature. Researchers using this method seek to identify the categories, relational themes, and constitutive patterns of texts. The method is comprised of seven stages: stage one is examining the text as a whole; stage two is summarizing sections of the text and identifying categories; stage three is analyzing the text based on categories in step two; stage four is identifying relational themes in the text; stage five is generating constitutive patterns in the text; stage six is validating the analysis by persons not part of the research team but familiar with both textual content and the research method; and stage seven is preparing the final report using sufficient excerpts from the interview to allow for validation of the findings by the reader.

While Diekelmann et al.<sup>18</sup> describe their method as Heideggerian,<sup>11</sup> it reflects a Ricoeurian perspective with an aim at epistemology rather than ontology. Ricoeur<sup>15</sup> posits that there is an objective truth that one can glean from a text and that authors and historical facts are fairly fixed and can be determined by adequate methods. He believes that one must find the perspective of the author so that an objective and context-based interpretation arises in the texts meaning. Diekelmann et al.'s method attempts to find categories, themes, and patterns that can be "validated" by others so that the interpretation is true and objective. Thompson<sup>17p251</sup> refers to this type of hermeneutics as objective hermeneutics. She writes, "A theoretical position that has consistently resisted Gadamerian and Heideggerian insights is one that maintains some of the objectivist assumptions. These hermeneutic thinkers share a common standard that determines the validity and objectivity of interpretive work".

### ***Hermeneutic Reflections***

Although Schleimacher<sup>3</sup> was Dilthey's teacher, it is Dilthey<sup>6</sup> who proposes hermeneutics as the primary mode of inquiry for the human sciences. The process of hermeneutic inquiry is described differently by many philosophers such as Schleiermacher,<sup>3</sup> Dilthey,<sup>6</sup> Heidegger,<sup>11</sup> Gadamer,<sup>12,13</sup> and Ricoeur<sup>15</sup> and by nurse scholars such as Benner,<sup>15</sup> and Diekelmann et al.<sup>18</sup>

The nurse scholars, Benner<sup>15</sup> and Diekelmann et al.<sup>18</sup> describe significantly different hermeneutic methods which they say are Heideggerian<sup>11</sup> in nature. Benner and Diekelmann et al. were discussed as being epistemologic rather than ontologic. This epistemologic perspective is consistent with a totality paradigm<sup>20</sup> perspective (view of persons as bio-psycho-social-spiritual beings) but not with a simultaneity paradigm<sup>20</sup> perspective (view of persons as unitary beings that cannot be known by their parts). An ontologic perspective is consistent with the simultaneity perspective, specifically with Parse's<sup>19,20</sup> human becoming theory.

### **Hermeneutics and Nursing: A Human Becoming Exemplar**

An exemplar of hermeneutics in nursing research is Ortiz's<sup>21</sup> research study, which utilized the human becoming hermeneutic method.<sup>8.19.20.22</sup> The method "was created in the Heideggerian-Gadamerian tradition to answer research questions such as *What does it mean to be human?*".<sup>22p172</sup> Parse<sup>22p172</sup> writes that "the basic assumptions underlying this method further specify ideas from assumptions underpinning hermeneutics". The assumptions of the human becoming hermeneutic method are:

1. Human perspective is personal meaning cocreated with the human-universe mutual process.
2. Human creations and interpretations of texts and artforms are perspectival.
3. The rhythmical process of researcher-text and researcher-artform dialogue coconstructs meaning moments.
4. New understandings of lived experience arise with interpretations of texts and artforms.
5. Understandings transfigure the researcher's life patterns.<sup>22p172</sup>

The human becoming hermeneutic method<sup>22</sup> flows directly from these assumptions and is described here in detail.

### ***Description of the Method***

The human becoming hermeneutic method<sup>8.19.20.22</sup> is a unique nursing method to discover emergent meanings of human experience in texts and artforms. Parse<sup>22</sup> explicates the processes of discoursing with penetrating engaging; interpreting with quiescent beholding; and understanding with inspiring envisaging. Parse<sup>22p172</sup> writes that "discoursing with penetrating engaging is piercing the hidden and disclosed all-at-once. The researcher is all-at-once in dialogue with the text or artform and also with the author of these media". She goes on to write that the process of interpreting with quiescent beholding is "silent pondering, a dwelling close to the medium of the artform, or the words and sentences of the text, while explicitly-tacitly immersing in the appropriating-disappropriating of the surfacing meanings".<sup>22p172</sup> Finally, Parse describes the process of understanding with inspiring envisaging as a . . .

springing forth with new visions – horizons fused with the warp and woof of the fabric unfolding in the researcher-text, or researcher-artform dialogue. It is climbing beyond with a deep apprehension of the surfacing meanings that are woven with and transfigure the researcher's explicit-tacit knowing of the phenomenon alive in the text or artform – yet there remains a knowing that the vessel of inquiry can never be filled. There is always the veil of mystery, the barely seen, as the researcher-text or researcher-artform dialogue moves beyond the moment of immediate contact.<sup>22p172</sup>

“These are the processes lived in the researcher-text dialogue”.<sup>20p66</sup> These processes are ontologically congruent with Heidegger<sup>11</sup> who sets forth the idea that there is ontologic grounding with hermeneutics, and with Gadamer<sup>12,13</sup> who elaborates this notion when he describes the idea of “fusion of horizons” as what arises “when the text and interpreter meet in dialogue”.<sup>20p66</sup> Through these processes the disclosed and hidden arise in “rhythmic movement between the language of the text and the language of the researcher”<sup>8p274</sup> as there is an “interweaving [of] the meaning of the text with the pattern of one’s life in a chosen way”.<sup>8p276</sup>

Parse<sup>22p173</sup> describes how the processes are lived out in a research study using the human becoming hermeneutic method. She writes,

After necessary approval is granted, the researcher approaches the text or artform gently contemplating the phenomenon under study. In sinking deep into immersion with engaging and beholding over time, the researcher invites visions of the connectedness of the phenomenon with human becoming. The researcher’s ideas are recorded by marking passages of the text or areas of the artform with human becoming concepts for consideration in relation to the whole work. Meanings shift as each penetrating engaging and quiescent beholding with the phenomenon brings to the surface new inspiring visions that are the emergent meanings of the moment. These too are recorded in a journal, or marked in a copy of the text, or on the artform, for further contemplation along with the emergent meanings that arise at other times with the lingering presence of the intense engagements. The emergent meanings are synthesized and written in a creative narrative expressing the author's unique understanding as new visions are fused with the warp and woof of the fabric understanding of the human experience under study.

### **Rationale for Selection of the Method**

A hermeneutic approach to human science nursing lends itself to examining phenomena that would otherwise remain unexplored. The hermeneutic method offers a means by which to gain an understanding of the way people experience the meaning of the world and their place within it.<sup>23</sup> By using the human becoming hermeneutic method, the Ortiz<sup>21</sup> focused on interpreting and understanding the chosen text, *A Promise to Remember: The NAMES Project Book of Letters*,<sup>24</sup> from a particular perspective. Parse<sup>20p66</sup> writes about the human becoming hermeneutic method, “It is a dialogical process between researcher and text uncovering meaning interpreted through a particular perspective. The interpretation itself is the meaning given to the text [or artform] from the frame of reference of the researcher; thus, the understanding of the text [or artform] incarnates that frame of reference”. The human becoming hermeneutic method was used in this study, since it is consistent with the researcher’s perspective and answers the research question: what are the emerging meanings of lingering presence in human experience?

## Protection of Human Rights

In all nursing research studies, the protection of human rights is crucial. In Ortiz's<sup>21</sup> study, the text, *A Promise to Remember: The NAMES Project Book of Letters*,<sup>24</sup> was chosen because of the researcher's interest in persons living with AIDS and their loved ones. Since there were no human participants involved in this study, a University Institutional Review Board gave permission to proceed in that light. Also, the researcher received permission from The NAMES Project of San Francisco to use the Brown's<sup>24</sup> text in the study. All letters in the text are published with the permission of the letter writers.<sup>24</sup>

## Living the Processes of the Method

Ortiz<sup>21</sup> read and reread Brown's<sup>24</sup> text, immersed in deep contemplation connecting lingering presence with human becoming. While moving through the *hermeneutic spiral* with Brown's<sup>24</sup> text, the processes of *penetrating engaging* – *quiescent beholding* – *inspiring envisaging* were lived simultaneously.<sup>8,22</sup> *Penetrating engaging* involved the researcher to listen to the meanings of the letters in immersion with the text. *Quiescent beholding* was lived as the researcher invited the whole text to surface certain meanings some of which he cherished as important meaning moments and others which he discarded. *Inspiring envisaging* is “climbing beyond”<sup>22p172</sup> the now with the text amid “springing forth with new visions”<sup>22p172</sup> as the lingering presence described in the text was weaved with human becoming. Ortiz<sup>21</sup> set forth his meaning of the whole experience with the letters as the meaning of the lived experience of lingering presence unfolded the fusion of horizons which is “assigning meaning to the text through appropriating and disappropriating beliefs”.<sup>8p280</sup> New possibilities from this study arose as emerging truths were identified by the researcher and were offered as enhancements to nursing science.<sup>8</sup> Penetrating engaging, quiescent beholding, and inspiring envisaging are all-at-once rhythmic processes that surface emerging meanings of lived experiences.

## Example of Hermeneutic Findings

The findings of Ortiz's<sup>21</sup> study included a description of emergent meanings, the findings of hermeneutic studies, of lingering presence with ways the emergent meanings enhance nursing knowledge, and a discussion of the appropriateness of the human becoming hermeneutic method for the study of lingering presence in Brown's<sup>24</sup> text. The emergent meanings of lingering presence are:

1. A lingering presence surfaces in the cherished remembered which changes moment to moment as new experiences arise in the now and shed different light on the was and will be. It is a confirming-not confirming of what is important.
2. A lingering presence is lived in private ways, yet with others in a different connecting-separating. It is being with others, ideas, objects, and

situations in ways that are seen and unseen, through words, silences, and symbols.

3. A lingering presence is living with the familiar-unfamiliar in the now moment, while moving beyond with different possibles.<sup>21p152</sup>

These emergent meanings of hermeneutic studies contribute to the enhancement of nursing knowledge. Ortiz's<sup>21</sup> study further elaborated Parse's<sup>20</sup> work on lingering presence, providing greater insight into the meaning of the phenomenon of lingering presence as a unitary, human becoming phenomenon. Parse<sup>20,25</sup> writes of lingering presence in the practice methodology of the human becoming theory. She says, "lingering presence is a reflective-prereflective 'abiding with' attended to through glimpses of the other person, idea, object, or situation".<sup>25p19</sup> In the lingering presence study,<sup>21</sup> writers of the letters wrote about loved ones' lingering presence through cherished remembrances and symbols with things like quilt panels, works of art, writings, and pictures of loved ones, incarnating the meaning of their relationships. Furthermore, these findings shed light on how the letter writers live what is important for them at many realms of the universe all-at-once. This information enhances understanding of human becoming, thus adding to the knowledge base of nursing to guide further research and practice. This knowledge base may provide nurses and others with new insights concerning the ways people live with a lingering presence.

The human becoming hermeneutic method was created to be consistent with Parse's<sup>20</sup> theory and was most appropriate choice to discover the emergent meanings of lingering presence in Brown's<sup>24</sup> text. The method provided the researcher with a guide to discourse with the text, interpret the letters in the text in light of the principles of human becoming,<sup>20</sup> and create new understandings. With the use of the human becoming hermeneutic method, the interpretation of the letters and their emergent meanings surfaced with the lens of the human becoming theory, thus, contributing to knowledge about the phenomenon and about the human becoming hermeneutic method.

### **Summary**

This paper provided a description of hermeneutics with a specific example of the human becoming hermeneutic method used in a study of lingering presence.<sup>21</sup> There was a discussion of the background of hermeneutics, the description of the human becoming hermeneutic method, a rationale for selecting the method, the protection of human rights, and the details of living the processes of the method. Through understanding the history of hermeneutics and the use of hermeneutics as method, nurse scholars may contribute to the unique knowledge base of nursing by expanding understanding of lived experiences.

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