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## **Unpacking Heideggerian Phenomenology**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper illuminates the thinking that underpinned Martin Heidegger's philosophy. Essentially Heidegger purported that we construct our reality from our own experiences and beliefs. For many researchers, however the difficulty in deciphering the complexities of German based language is a frequently cited reason for avoiding Heideggerian phenomenology. As a result this article examines facets of the language used by Heidegger, and furthermore offers discussion and examples to allow researchers to appreciate how this philosophy may translate into a methodological framework to be utilized in contemporary nursing research.

**Keywords:** Nursing, rural, Heidegger, qualitative research, phenomenology, hermeneutics

## **Unpacking Heideggerian Phenomenology**

### ***Introduction***

In recent years the volume of nursing research making use of qualitative methodologies has increased dramatically. By choosing such methodologies insight has been provided into the human side of nursing, which has not been served well by the positivist paradigm. As offered by Birks, Chapman and Francis "The methodological approach utilized...must facilitate answers to the research questions(s), be appropriate for addressing the aims of the specific research....and fit the needs and abilities of the researcher".<sup>1</sup>

Phenomenology is a complex methodology with many researchers finding the esoteric nature of the language both daunting and exclusive. Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, whilst an extremely valuable resource for nursing researchers, is perhaps, one of the least understood or misunderstood methodology.<sup>2</sup> Arguably this is because of the idiosyncratic way in which he used language. Consequently one of the main challenges in studying Heidegger is deciphering his language. Not only did he write in an exceedingly technical manner, but, he frequently invented his own terminology in order to highlight or explain a concept. Furthermore this difficulty is heightened by the translations and the lack of direct translatability of some of the phrases into languages other than German. Hence, drawing upon our extensive combined experiences in studying Heidegger this paper will explicate some of his terminology, offering our interpretations.<sup>3-6</sup> Our intent is to assist other nurse researchers to develop an understanding of Heideggerian thought. Additionally we will demonstrate how we have applied the philosophy to frame a nursing research project.

### ***The research question: An exemplar***

The research question, "What is the experience of nursing someone you know?" was conceptualized from the many experiences the researchers, as rural nurses, had encountered. Understanding gained through this research will provide

valuable insights to experienced rural nurses, those new to the area and educators of rural nurses.

### ***Choosing a methodological framework***

Phenomenology relies on borrowing people's lived experiences so that the researcher can better understand the meaning or the significance of the event.<sup>7</sup> The wide-ranging applicability of phenomenology has seen it heavily employed in many areas or research concerned with human experience, including nursing, psychology, sociology and more recently education.<sup>8</sup> Notable nursing studies utilizing phenomenology include Chapman,<sup>4</sup> Davenport,<sup>9</sup> Gullickson,<sup>10</sup> Robertson-Malt,<sup>11</sup> Walters,<sup>12</sup> Taylor,<sup>13</sup> Pearson et al,<sup>14</sup> James,<sup>15</sup> Rather,<sup>16</sup> Ferguson<sup>17</sup> and McManus-Holroyd.<sup>18</sup>

In line with Heidegger's thinking, it is not possible to interpret a text or work devoid of judgment(s). Therefore we make no apology for the components of Heidegger's work that we have chosen to highlight, and integrate into our study, and furthermore those that have been purposefully downplayed or neglected. It must be stressed that the concepts we have chosen are used to couch our questioning and understanding of the data generated in our study. Above all it should be remembered that the appraisal of Heidegger, in this context, is not entirely about the philosophy per se, but rather about meshing relevant philosophical standpoints into a usable, methodological framework, to guide and ultimately interpret nursing research.

People, their interactions and their lived experiences are the core of nursing. Whilst logio-positivism will always have a place in nursing, nurses have always displayed interest in seeking meaning from their work as evidenced by nurses' willingness to share their stories. From the pooled anecdotes insights are gained and knowledge generated both of which can then be injected back into the profession. Interpretive research is simply the formalizing of this tradition.<sup>19</sup>

Considering hermeneutic phenomenology as a vehicle for exploring the experience of nurses caring for people with who they have a dual relationship is viewed as eminently befitting. As rural nurses we are always engrossed in the world of rural nursing. Furthermore as a people we are always immersed in the world of rural life. These entities are contributors to our Dasein, and as such we are unable to separate ourselves from these. We are not objects amongst the objects of rural nursing or living, rather we are at all times absorbed within the world of rural nursing and living. Therefore the beauty of using Heidegger to underpin this study is that his philosophy permits and encourages the exploration and inclusion of preconceptions as legitimate components of the research.<sup>20</sup> Hence our experiences, both as practitioners and as researchers are then woven together to produce a shared understanding of the phenomena, or a 'fusion of horizons', as Gadamer called it.<sup>21</sup> The ultimate aim in expounding a shared experience is to look beyond the words, or the superficially accepted sense of the

experiences, to broaden the understanding beyond the everyday reality.<sup>22</sup> Asking the question "what does this really mean?" is often a helpful start to this process.

### ***The development of Heideggerian Phenomenology***

Phenomenology was one of the first genuine moves away from the positivist paradigm and into qualitative research, where the subjectivity of human experience became more valued.<sup>23</sup> The father of phenomenology was a mathematician Edmund Husserl, who developed transcendental phenomenology.<sup>24</sup> He believed that in order to generate valid data it was first necessary for the researcher to put aside any presuppositions that they may have in relation to the question. He termed this bracketing or phenomenological reduction.<sup>25,26</sup> What resulted was data that was fundamentally epistemological in nature. That is, it provided a description of the experience, as he reasoned that raising awareness of a phenomenon equated with knowledge.<sup>27</sup>

Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, challenged this idea, by suggesting that the researcher is as much a part of the research as the participant, and that their ability to interpret the data was reliant on previous knowledge. Heidegger called this prior understanding fore-structure.<sup>28</sup> He postulated that there is no such thing as interpretive research, free of the judgement or influence of the researcher.

More to the point, he sees the researcher as *Being-in-the-world* of the participant and research question. What is vital, however, if the researcher does subscribe to the philosophical standpoint of *Being-in-the-world* attested to by Heidegger is that they are open and upfront with this viewpoint. In regards to bracketing, Heidegger's message was simple; "Understanding is never without presuppositions. We do not, and cannot, understand anything from a purely objective position. We always understand from within the context of our disposition and involvement in the world" (Johnson, 2000, pp. 23).

Heidegger emphasized that there was no discernable difference between epistemology and ontology. For him, knowing is extrapolated from interpretation and understanding.

In other words we construct our reality, and therefore, comprehension from our experience of *Being-in-the-world*.

### ***Hermeneutics and the Hermeneutic Circle***

The word hermeneutics comes from the Greek word *hermeneusin*, a verb, meaning to understand or interpret.<sup>29</sup> Hermeneutics is the stream of phenomenology supported by Heidegger. Although originating as a method for studying theological scriptures, Heidegger redefined hermeneutics as a "...way of studying all human activities" (Dreyfus, 1994, pp.2). It is the basis for interpretation, with the aim of allowing the text to speak for itself.

Heidegger saw himself as an ontologist.<sup>30</sup> That is, he aimed to ask the questions that would ultimately result in the uncovering of the meaning of being. He viewed humans as entities with the awareness and thus the ability to ask ontological questions. He contends that the only true way for the researcher to conduct a hermeneutic inquiry was to have prior knowledge, some fore-structure to ensure that the questions asked were pertinent.<sup>31</sup>

A hermeneutic enquiry, in the tradition of Heidegger's philosophy aims to elucidate the subjective, humanistic meaning of an experience or as noted by Mulhall<sup>32</sup> employing the hermeneutic circle augments the elucidation of *Dasein*. There is no attempt "...to reveal casual relationships, but rather to reveal the nature of phenomena as humanly experienced".<sup>33</sup> Rather the goals of hermeneutic research, in line with Heidegger thinking are to enter the world of the person and interpret the meaning they assign to the experience.<sup>34</sup>

The hermeneutic circle relies on the circular movement from the whole to the parts, deconstructing and then re-constructing the text, resulting in a shared understanding.<sup>35</sup> In terms of this research we are endeavoring to answer the question "what is the experience of being a rural nurse caring for someone you know?" It must be stressed however, that it is the researchers who ask the text what does it mean to be a rural nurse living out the phenomenon in question. It is not the responsibility of the participant to analyze the situation, rather the participant simply describes, or recounts the experience. By utilizing the hermeneutic circle the researcher attempts to 'read between the lines' and uncover the true essence of the experience. Gadamer<sup>21</sup> termed the understanding obtained when the researcher and the text meet as the fusion of horizons, and further notes that in the setting of phenomenological reduction a shared understanding is not possible. Also worth noting is the infinite possibility of the hermeneutic circle.<sup>36</sup> Koch<sup>37</sup> further elaborated by explaining that every time the text is re-explored, further possibilities are feasible.

## ***Dasein***

The concept of *Dasein* is pivotal to the philosophical standpoint of Heidegger. Although not directly translatable into English, in colloquial German, *Dasein* means human existence with the entity to ask what it means to be.<sup>38</sup> Similarly Johnson (2002) defined *Dasein* as meaning there being. *Dasein* is the foundation upon which Heidegger built up the entirety of his thinking.

As *Dasein* is not static it can not be measured objectively (Stumpf, 1994). Sheehan<sup>39</sup> summarized by stating that "...*Dasein* is the answer to the questions about the meaning of being".<sup>39</sup> Wrathall<sup>40</sup> agreed, concluding that everyone is *Dasein* or moreover that every human is a meaningful being. Fundamentally Heideggerian phenomenology considers what it means to *Be-in-the-world*. The meaning is subject to context but always a possibility. Heidegger<sup>28</sup> claimed that

the aim should be to discover, or uncover "...the universal structures of Being as they manifest themselves in phenomena".<sup>28</sup>

### ***In-der-Welt-sein (Being-in-the-world)***

As explained by James<sup>15</sup> Heidegger argued that we are not entities that exist parallel to our world. Rather we are, at all times, submerged in our world. Hence Heidegger coined the term *Being-in-the-world*, hyphenating the words as a way of emphasizing that there is no separation between our being and our world; they are as one.<sup>41</sup> Dietsch<sup>42</sup> concurred, noting that humans are inseparable from their world, and further that the ability to interpret the world relies on the marriage of the two.

To illustrate *Being-in-the-world* in the context of this enquiry consider that the nurse living in a rural community is always situated within in the world of rural nursing, regardless of whether at work or not. Hence our task, as researchers is to ask the text what it means to be a rural nurse in the world of rural nursing, faced with a patient known to the nurse.

### ***Sorge (Care)***

"Caring is a fundamental function of nursing",<sup>43</sup> a concept which underlies every aspect of nursing. Nursing is built upon the foundation of human interaction. Neither a nursing, nor a patient experience happens in isolation. Heidegger<sup>28</sup> summarized this sentiment, by declaring that to be with another is to care. Additionally he claimed that everything one does can be understood as a way of caring. Further as alluded to by Benner and Wrubel,<sup>44</sup> Heidegger identified caring in two ways. Firstly, as taking over others concern, and secondly, as empowering others via advocacy and facilitation.

Leonard (1989) purported that *Sorge* (care) is pivotal to *Dasein*, and in reality *Dasein* is not possible in the absence of caring. Caring is symbolic of not only *Being-in-the-world*, but also being connected to others, and furthermore believing that connectedness is of consequence. To provide comfort requires the "being-with" of *Dasein*; to be actively engaged in another's lifeworld. In addition, an integral part of *Dasein*'s identity is centered on what or who, is cared about, and deeming these entities significant.<sup>45</sup> The notion of connectedness is an area that will be explored in this study, by asking the text what does it mean to care for a patient known to the nurse?

### ***Authenticity***

"To be authentic is to be aware of what it means to exist".<sup>28</sup> In terms of human interaction Krasner<sup>46</sup> explained that an authentic relationship involves "...responding to the appeal of the presence of other *Dasein*".<sup>46</sup> In other words *Dasein* is not isolated but rather is absorbed within a relationship with others.<sup>47</sup>

*Dasein* may be described as the glue that binds a nurse and a patient. Consequently our study aims to uncover the *Dasein* that exists when a nurse cares for a person who they know. Also of interest is the authenticity of the relationship, both in terms of the previous relationship as well as the nurse/patient relationship. Ultimately the aim of a phenomenological study, such as this, is to let *Dasein* reveal and interpret itself.<sup>48</sup>

### ***Befindlichkeit (Disposition)***

In line with Heidegger's conviction that *Dasein* is relative to context, so too did he believe that *Dasein* is never devoid of a mood or disposition, for which he used the word *Befindlichkeit*.<sup>49</sup> Regardless of the phenomenon, the starting point is always the mood in which the experience is lived. Moreover Heidegger affirmed that disposition arises out of *Being-in-the-world*. To further illuminate this concept Wrathall<sup>40</sup> stated that moods "...come from a whole way of comporting ourselves and relating ourselves to the things and people around us".<sup>40</sup>

In terms of the research in question, namely nurses caring for people they know, it is not necessarily the patient nor the patient's condition that the nurse may hold some reservation. More accurately it is the nurse's feelings in approaching the situation, underpinned by *Befindlichkeit* that influences the experience. Mood takes into account ideas preconceived in relation to experiences of *Being-in-the-world*; in this instance, the world of living in a rural community and working as a nurse.

Whilst being totally in control of the context is only a reality in idealism, humans are always in control of deriving meaning (*Verstehen*) from the situation (Johnson, 2000).

### ***Temporality and Spaciality (Time and Space)***

Heidegger did not define time (*Temporality*) and space (*Spaciality*) as chronological, linear or measurable entities. Instead he declared that time for *Dasein* is infinite.<sup>45</sup> Heidegger was adamant that time is the foundation of *Dasein*, or as described by Gelven,<sup>49</sup> that *Dasein* is to always in time. To illustrate his point Heidegger asked the question: *What does it mean to be in time?* So important was the concept of time to Heidegger that he chose to refer to time as *ecstasis*, a word derived from Greek meaning 'to stand out'.<sup>40</sup> Essentially Heidegger suggested that, when reflecting on a phenomenon chronological time did not matter. What mattered was what, or why, it stood out from the general flow of time.<sup>50</sup> To exemplify this point one simply needs to think of a significant time either in history, such as 9/11, or in their life, such as the birth of a child, to understand how a time may stand out from the general flow, yet the date or time of day be rendered irrelevant. The same may be true of a nurse caring for a patient with whom they share a dual relationship. Whilst the time of day, nor the

date may be recalled, the way in which this time 'stood out' may still be obvious because of the significance of the event.

In terms of space Heidegger once more considered the concept by asking: *What does it mean to be in space?* He did not mean space as a place per se, but rather by how it feels to be in a space.<sup>49</sup> As an example, when one talks of 'being in love', love is not a geographical place, but rather a sense of being in a particular space. Where that space is, no one knows, yet the concept is universally understood and accepted. The same is true of Heidegger's perception of *Spaciality*. It is not a particular space that he refers to, moreover a sense of what it means to be in that space, and how that feeling influences experiences.<sup>51</sup> In regards to this research we aim to examine and re-examine the text with the question "what does it mean to be in the space of nursing a person the nurse knows"?

Heidegger<sup>28</sup> advocated strongly that there is no such thing as a situation-less experience. He insisted that we are located within our own temporo-spatial circumstance, and that it is the context which influences the meaning of the event. In other words if the time and setting were to differ then so too would the experience, because every experience is context specific.

### ***Acknowledging the argument against Heidegger***

In considering whether to adopt Heidegger's philosophy to frame a study, some researchers are apprehensive, influenced by the controversies surrounding him. Essentially the debates surrounding Heidegger are centered around his involvement in Nazism.<sup>52</sup> We emphatically agree that fascist, anti-Semitic beliefs have no place in nursing. In his defense, however and as noted by Johnson,<sup>48</sup> even philosophers are not spared the horror of wars, and as such philosophy and political views are not presented the luxury of remaining mutually exclusive. Whilst mindful of the warnings heralded, we nevertheless believe that many areas of Heidegger's thinking remain relevant to generating thought in contemporary nursing research, regardless of his life choices. In the end the choice of philosophy is determined by its relevance to a study, not simply by the philosopher as a person judged by a set of life choices.

### ***Conclusion***

With a raft of approaches available, choosing an appropriate methodology when developing a research project is paramount. Moreover it is vital that researchers are cognizant with the chosen methodology's philosophical underpinnings. We believe that Heideggerian phenomenology is exceedingly valuable for informing nursing. Therefore throughout this paper we have selected and deciphered examples of the intricate expression as a way of unpacking Heidegger's thinking. Furthermore we have illustrated the applicability of these chosen concepts for nursing research, using our study as an exemplar. It is hoped that the greater

understanding gained from this paper will motivate researchers to consider the suitability of Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology for future research.

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