Hermeneutic Phenomenology as a Research Method in Social Work

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Abstract

Hermeneutic phenomenology has not been widely used as a research method in social work. The purpose of this article is to give a brief overview of this approach to research, and to discuss how the method was applied to a particular research project. First, the article discusses how the researcher oriented herself to the topic and gives a brief overview of the historical background of hermeneutic phenomenology. The next section discusses Gadamer’s three metaphors of understanding: the fusion of horizons, the act of dialogue and the hermeneutic circle. Examples from the research findings are used to illustrate how these concepts were applied. The article concludes with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the method. It is hoped that this article will encourage other researchers to consider hermeneutic phenomenology as a method in the generation of social work knowledge.

Introduction

As a branch of the human sciences, social work seeks to understand human beings from a holistic perspective, viewing them as complex, multifaceted beings embedded in a multi-layered network of relations. Because they can be more holistic in their focus, qualitative research methods have recently played an increasingly important role in social work research (Allen-Meares, 1995; Goldstein, 1994; Hartman, 1990; Hedrick, 1994; Heineman-Pieper, 1989; King, 1994), complementing knowledge generated by quantitative research studies. However, hermeneutic phenomenology, a type of qualitative research, has not been widely used as a research method in social work. The purpose of this article is to give a brief overview of hermeneutic phenomenology and discuss how the method was applied in a research project conducted by the writer (Wilcke, 2002). Extracts from the research study are presented in block paragraphs and participants’ words are shown in italics.

Rationale for the Study

The purpose of the research study was to examine the experience of a group of refugee women from the former Yugoslavia who had settled in a western Canadian city. Social workers in their role as providers of services frequently encounter immigrants and refugees in their work. Although women make up the majority of refugees worldwide and often provide the strengths that keep refugee families together (Birman & Trickett, 2001; Williams, 1990), their experiences and needs have been largely ignored and there are still few studies that focus specifically on the lives of women refugees. Women from the former Yugoslavia were a recent group of refugees to come to Canada and the research project sought to expand our understanding of this population.
Participants
Research participants consisted of ten women refugees from the former Yugoslavia selected through a snowball-sampling method. Criteria stipulated that respondents had to be female, 18 years of age or older, and had come to Canada as refugees as a result of the 1991-1995 civil war in the former Yugoslavia. Since the first six months in a new country are the period of greatest upheaval (Ritsner & Ponizovsky, 1999; Williams and Westermeyer, 1986) only women who had been resident for longer than six months were selected. No interpreter was used, therefore women who could not speak English had to be excluded. The final sample consisted of ten women, ranging in ages from 30 to 45. All participants were married, except one who was widowed; all, except one, had children living with them; and all, except one, had university degrees. Since only women of Serbian and Croatian origin agreed to be interviewed, the study did not include women of Muslim descent.

Steps in the Research Process
Orienting to the Phenomena
The first step required in hermeneutic phenomenology is to orient oneself to the phenomena (Van Manen, 1990/1994). To orient oneself implies to find one’s way, get one’s bearings, from the Old English beran: to carry, to give birth to (Hoad 1986/1996). Hermeneutic phenomenology is not simply a research method, but a stance, a way of being in the world, a willingness to undergo a process so that “what is” may emerge and show itself (Gadamer, 1997). As part of undertaking a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, the researcher needs to have some understanding of the philosophical thinking on which the approach is based.

Historical Background
The approach the researcher used was based on the method of Hans-Georg Gadamer (b. 1900), who himself was strongly influenced by the work of Husserl and Heidegger.

Husserl
The term phenomenology derives from the Greek phainomenon, whose root words are phainein: appear; and logia: science or study; therefore the study of appearances (Hoad, 1986/1996). Developed as a philosophy by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenology is a “reasoned inquiry into the world of appearances, that is, anything of which one is conscious” (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990, p. 3). The goal is to study experience as it occurs in consciousness, in an attempt to glimpse the phenomenon in its immediacy as it is experienced, before the phenomenon has been overlaid with explanations as to causes or origins. To study the experience of phenomena as they appear in consciousness and in so doing apprehend their authentic reality, phenomenologists turn their attention to the life-world of the individual, the world of everyday lived experience (Munhall, 1994). In the attempt to grasp the essence or core structure of experience, that is, naked experience free of extraneous details, Husserl proposed the researcher engage in a process of “phenomenological reduction” in which all beliefs, assumptions and pre-conceived notions regarding the phenomena to be studied are identified, made explicit, and then set aside or “bracketed” (Beck, 1994). The researcher takes nothing for granted, is aware of preconceptions and sets them aside, and seeks to adopt an attitude of “wonder in the face of the world” (Fink, quoted by Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p. xiii). Subjects’ descriptions of the experience are the raw data upon which the researcher reflects in order to discover the nature of the phenomena, intuit their essence or underlying structure, and describe them (Parse, Coyne & Smith, 1985; Spiegelberg, 1982).

Descriptive phenomenology, therefore, emphasizes knowledge of the world and examines experience with the goal of revealing consciousness. Phenomena are assumed to have a core essence which can be intuited through making assumptions explicit and then bracketing them, so as to study the phenomena objectively. Findings are then offered through explicit descriptions.

Heidegger’s Influence
Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Husserl’s student, introduced hermeneutics into the study of phenomena, since he believed that pure description was limited in its ability to reveal meaning (Osborne, 1994). The word “hermeneutics” has its origins in the Greek hermeneuein: to interpret (Hoad, 1986/1996), and derives from the Greek god Hermes, the messenger of the gods, who made the unknowable knowable through the invention of language and writing (Thompson, 1990). Originally, the term “hermeneutics” referred to the study and interpretation of biblical texts, but as a result of the contributions of various philosophers, including Heidegger and Gadamer, the term is now defined as “the theory and practice of interpretation and understanding (Verstehen) in different kinds of human contexts” (Odman, 1988, p. 63; italics in the original).

Phenomenology focuses on knowledge of the world, the intuiting of essences and description of phenomena. Heidegger rejected the notion of the dichotomy of subject and object implicit in Husserl’s philosophy, where the researcher as subject clears her mind of preconceptions in order to study the objects of consciousness. He also rejected the notion of essences, and the emphasis on knowing. He argued that we live our life by experiencing it, not by knowing it (Thompson, 1990) and that rather than coalescing into essences, human existence is each one’s own, although one can still give a diagnosis of human existence in general (Spiegelberg, 1982).

Heidegger (1962) conceived of existence, that is Dasein or being-in-the-world, as taking place in a world that is already given and which we take for granted. Many of the elements that shape our being-in-the-world are hidden and require interpretation for existence to be understood; therefore Heidegger’s concern was to uncover these hidden phenomena of our lives as well as their meanings (Spiegelberg, 1982). Rather than the phenomenal reduction and “bracketing,” Heidegger emphasized the importance of our preconceptions. He posited that we experience and understand the world by means of projection, and that “an interpretation is never a pre-suppositionless apprehending of something presented us” (p. 191). Our interpretation consist of structures of pre-understanding, that is, a “framework of already interpreted relations” (Odman, 1988, p. 66), which anticipates the future and encompasses the person’s past and current situation. Understanding and experience are thus inextricably linked.

Hermeneutic phenomenology therefore differs from descriptive phenomenology in significant ways. Descriptive phenomenology emphasizes knowledge of the world through the study of consciousness; it assumes that phenomena have an essential essence which can be intuited through the process of “bracketing” that allows the phenomena to be studied objectively. Findings are offered through explicit descriptions. Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to go beyond description in order to discover meanings that are not immediately apparent (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). Rather than bracketing our assumptions, Heidegger maintains that our preconceptions are an integral part of the process of understanding and that each individual’s experience is unique, although generalizations about the human condition are possible. Hermeneutic phenomenology therefore appropriates elements of descriptive phenomenology, modifies them and incorporates them with the hermeneutic process of understanding.

Gadamer and the Metaphors of Understanding

Building on the work of Husserl and Heidegger, as well as other phenomenologists, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1997) developed his own approach to the process of understanding. He stressed the importance of language in shaping both our experience and our interpretations. One manner in which the researcher incorporated the importance of language in the research study was by paying attention to words used in the process of writing the text, examining their origins and permutations in order to explore underlying meanings that might illuminate understanding:

Refugees are exiles, condemned to wander from their homes. The term exile has a variety of connotations: forced removal from one’s home, absence, banishment, punishment, homelessness (Davies, 1969/1976), all words denoting an inflicted uprooting, separation, pain, suffering, dislocation, journeying. An exile is one who is condemned to wander from her home. And what is meant by the word “home?” Home, from the Old English ham: a collection of dwellings (Davies) is first of all a physical space, the building in which one lives; it is also a larger space, the environment where one is born and lives with one’s family within a surrounding community. In addition, it is an emotional space, a space of ease, comfort and familiarity to which we are attached. Home is the vital center of our lives, just as the heart is a vital center of our living body, the innermost core of our being. We talk about the “heart of the matter,” we say “the thrust went home” (Pollard & Liebeck, 1979/1994), both phrases referring to a central core of truth, of being. Heart and home sustain our being. We all grow and leave our past behind us, but for exiles the past is in truth another country.
In addition to stressing the importance of language, Gadamer conceptualized the hermeneutic experience of understanding as being characterized by three metaphors: the fusion of horizons, the act of dialogue and the hermeneutic circle (Thompson, 1990).

The Fusion of Horizons

The "fusion of horizons," refers to a facet of the process of understanding (Gadamer, 1997). Every person's horizon consists of a range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point (p.302), and can be understood to refer to our frame of reference, based on our experiences and current situation, with which we orient ourselves in the world. The limits of anyone's particular horizon are not fixed but expand as our range of vision expands, as we deepen our understanding. The term "fusion of horizons" refers to the encounter between the researcher and the topic of inquiry, in which two standpoints come together, and "we genuinely let the standpoint of another speak to us, and in such a way that we are willing to be influenced by the perspective of another" (Thompson, 1990, p. 246).

In orienting to the phenomena, the researcher explored the participants’ and her own historical and cultural horizons, in order to make these explicit. Since I do not speak Serb-Croatian, I tried to gain an understanding of Yugoslav history and culture by reading historical, political and biographical accounts (Bennet, 1995/98; Boyce, 1997; Drakulic, 1993; Drakulic 1996/1999; Glenny, 1992/1994; Judah, 1997; Kumar, 1997; Lalic, 1981; Selimovic, 1983; Simic, 1992; Sudetic, 1998/1999; Ugresic, 1995), viewing films (Granada Television, 1993) and collecting anecdotes on refugees from the former Yugoslavia. In this way, I attempted to formulate some understanding of the historical and cultural factors that had shaped participants' lives.

Hermeneutic phenomenology asserts that all research is value-laden, since researchers bring their biases, prejudices and assumptions to the research, and these color the findings (Heineman, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Taylor, 1987). Gadamer (1997) refers to the elements of prejudice and fore-meanings as the means by which we orient ourselves to a topic and states: "The important things is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings" (p. 269). I therefore had to analyze my personal orientation and examine what had brought me to the topic, what influenced my stance. I am a white, middle-class, immigrant woman and although my experiences did not compare to those of people who had been subjected to the horrors of war, they did give me a means with which to begin to orient myself to the topic. I lived in South Africa during the years of apartheid, so that I had experience of facing the brutality of which people of my own nationality were capable, as well as the discrimination that resulted from my parents' mixed (English/Afrikaans) marriage. My experiences adjusting to a new country as an immigrant gave me some understanding of the process of cultural adjustment, and my international background stimulated an interest in international politics and an appreciation for different cultures. As a woman, I was interested in the experiences of other women, and when war erupted in the former Yugoslavia, I wanted to know more about the women who were experiencing war and dislocation.

As mentioned, the "fusion of horizons" refers to the process by which the standpoint of the other speaks to us and we allow ourselves to be influenced by what we learn, which implies putting forth our projections and then reexamining them in the light of what we have learnt. The purpose of my research was to learn more about the experience of being a woman refugee from the former Yugoslavia. In order to render findings manageable, of necessity, research has to focus on a particular aspect of human experience and neglect others. But human experience is more complex and multifaceted than any one study of it, and research on refugees has been justly criticized for labeling people (Meucke, 1992). Although I was aware of this and thought that I subscribed to the notion that people were more than the categories we impose on them, it was still a surprise, and a salutary one for me, to be reminded by one of the interviewees that her status as a refugee was not the defining characteristic of her identity. In reply to the question what had changed her the most, the participant said: to get baby, that really changed me. Her life had gone on, and in her own estimation, the shaping influence of her life was not her refugee past, but the present, the experience of giving birth and of mothering a child. All other experiences paled before this one. A continued involvement in life, a focus on the daily changes that time brings, and a refusal to let the past define the present were therefore sources of strength. I felt caught up short, and was forced to rethink my attitude, my unconscious assumption that the refugee experience, because it was my focus of interest and therefore at the forefront of my thinking, was the major influence in participants lives. "All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought, and it must direct its gaze 'on the things themselves'" (Gadamer, 1997, p. 266). The interchange challenged my assumptions and broadened my understanding of what it means to be a woman refugee: it means to be a woman, part of whose experiences is that of being a refugee.
The Act of Dialogue
Gadamer (1997) further proposes that the fusion of horizons occurs through the act of dialogue, in which we engage in a genuine conversation based on the Socratic-Platonic art of dialectic, "i.e. the art of questioning and of seeking truth" (p. 367). The questioner maintains a stance of openness to the topic, and seeks to formulate questions in such a way that the topic is "broken open" and something is allowed to emerge, that is "the truth that the topic reveals" (p. 363). The aim is not to understand individual people, but to understand that about which they speak.

The Interview Process
Individual interviews were conducted with each respondent and lasted from one-and-a-half hours to three hours, depending on the amount of information the interviewee wished to share. Ten interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by the researcher. A second interview was then conducted with each participant, either face-to-face or over the telephone, to clarify any unclear statements and to make sure I had understood their meaning correctly. This second set of interviews was taped if conducted in person, or written up immediately following the telephone conversation, and then transcribed in the same manner as the first tapes.

Entering into Dialogue
How to approach the topic? Hermeneutic phenomenological research involves entering into a dialogue while maintain a stance of openness. To achieve this end, individual open-ended conversations were held with each participant to explore their experiences. The question guiding this research was "what is the experience of a woman refugee from the former Yugoslavia?" During conversations other more specific questions emerged: What was life like for you before the war? What were your experiences during the war? How did you come to Canada? What is life like for you now? What helped you survive the experience? How has the experience changed you? The questions were guideposts only, and questions changed depending on the information that emerged out of the conversation. As I moved from one interview to another, questions were added based on previous conversations: women's experience of the Canadian health care system during childbirth; the effect of immigration on family life; homesickness; and sources of inner strength. During the second interviews questions were more specifically about statements respondents had made whose meaning was not clear.

The Hermeneutic Circle
The hermeneutic circle of understanding refers to a circular movement, an ever expanding circle of understanding and interpretation (Gadamer, 1997). We approach a topic with some pre-conceptions, or projection, and this projection is then examined and revised in the face of what "the things themselves" reveal to us (p. 267), and we return to a further exploration in the light of this new understanding. In addition, the topic is understood by viewing "the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole" (p. 291). This dynamic movement of understanding from projection to topic to new projection, and from whole to part to whole, constitutes the hermeneutic circle of understanding and interpretation.

The goal of hermeneutic phenomenology, is to "reveal a totality of meaning in all its relations" (Gadamer, 1997, p. 471) through a process of interpretation which involves making manifest that which is hidden by going "beyond what is directly given" (Spiegelberg, 1982, p. 712), reading between the lines (Odman, 1988) and paying attention to what has been omitted, to the silences and the assumptions, to that which has been so taken for granted that it has not been questioned. Hermeneutic phenomenology thus seeks a deeper understanding of human experience by rediscovering it and opening it up (Bergum 1997).

The Cycle of Interpretation
Initially, the researcher transcribed the tapes of the conversations and then transcriptions were checked and rechecked against the tapes, in order to make sure that the transcripts accurately recorded the conversation. Through the process of transcribing the tapes of the conversations, the experiences described were transposed to written text. The transcripts were then examined and divided into statements, a process that Creswell (1998) calls “horizontalization” (p. 55). These statements were then organized into clusters of meaning, or essential themes using a cut-and-paste method.

As I moved between the description of participants’ experiences and my own reactions and interpretations of these experiences, the information seemed to fall naturally into a linear progression, mirroring the journey participants had experienced. Two main themes emerged: first, life in the former Yugoslavia before, during and after the war; and second, the refugee journey to Canada and adapting to a new society. Through a process of writing, reflecting and rewriting, themes were explored and refined. Women’s experiences of life in Yugoslavia before the outbreak of war were organized under the theme: “Yugoslavia Before the War: Living a Beautiful Life.” Subthemes included “Family Ties” and “Friends and Neighbors,” which described experiences of relationship with family and community; “Life under Communism” described the social and economic realities of their former lives. Other subthemes included “Education,” “European Lifestyle,” “Nationality and Religion” and “Being Rooted.”

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the task of the writer is to stimulate and hold the thought of the reader in a productive movement (Gadamer, 1997, p. 393), therefore great care was taken with the writing to make it clear and evocative. Direct quotes from participants were used to illuminate points and the etymology of words was examined for the added insight this might offer in elucidating the themes. For example, the theme “Rumblings: The Approach of War” contained the following interpretation:

Civil war attacks the very foundations upon which a society is based: society’s cohesion is disrupted, as is civil life. The term civil comes from the Latin: civis - citizen, a person with rights in a society; it is also the root word of the words civility: politeness; civilised: cultured, refined; civilisation: a developed state as opposed to a savage state (Hoad, 1986/1996). The term war is from the Old High German: werra: confusion, discord, strife. War brings conflict; it also represents a return to a primitive, savage state. In the face of savagery, civil life, in all its above-mentioned permutations, disintegrates. It is difficult and painful to admit that the stability of society is based on a fragile and easily disrupted foundation. War challenges the beliefs on which our lives are based. The sense of disbelief, of the inconceivability of war between people who lived together, was echoed again and again:

I couldn’t believe that war would come;
It was unbelievable;
Nobody could believe that it would be war;
Nobody thought that something like that would happen, because we were in 21st century and it was crazy idea;
We didn’t believe in war, we didn’t believe it would happen: who will make aggression and who will fight and on which side we have to run? And from whom? It was very confused for me.

In addition to organising the text into themes, close attention was paid to statements that rang true, that were haunting or that showed the phenomena in a new way: One description evoked a strong reaction from me and persisted in troubling me as I sought to understand its import. A young woman recounted leaving her home in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina because all the roads to the town were closed except one and she was worried that her family might be without electricity or without milk, so she decided to spend a few days with her mother-in-law. She stepped out of her house carrying her infant son, a bag of diapers, and an umbrella because it was a rainy day, expecting to return in a few days. She never saw her home again.

What is it about this image of a young mother setting out innocently, carrying her baby, and an umbrella for protection, that is so haunting? “Interpretative inquiry... begins by being ‘struck’ by something...and goes on to explore what understanding this instance makes possible” (Jardine, 1998, p. 40-41). What struck me was her innocence, her vulnerability, her complete lack of preparation or awareness of impending conflict, as well as the poignant inadequacy of an umbrella to protect her against the approaching storm of war. Around this figure coalesce various experiences: the unanticipated and incomprehensible event of war disrupting the fabric of life; the loss of home; the need to protect and provide for one’s children; and the loss of innocence that is about to occur as she steps out, naive, trusting and vulnerable. All participants shared these experiences in
one form or another. This image of the young mother, drawn from an individual, unique experience (a part), was therefore a means of entering into the whole. At the same time, participants’ descriptions of their experiences served to illuminate and give added significance to the part. Therefore a hermeneutic circle of interpretation, from the part to the whole and back to the part served to deepen the understanding that the particular instant made possible.

As part of the work of hermeneutic interpretation, this image was used during the writing as a recurring theme that could keep elucidating the whole. In a section entitled “Home is Another Country” which explored the theme of loosing one’s home and becoming a refugee, the image was used to introduce the section:

When the young mother stepped outside clutching her baby and her umbrella, she fully expected to return home within a few days. But fighting broke out in her hometown, and suddenly she found herself a refugee: it happened just in two hours. The life she had known was gone:

It happened big changes ...maybe with people who don’t have experience like mine, very difficult to imagine how bad situation can be and how big difference from previous and new life was. It happened just in two hours. I remember that day; it was very terrible day for me.

Once the material had been shaped into a coherent whole, a final cycle of interpretation was undertaken in order to uncover further meaning and to allow a metaphorical interpretation of the subject to emerge. “Metaphor teases the mind into thinking something new by virtue of seeing a resemblance previously unnoticed and unthought” (Klemm, 1983, p. 96). The image of the young mother was again used to introduce the overarching metaphor of crossing thresholds:

As the war approached, a young woman left her home in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina. All the roads to the town were closed except one and she was worried that her family might be without electricity or without milk, so she decided to go and stay with her in-laws. She stepped out of her house carrying her infant son, a bag of diapers, and an umbrella because it was a rainy day, expecting to return in a few days. She never saw her home again.

The step that she takes over the threshold of her home is momentous, a step across the border between two worlds: the world of peace and war, the old life and the new: very difficult to imagine...how big difference from previous and new life was. Life in peacetime was rooted in a stable community, surrounded by friends and neighbors and expectations were that not much would change: I actually saw my future pretty clearly. This period is characterized by a state of innocence: we were spoiled children before war.

When the young mother steps across the threshold, she enters the liminal world between peace and war, between childlike innocence and the knowledge of atrocity and betrayal, between social order and social chaos, between a settled, secure life and the instability of refugee life, between rootedness and homelessness, between having an identity, I was Yugoslav, and a sense of alienation: I don’t feel I belong.

In their journey from their old home to a new one, refugees cross a series of thresholds: from peace to war; from home to homelessness; from stability to transience; from social order to social chaos; from belonging to alienation; from one country to another; from a familiar culture to a foreign one; and from one identity to another.

Conclusion
Hermeneutic phenomenology aims to elucidate lived experience and to reveal meaning through a process of understanding and interpretation. One of my reasons for choosing this method was that previous studies have been criticized for objectifying and pathologizing refugees, and ignoring the strengths of refugee women (Camus-Jacques, 1989; Muecke, 1992). The choice of the hermeneutic method allowed the experiences of the respondents to be presented in a direct and evocative manner, encouraging the reader to enter imaginatively into the experiences described. In so doing, the method provided a vehicle for deepening our understanding of refugee women as people living full and complex lives. The method also allowed for the researcher to reflect on the meaning of the experiences, thus providing an added dimension of understanding. This was accomplished through the use of metaphor, the examination of the etymology of words, and drawing connections between the part: the young women who stepped out of her home with her child and her umbrella; and the whole: the myriad images evoked by this incident, which coalesced into a variety of meanings embodying the whole experience of becoming a refugee.

The method also allowed for the examination of projections and reinterpretations, as when the researcher was
confronted with her own unacknowledged assumption that being a refugee was respondents’ defining experience. The open-ended and exploratory nature of the method also allowed the uncovering of participant’s own interpretations of their experiences, in which it emerged that they saw themselves as women whose lives had been shaped by, but not limited to, their refugee experience. They experienced themselves as people, not as refugees.

The limitations of this method are that it focuses on experiences that are unique to the individuals and to their setting: the former Yugoslavia and a western Canadian city. Findings can therefore not be generalized to a larger population, nor can findings be used as the basis for theoretical constructs of for policy decisions.

However, while keeping these limitations in mind, the study presented findings that deepened our understanding of certain aspects of the refugee experience, and suggested directions for furthering social work knowledge, education and practice. The study made explicit the danger of objectifying and categorizing people for the purpose of research, and reminded us that peoples’ lives are richer and more complex than the categories we may impose on them.

In conclusion, I hope that the above discussion will encourage other social work researchers to adopt a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, in their efforts to deepen our understanding of the fascinating and complex topic that is human experience.

References


