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Author biography

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'Shared intelligibility' and two reflexive strategies as methods of supporting 'responsible decisions' in a hermeneutic phenomenological study

Abstract

Hermeneutic phenomenologists propose that researchers inescapably bring themselves into their research because interpretation must inevitably be influenced by their contexts and pre-understandings. They propose that interpretation is a dynamic and active part of the construction of a text's meaning, and involvement in this construction process leads to deep empathic understanding of others' experience, reappraisal of accepted social and cultural systems, and a level of self-enlightenment. The strengths of the hermeneutic methodological approach have led to its use in a number of disciplines, however, there remains concerns about interpretative validity. It is widely acknowledged that in order to support rigour and validity in hermeneutic studies, researchers are required to develop and integrate strategies within the research process to promote awareness of the interplay between their pre-understandings and interpretation. This paper discusses how episodic interviewing which capitalises on 'shared intelligibility', and the reflexive strategies of 'oppositional arrangement of perspectives' and 'backgrounding' were used to shed light on data from a study of the experiences and views of nursing home nurses regarding their occupational role and status, and work identity.

Key words

'Shared intelligibility' and two reflexive strategies as methods of supporting 'responsible decisions' in a hermeneutic phenomenological study

Introduction

Hermeneutic phenomenologists propose that researchers inescapably bring themselves into their research because understanding must inevitably be influenced by their contexts and their pre-understandings - defined as the assumptions, experiences, prior knowledge and attitudes, which a person brings to the perception and interpretation of any given phenomenon (McCabe & Holmes, 2009). Literary hermeneuticists, highlight that this is both a strength of the methodological approach, and a problem, by emphasizing that because of their contexts and pre-understandings, readers of literature play a dynamic and active role in the construction of a text's meaning, so that they come to understand it in a very personal way (Iser, 1978a;1978b; Barthes, 1981). Although involvement in this process can lead to deep empathic understanding of others' experience, reappraisal of accepted social and cultural systems, and a level of self-enlightenment, Barthes' (1981) comment declaring the 'death of the author' reminds us that the reader's role in text construction is so significant in hermeneutics, that understanding the author's meaning is greatly at risk.

The strengths of the hermeneutic methodological approach have led to its use in a number of disciplines including social science, theology, media studies, architecture and linguistic anthropology. However, there remains concerns about interpretative validity. According to the hermeneuticist Hirsch (1967), within the context of hermeneutic phenomenological research, valid interpretations are significances assigned by the interpreter but positioned within the system of typical probabilities and expectations, which the writer's meaning permits. It is widely acknowledged that in order to support rigour and validity in hermeneutic studies, researchers are required to develop and integrate strategies within the research

process to promote awareness of the interplay between their pre-understandings and interpretation (Finlay, 2002; Gough, 2003; Darawsheh, 2014). Such an awareness allows researchers to examine the influence of their pre-understandings in order that these can become valid interpretative tools, rather than predilections which direct interpretations.

There are a number of strategies proposed by literary hermeneutic phenomenologists that can be adapted to support validity and reflexivity. These include episodic interviewing which capitalises on 'shared intelligibility', and the reflexive strategies of 'oppositional arrangement of perspectives' and 'backgrounding'. By using these approaches, social research can benefit from the strengths of hermeneutics in promoting understanding, and reappraisal of social and cultural norms, while achieving interpretative validity.

This paper discusses how a hermeneutic methodological approach, using these interpretative validity strategies was used to shed light on data from study of the experiences and views of nursing home (NuH) nurses regarding their occupational role and status, and work identity.

Hermeneutics

Researchers choose their field of expertise for a number of reasons, but often choices are intertwined with personal and/or professional interests, values, beliefs and experiences. Topics are chosen because the historical and cultural contexts of their own lives throws particular phenomena into prominence. In my own case, experiences of working as a NuH nurse within the current English health and social care system were hugely influential in the choice of my research areas – developing knowledge and understanding of the health and social care workforce, and workforce development for health and social care professionals. This suggests then that the reasons why researchers embark on specific research projects are because they are interested in that topic. If we are interested in the research topic, how can we be disinterested in, or detached from, its unfolding? This question echoes the hermeneutic

phenomenological notion of 'intentionality' – the argument that being is actually synonymous with being-part-of-the-world: rather than impartial observers, our capacity to know is formed by, actively invests in, and takes meaning from, interaction with our environments (for example Heidegger, 1962; Gadamer, 1975; 1976). If to be is to be-part-of-the-world, then understanding arises from what we bring with us when we approach phenomena. Thus, understanding is driven, and restricted, by the contexts and pre-understandings from which we view phenomena. Contexts and pre-understandings are therefore interpretative tools through which we view phenomena.

Of course, research is not simply about understanding what it is to be in the world. It is also about critically considering that understanding, so that limitations, contradictions and conflicts in views can be understood. In other words, a critical reflection of being is necessary. Gadamerian hermeneutics in particular acknowledges this point. Gadamer (1975; 1976; 1980) proposes that understanding does not only arise from an awareness of where we stand in relation to the world, but by opening up to, and learning from the world via the process of dialogue with the phenomena of the world. Gadamer uses the term 'dialogue' to describe interaction with any phenomenon. Furthermore, he sees all phenomena which we wish to understand as texts, because no phenomenon, whether it is a work of art, a written piece, or other form of communication, is an expression of reality, but in different ways can be regarded as a claim of truth which requires interpretation. Regardless of whether texts are listened to, read or viewed, dialogue emanates from what we want to know and understand, not what is said. To take this metaphor concept further, in Gadamerian hermeneutics, 'listening', 'reading' and 'viewing' therefore become metaphors for interpretation.

Gadamer (1975) states that the nature and product of interpretation depends upon the questions we construct from within our current context and to which the text is used as an answer. He calls this interpretative process a 'fusion of horizons' Even when texts remain

fixed (for example, written pieces) readers' standpoints are different, so that the text is addressed differently at each reading. This results in numerous readings/fusions, each producing a different response. In effect, hermeneutic phenomenology appears to involve a shift away from the text towards the reader.

Literary hermeneuticists reconstruct Gadamer's (1975) 'fusion of horizons' idea, but more boldly affirm the power of the reader by highlighting the text-to-reader shift (for example, Ingarden, 1973; Iser, 1978a; 1978b, Barthes, 1981). For these theorists, reading is an active pursuit whereby readers generate understanding by drawing on their pre-understandings and tacit knowledge of the world, and relating these to the text. These pre-understandings and knowledge are affirmed or undermined as the process of reading proceeds. The text itself becomes little more than a series of cues or 'schemata' which readers integrate with their own historical or contextual pre-understandings to arrive at an understanding (Ingarden, 1973; Iser, 1978a). Iser (1978a) proposes that by reading from our own standpoint, we are both modifying the text, and being modified by it. Reading, for Iser (1978a), is an action that allows us to not only critically review the text, but also to re-appraise ourselves and the wider assumptions of our culture. Barthes (1974; 1981) refers to this receptive reading as 'writerly' reading because the readers' involvement in the generation of understanding implies that they are 'no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text' (Barthes, 1974, p.4).

For Iser (1978b) and Barthes (1981), readers' own versions of a text speak to (and of) them personally, so that reading becomes a process of self-knowing and self-enlightenment, and consequently can be a vehicle for change. In addition, seeing the 'self' within texts stimulates empathy, and understanding of the experiences of others, as well as enabling us to reappraise our own views and experiences of the world.

According to Iser (1978b), literary texts (novels, poetry, plays) particularly lend themselves to 'writerly' reading. Such texts maximize the interaction between episodic knowledge defined as specific episodes of experience expressed as narratives and stories (i.e. 'what happened?'), and semantic knowledge defined as readers' assumptions and theories that arise from their own knowledge and theory of the world in which the narrated episodes occurred (i.e. 'Why did the episode of experience happen?' 'What does the episode of experience mean?' 'Does knowing/reading about the episode of experience confirm or alter my assumptions/theories of the world?'). Iser (1978b) refers to this interplay between narration of specific episodes, and assumption and theory about their relevant contexts, as 'semantic potential'. For Iser (1978b), the maximisation of semantic potential which occurs in writerly texts may compel readers to question cultural philosophies, and disturb habitual views, so that new ways of understanding might be achieved. As such, in recent years, the potential for this approach has been recognized as going beyond the field of literature, most notably in theological studies about what influences often diverse interpretations of religious texts (for example, Parris, 2009) and media studies, particularly about the influence of audience contexts on film, theatre and media interpretations (for example, Hall, 2012; Lewis & Johnson, 2017). More recently, educationalists have facilitated students' awareness of this approach to enhance their critical thinking skills and reflexivity regarding the learning process (for example, Smyth, 2009). Even the field of architecture has acknowledged its possibilities in contributing to the debate about the relationship societies and individuals have with buildings and structures - for example, over time, or as part of the everyday landscape and everyday life (for example, Gough, 2013).

Although the language of these literary hermeneutic approaches are rarely used in hermeneutic social research, hermeneutic research's use of pre-understandings and contexts as tools through which to interpret phenomena are in effect, an act of writerly reading.

However, if research is to capitalise on the power of a writerly outcome, researchers need to devise appropriate and robust methods to achieve this without compromising validity. For example, if research is to reproduce a writerly outcome, then it must also exploit semantic potential by utilising both the participants' and the researcher's (i.e 'reader') semantic and episodic knowledge at the data collection, and data analysis and interpretation stages. A further significant challenge is addressing the difficulty that writerly reading is so reader focused that understanding could be compromised to too great a degree. Indeed, hermeneutic research is often accused of failing to consider interpretive validity, and the requirement for rigorous standards. From Betti (1962/1980, p.79), who criticizes the methodology because it 'enables a substantive agreement between the text and reader…to be formed without, however, guaranteeing the correctness of understanding', to a hermeneutic researcher I saw speaking at a recent conference who informed the audience 'I already knew what I would find', there is a risk that the methodology may fail to recognize the tension between bias and understanding.

However, there are a number of strategies that can be combined and adapted to address the methodological challenges of promoting semantic potential, and supporting interpretative validity. These include combining shared intelligibility and episodic interviewing, and the reflexive strategies of 'oppositional arrangement of perspectives' and 'backgrounding'. I argue that by using such strategies, hermeneutic research can support understanding and the modification of views of social and cultural norms, while a critical, in-depth and valid analysis of data can be achieved. In the next section, these approaches are discussed and used to illustrate how they supported interpretation of data from a study of the experiences and views of NuH nurses. Before this discussion commences, a brief summary of the study is presented.

Summary of the study

My research interest in NuH nursing arose from my experiences of working as a nurse in these settings in England, and from my studies of the influences of historical and socio-political factors on nursing practice in long term care. A combination of these experiences and knowledge led me to perceive a contradiction regarding NuH nursing in England. On one hand, I felt that nurses in this environment are required to develop complex and specialized skills that focus on managing multi-morbidities and maintaining quality of life for older people. However, on the other hand I felt that NuH nurses are not viewed as highly skilled professionals and are afforded low status. My experiences and feelings prompted me to undertake a study that explored the views and experiences of NuH nurses in England regarding their role and status. The study also aimed to generate understanding of how and why these experiences and views occur, and to explore whether emerging insights might inform workforce development processes.

The methodology utilized was hermeneutics, based upon the philosophies of Gadamer (1975; 1976; 1980) and Iser (1978a; 1978b). Thirteen nurses from seven NuHs in North East England were each interviewed using an interview method based on Flick's (2000; 2009) episodic interview technique that capitalized on 'shared intelligibility'. The data collection method involved interviewing each participant up to five times. Data analysis methods combined Van Manen's (1997a; 1997b; 2002) hermeneutic phenomenological research approach and techniques adapted from the approaches of Iser's reception theory (1978a). Each interview transcript initially underwent a holistic reading in order to determine an overall, global meaning of the text i.e. what the text is fundamentally about. An 'oppositional arrangement of perspectives' analysis method was utilized to enhance criticality and reflexivity during this analysis stage. The second stage of analysis involved coding phrases and sentences within the transcript, and included the 'backgrounding' method discussed below. This process served to confirm, modify or contest the original inferences generated

from the holistic reading. The third stage entailed a line-by-line examination of the text in order to identify possible sub-texts within participants' expressions and phrases. Such expressions themselves do not directly constitute meaning, but they can be indirect clues to underlying issues. According to Eagleton (2008), these expressions are identified as points of ambiguity, evasion, or overemphasis, or consist of words spoken with unusual frequency, or words that do not get spoken. Their interpretation arises from 'reading between the lines'. As Eagleton (2008) suggests, 'we are looking at what is silenced or suppressed, examining ways in which the text is not quite identical to itself' (p.179). Backgrounding was used during this stage, particularly to identify the significance of what was *not* being said (see 'backgrounding' example below for elucidation of this method).

After each interview had been subject to these three analysis stages, interview topic maps were generated - issues raised presented in a diagrammatic form in order to trace their sources, consequences and potential outcomes. These diagrams facilitated development of topics for discussion for participants' later interviews (in the sequences of five interviews). These interview topic maps were then assimilated into individual participant topic maps. The next stage of the data analysis process involved comparing all participant topic maps, and generating topic categories - each category encompassing the views and experiences of all the participants relating to the topic under consideration. While the categories demonstrated connections and consistencies between participants' responses, they were not interpreted within the context of what is already known about the experiences and views of participants. The final stage of analysis – the development of themes - considered the links between the categories and the wider social world. Thus, themes were different to categories in that categories reflected participants' actual experiences and views, whereas themes reflected concepts which exist within the experiences and views, but which transcend the experiences and views of the individual and relate to, and are recognized within, wider social contexts.

For example, in the participants' responses about: their discomfort regarding business and sales activities (discussed in the category 'business aspects of the NuH nurse role'); their responses concerning social and personal care for residents (discussed in the category 'nursing residents rather than nursing patients'), and their responses about feeling stigmatised (discussed in the category 'NuH nursing as a stigmatised role'), they discussed their experiences, perceptions and feelings. They did not refer to concepts of social identity constructs, 'knowledge-based status', or 'dirty work'. These concepts exist in the culture of academic sociology, and were introduced by the researcher after reflecting on participants' responses and exploring literature with the aim of identifying concepts that were congruent with the participants' views and experiences. During the theme construction process, three themes emerged: uncertainty about role identity; unpreparedness for the demands of the role; low occupational status.

Methodological strategies

Episodic interviews and shared intelligibility

Flick's (2000; 2009) episodic interview technique stimulates the semantic potential necessary for a writerly outcome. The basis of the episodic interview is the supposition that participants' experiences are related via narratives that involve utilising both episodic and semantic knowledge. During episodic interviews, the reader both asks the participant to narrate specific episodes, and prompts generalized dialogue between reader and participant based on assumptive knowledge and views. This combination of episodic and semantic knowledge generates data that springs from a wider range of experience than life events only, so that participants' responses are located in general, as well as concrete experiential contexts. Flick summarizes thus:

> The episodic interview facilitates the presentation of experiences in a
> general, comparative form and at the same time it ensures that those
> situations and episodes are told in their specificity. Therefore, it includes a
> combination of narratives oriented to situational or episodic contexts and
> argumentation that peel off such contexts in favour of conceptual and rule-
> oriented knowledge (Flick, 2009, p.186).

The similarities between Flick's (2000; 2009) interview method the use of semantic potential are clear. In both techniques, semantic knowledge emerges from narrative episodes, but simultaneously, semantic knowledge frees narratives from the burden of 'wholeness'. The obvious benefit of this is that it helps the data to retain its focus on the topic in hand, without being diverted or engulfed by less relevant minutiae. Instead, semantic knowledge initiates, and 'triggers' phenomena-related new narrative episodes. This trigger effect between narrative and semantic utterances influences the reader's response in the same way. The semantic knowledge that emerges from respondents' narratives reminds us our own narratives (episodes that we have experienced) and these in turn lead us to develop our own understanding of the text that supports understanding of semantic assumptions even further.

However, prompting reader/researchers to utilize their own narratives and semantic assumptions to aid interpretation is problematic. Like Betti (1962/1980), Derrida's (2005) criticism of hermeneutics proposes there is always a chance that, in spite of our best efforts, we are unable to understand aspects of the other's meaning, or that understanding will be distorted, constrained, or thrust off track by our pre-understandings, or indeed, we will misunderstand altogether. This is something that Eagleton (2008) has termed 'hermeneutical anarchy' - dissolution of the text due to too contentious readings. However, Derrida acknowledges that the instability of interpretation does not necessarily render it unrepresentative of meaning. This is because meaning and understanding arise and are held

sufficiently in place by wider social contexts and practices. For Derrida (1982; 2001), the possibility of misunderstanding is best mitigated against by thought and reflexivity, whereby understanding is achieved by a process of negotiation in which alternative interpretations are weighed up and evaluated. This does not ever reach a single 'right' interpretation, but it does by degrees constrain interpretations from heading too far off track and becoming invalid. Derrida (2001, p.62) terms this process 'responsible decision-making' with regard to interpretation, although he leaves it to others, most notably Fish (1980) to explain how this evaluation process is actioned.

Fish (1980) suggests that the distinctive characteristics of readers that emerge from the cultural environments in which texts are placed, influences reading. Because readers are familiar with these cultural environments, they can utilize 'shared intelligibility' (Fish, 1980, p.320) which they have in common with other individuals within their environments, to facilitate and validate their interpretations. Fish is not denying the multifarious nature of reader interpretation due to the multifarious nature of readers' experiences and pre-understandings, but he is suggesting that readers' approaches to interpretation can be influenced, or constrained, by the conventions of the 'systems of intelligibility' (Fish, 1980, p.320) of their readership. These conventions limit reader responses and protect against wide and unreasonable deviations. Zerweck (2001) and Nunning (2005) have adapted this concept for use in checking the reliability of narrators in fictional literature – defined in this instance as consistency between what the narrator tells us, and accepted systems of shared intelligibility, for example, shared historical and cultural knowledge, social norms and moral values. Where ambiguities and inconsistencies exist, then further investigation is required about this apparent unreliability.

Using these strategies in my study supported valid understanding by enhancing semantic potential, and offering protection against hermeneutical anarchy. This is demonstrated in an

extract from Participant 6:1's (P6:1) second interview. During the interview, I asked P6:1 about her views regarding other healthcare professionals' attitudes towards NuH nurses, and what experiences had led her to hold these views (episodic experiences are presented in non-italics, and semantic assumptions are presented in italics):

> **P6:1** There's many people in the team that come in with a self-righteous approach, a judgemental approach on the nursing aspect, but we don't get the tools to do it properly. *You know I think it's very much them saying, 'Well what's the point of investigating because whatever the outcome's going to be, what are we going to do? We're not going to act upon it, so don't investigate'.* So sometimes you're nursing them blind in this area, you know. *But definitely not, I don't think there's much money invested in the elderly. And I think it's really wrong. They're a part of society still, and they've worked hard.*

Here, the narrative elements elucidate possible meanings more effectively than methods aimed at exploring semantic knowledge only. However simultaneously, the semantic elements lessen what Flick (2009, p.190) calls the 'one-sidedness' and 'artificiality' of the narrative. In effect, a level of triangulation is accomplished because two approaches to data collection are utilized i.e. gathering episodic narratives *and* gathering semantic assumptions and theories about the world. Whether the narrative is a mirror of the actual occurrence described is not critical, because the purpose of the episodic interview i.e. to initiate and illustrate the semantic ideas from narratives via 'triggering' is successful. These ideas then trigger more narratives as the participant is reminded of other episodes which exemplify the concepts further. This 'trigger' effect between narrative and semantic phrases influences my response in the same way. In this case, the semantic knowledge that emerged from P6:1's narratives reminded me (the reader) of my own narratives (episodes of apparent ageism

within health and social care that I have witnessed during my career as a NuH nurse) and these in turn led me to generate understanding by 'producing' my own text.

'Shared intelligibility' enhanced this process. In the study, the use of 'shared intelligibility' to check reliability and guard against hermeneutical anarchy involved capitalizing on shared contexts that arise from both my and participants' pre-understandings and experiences of working within the NuH nursing community of practice. Also, my knowledge and experiences of the influences of historical and socio-political factors on practice supported my understanding of the participants' work situations and experiences, again in this case regarding ageism within health and social care (figure 1).
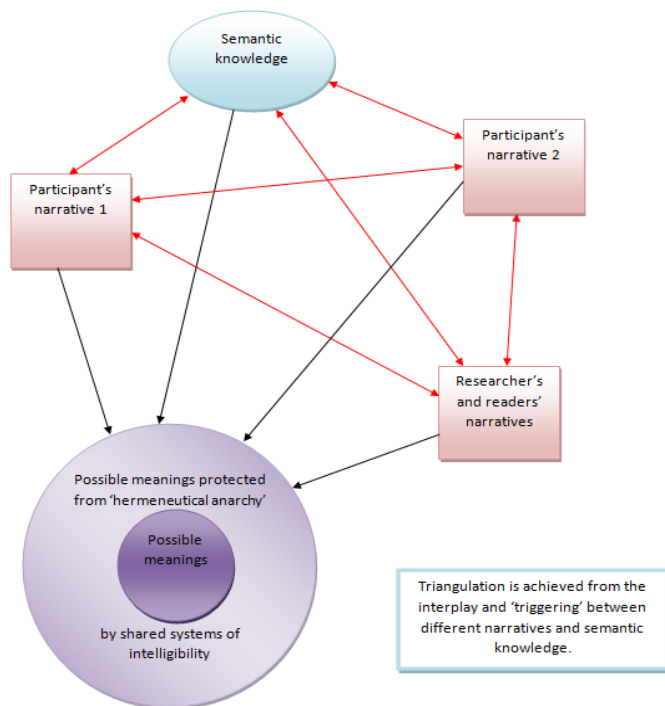

Figure 1: Interpretation and triangulation of data

The use of multiple interviews was also helpful. During the final interviews, I verbally summarized the main aspects of previous interviews with individual participants and invited the participant to comment. Participants, by now used to engaging in episodic interview

dialogue, were able to respond accordingly. Sometimes, they responded with a semantic statement:

> Researcher: You mentioned that residents and families, when they first come in, are often very suspicious, and that's something you've got to work on, to build up that trusting relationship.
>
> **P2.3:** *And you don't want - as with all things - one negative incident can out shadow all the nice things that are done.*

Participants also used further narrative episodes as responses:

> Researcher: Researcher – We talked about the fact that this is a business as well as it being a unit for healthcare. And you said that when you're showing people around, because you are selling them a home in some sense, it's uncomfortable. You're always careful to be very honest about things.
>
> **P5.2:** Definitely. Erm, because I've had a bad experience in the past with that. Where a previous manager was showing someone round and promising them all this.

The 'shared intelligibility' between the researcher and participant regarding the interview and research field contexts functioned as a credibility check of my interpretation. Also, further triangulation of data occurred when my interpretation triggered, and was validated by, new participant semantic and narrative responses (figure 2 – an extension of figure 1).
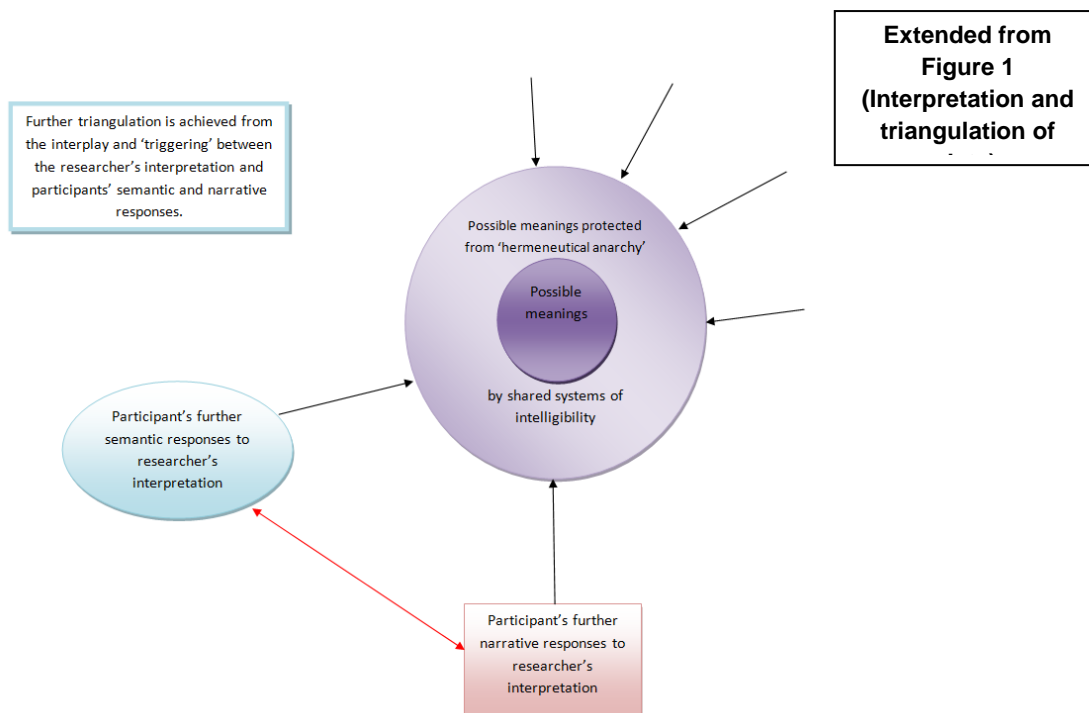
Further triangulation is achieved from the interplay and 'triggering' between the researcher's interpretation and participants' semantic and narrative responses.

Extended from Figure 1 (Interpretation and triangulation of

Possible meanings protected from 'hermeneutical anarchy'

Possible meanings

by shared systems of intelligibility

Participant's further semantic responses to researcher's interpretation

Participant's further narrative responses to researcher's interpretation

Figure 2: Final interview: triangulation and validation of data

Although participants and researchers may share intelligibility regarding social norms and contexts, thus narrowing the range of potential interpretations, the use of these approaches on their own remains problematic. There remains a risk that researchers may nevertheless allow their own existing knowledge and personal experiences that occurred within social norms and contexts, to influence their interpretations. Iser (1978a) explains:

> Unfamiliar experience contains elements which at any one moment must
>
> be partially inaccessible to us. For this reason [we are] guided by those
>
> parts of the experience that still seem familiar. They will influence the
>
> gestalt we form (p.126).

There is also a risk that social norms and contexts may be allowed to influence researchers unchallenged if researchers are immersed in these norms and contexts, and take their apparent authenticity for granted. These risks can be mitigated by reflexive processes. Reflexivity was achieved during the research process of this study by applying Iser's (1978a) 'oppositional arrangement of perspectives' and 'backgrounding' approaches.

Oppositional arrangement of perspectives

According to Iser (1978a), in order to promote reflexivity, individuals are required to become aware of the range of perspectives that are at work within an established frame of social norms. Having acknowledged that a range of perspectives exists, individuals can arrange each perspective in opposition to the others with the aim of exposing the deficiencies of each. Iser (1978a) calls this process the 'reciprocal negation of perspectives' (1978a, p.101), and argues that, by undertaking this process, individuals can begin to understand, and reflect upon, how social norms and experiences may have manipulated their own perceptions, and thus they become able to modify their perceptions. Simultaneously, the traditional norm is modified by individuals because an awareness of different perspectives allows individuals a transcendental viewpoint from which all negated positions can be evaluated. Although not widely referred to in hermeneutic phenomenological research method in social sciences, Iser's oppositional arrangement of perspectives is commonly used in other disciplines such as literature, literary criticism, film and media studies, and linguistic anthropology. On a simplistic level, the process can be illustrated by referring to the social novels of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty first centuries (for example, Dickens, Hardy, Lawrence, Welsh). Here, the unique stories of characters living within a social context are presented – a social context of which readers are a part, or at least are familiar with. However, by becoming intimate with the characters, readers are able to stand them in opposition to the very social context in which they are placed. This enables readers to understand and empathize with some characters' particular predicaments, despite their, at times apparently anti-social, or sinful behaviour; and simultaneously be critical of behaviours of other characters who are presented as stalwarts of society. In addition, readers are also able to view the social context in a new light, challenging the social system/context that governs the world. Similarly, oppositional arrangement of perspectives is used in film-making and media criticism to

explore the complexity of context-based spectator interaction with media, and how and why some media provoke oppositional viewing i.e. audience reception that opposes ideologies of worlds portrayed in films, or by media institutions (Hall, 2012) In terms of linguistic anthropology, there is a substantial body of work (for example, Ochs & Capps, 2001) that has drawn inspiration from literary hermeneuticists such as Iser. By setting data, narrative, and setting perspectives in opposition, this work demonstrates consciousness of the social constructedness of anthropological texts and how they can be influenced, biased or even conditioned by the social, political and academic environments in which they are generated.

This transcendental view, which enables consciousness of potentially biasing contexts can be a valuable reflexive strategy in hermeneutical social research. In this study, the oppositional arrangement of perspectives technique was utilized during stage 1 (holistic reading stage) of the data analysis process in order to mitigate the risk that my pre-understandings concerning the traditional norm that states NuH nurses are perceived as less skilled than acute care nurses would lead to bias in interpretation. The following extract from the study is used to elucidate the oppositional arrangement of perspectives technique further:

> **P1:3** I think she [mother who is a nurse working in a local hospital]
> wanted me to get the experience of working in a hospital on a busy ward,
> because with me being newly qualified, I think she thought I would get
> more, I would you know, develop skills and things that I wouldn't here
> specifically.
>
> **Researcher** Do you think that's been the case?
>
> **P1:3** I think when you're working upstairs in the [National Health
> Service (NHS) intermediate care unit], you still get to sort of develop
> your skills with things like you know, the ward rounds and the MDT
> [multi-disciplinary team], you do quite a lot of involvement which is

similar to the hospital. But then again you don't get to practise things like IVs, and cannulation and things, which is what I've missed out on.

Researcher So do you consider those things as missing out?

P1:3 I think so, yeah, because a lot of the people I qualified with, when I meet up with them, they're telling me what things they've learned, and I have learned things, but completely different things. Mine's all based around managerial, and the running of a business and a home, where theirs are all practical things like setting up IVs [intravenous infusions] and drips, and er, just a lot more acute things. I think they, I think it's something, not showing off, but a bit like, 'Oh this is what I can do, you know this is what I've learned', and I think people do think yeah, that is more important.

The text illustrates the ebb and flow of semantic and episodic data that centres around the topic regarding development and practice of clinical skills. In this extract, P1:3 suggests she has missed out on opportunities to develop practical clinical skills. She acknowledges that she has other skills, but she feels that practical clinical skills associated with acute care are viewed as more important skills to acquire and practise. At first sight, this appears to coincide with literature that suggests nurses working in NuHs and long-term care settings are perceived to be less skilled practitioners because their work is viewed as less clinical and less technical (for example, Neville, Dickie, & Goetz, 2014). Personal views and experiences, and familiarity with this literature may support interpretation to some degree in that it creates a context of 'shared intelligibility' which narrows the risk of misunderstanding. From my initial holistic reading, influenced by my experiences and knowledge of existing literature, I arrived at an early understanding of the text which was *'nursing home nurses are perceived as less skilled practitioners'*.

However, familiarity, norms, contexts or pre-understandings may manipulate our perceptions leading to a risk of bias in interpretation. Iser's (1978a) 'oppositional arrangement of perspectives' can be used to mitigate against this risk. Consider again the extract above. First of all, it is necessary to untangle the text so that the different perspectives are clearly delineated:

- *P1:3's perspective* – P1:3 has some skills but she has missed out on opportunities to develop and practise clinical skills, which social norms dictate are superior skills. This confirms the perception that NuHs nurses are less skilled than acute care nurses.

- *P1:3's perception of acute care nurses' perspective* (represented by P1:3's mother and friends) – Practical clinical skills are more important nursing skills. NuH settings are not conducive to skill development. This also confirms the perception that NuHs nurses are less skilled than acute care nurses.

Viewed as single perspectives, both confirm that NuH nurses are perceived as less skilled than other nurses. However, when perspectives are set in opposition, and attention is switched from one to another, the standpoint of each perspective highlights the shortcomings of the others. During this process, the 'reciprocal negation of perspectives', perspectives undermine each other thus:

- *P1:3's perspective* – NuH nurses do have skills, but these are different skills to those of acute care nurses.

- *P1:3's perception of acute care nurses' perspective* – Acute care nurses hold hierarchical, prejudiced attitudes about NuH nurses. Alternatively, P1:3 may have misinterpreted or overgeneralized the acute care nurses' perspective because she may have a negative view of acute care nurses, or because she is intensely conscious of the negative perception of NuH nurses.

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The consequence of this 'reciprocal negation of perspectives' is that the traditional norm is modified by readers because they have a transcendental viewpoint from which all negated positions can be seen. Thus, for example, the extract may no longer be about the perception that NuH nurses as less clinically skilled, but about understanding that they do have skills, but these skills may not be recognized or accepted as 'clinical skills'. This modified interpretation (my modification of the text) led me to question the social norm in terms of what constitutes nursing skills (my views were simultaneously modified by the text). If clinical, technical skills are valued more highly than other skills, what are the implications of this for nurses as supposedly holistic practitioners? Also, because the oppositional arrangement of perspectives allows reciprocal negation, the social norm can be revealed as a potential stigmatizing, prejudicial force.

Backgrounding

As already discussed above, Derrida (2001) proposes that interpretation is achieved by a process of negotiation in which alternative interpretations are evaluated, before a 'responsible decision' is made regarding which interpretation is selected. The selection is influenced by shared intelligibility, which, although it helps to constrain the risk of misunderstanding, nevertheless is flawed in that individuals' experiences within a social context may influence interpretation decisions. Alternatively, social norms themselves may have become so ingrained within individuals' consciousness that these norms go unchallenged. Oppositional arrangement of perspectives assists individuals to mitigate against experience bias, but a weakness nevertheless remains. While the process of oppositional arrangement of perspectives supports reflexivity, decisions regarding interpretation are invariably influenced, if not governed, by what we expect the text/data to be about. For example, in the above extracts, the initial reading generated understandings concerning the influence of clinical skills on perception of the NuH nurse's role. During further analysis, I might concentrate

primarily on searching for, and selecting, corroborative or contradictory statements about these issues. I am aware that other data exist, but may be at risk of overlooking its significance. There is therefore a risk that data that do not relate to expectations about the text fades into the background. In order to reduce this risk, Iser (1978a) suggests that a process of 'backgrounding' such as that developed by Rubin (1958) should be employed.

Rubin's (1958) theory of figure/ground distinction can be used to elucidate this idea (Rubin, 1958; Pind, 2014). Rubin's (1958) figure/ground experiments demonstrate that if observers are instructed to perceive an image in a particular way, their perception of the image in a later recognition test will default to that of the original instruction. For example, when viewing an image of a 'Rubin's vase', if observers are prompted to see a vase as the foregrounded figure, they will see a vase when tested at a later date. In both the instruction and recognition tests, the two faces - the backgrounded field - will not be immediately obvious. Rubin (1958) suggests that if observers are then stimulated into a reverse perception of the image, new and surprising phenomena will be exposed (i.e. the faces become apparent). This concept is primarily used in cognitive and visual psychology to explore sensual and perceptual organization (for example, Wagemans et al., 2012). It is also used in text analysis, in particular in literary criticism to uncover aspects of texts that may assume a significance that was not attached to them on a first reading (for example, Stockwell, 2003). This concept has recently come into its own with the development, and critical appraisal, of hypertext fiction – fiction comprised of a non-linear story created in electronic hypertext format that contains multiple and varied plot progressions and endings. The story is developed via the interactive choices of the reader. The concept has been used as a means of exploring the foregrounding and backgrounding process of readers' interaction, selections, situation, and contribution to text production (for example, Pope, 2006). This concept is also useful in hermeneutic social research data analysis, as a means of promoting reflexive data analysis in research. During

stage 2 of data analysis in this study, after completing the coding exercise, I employed the figure/ground process in order that backgrounded data could be transformed into foregrounded data. This transformation allowed me to investigate whether any other topics of potential significance that I had not expected to find were encompassed within the text. Thus, after coding the above extract, I re-read it and emphasized the backgrounded data (in italics) in order to bring it to the fore - in this case, data that does not relate to the influence of clinical skills on role perception.

> **P1:3** I think she [mother who is a nurse working in a local hospital] wanted me to get the experience of working in a hospital on a busy ward, because with me being newly qualified, I think she thought I would get more, I would you know, develop skills and things that I wouldn't here specifically.
>
> **Researcher** Do you think that's been the case?
>
> **P1:3** *I think when you're working upstairs in the [NHS intermediate care unit], you still get to sort of develop your skills with things like you know, the ward rounds and the MDT, you do quite a lot of involvement which is similar to the hospital.* But then again you don't get to practise things like IVs, and cannulation and things, which is what I've missed out on.
>
> **Researcher** So do you consider those things as missing out?
>
> **P1:3** I think so, yeah, because a lot of the people I qualified with, when I meet up with them, they're telling me what things they've learned, and I have learned things, but completely different things. *Mine's all based around managerial, and the running of a business and a home*, where theirs are all practical things like setting up IVs and drips, and er, just a

lot more acute things. I think they, I think it's something, not showing

off, but a bit like, 'Oh this is what I can do, you know this is what I've

learned', and I think people do think yeah, that is more important.

By emphasising the previously backgrounded data, I was able to view the text 'in reverse'.

This technique permitted minor topics and phrases (italics) that were present in the text in the

form of asides rather than direct responses, to take centre stage. At this point, these topics

were 'in their infancy'. They were little more than murmurs:

Phrase 1 P1:3 mentions the similarities between the NHS funded unit in the NuH, and

hospital wards. This suggests she connects the concept of the NHS with skill development

and practice. Is then, being/not being associated with the NHS an underlying issue, rather

than/as well as the clinical skills development and practice issue?

Phrase 2 NuH nursing requires business and management skills, rather than clinical skills.

Analysis of the data has previously focused on the tension between 'clinical skills' and

'different skills'. Is the specific nature of these different skills significant? I.e. business and

management skills?

The use of the multiple interview technique was advantageous because these 'murmers' could

be explored in more detail during later interviews, enabling the opportunity for backgrounded

topics to evolve into significant topics.

The backgrounding technique was also used alongside systems of shared intelligibility during

stage 3 of the analysis process to support in depth critical analysis of the data. The purpose of

this stage is to identify hidden subtexts, including via investigating what is not said. For

example, participants' responses were considered against a system of intelligibility that arises

from contexts which I share with NuH nurses working within a NuH community of practice,

and my knowledge of previous research, and historical and socio-political factors about NuH nursing. This system of intelligibility suggests that contradictory perceptions of NuH nursing exist because, on the one hand, the role is viewed as not requiring much skill. On the other hand, management of residents' multi-morbidities requires NuH nurses to be highly skilled. Using a backgrounding technique to consider the data against this system of intelligibility context revealed that the participants 'bought into' the perception that their work is routine, repetitive and offers little in the way of development opportunities. For example:

> **P2:1** But in the nursing home you get to know your residents, you get
> to know the diagnoses, and their problems, then it will become a
> routine. There's nothing new…There's no everyday challenge.

> **P1:2** It's like an everyday learning for you...In the hospital, you know,
> like different ones, it's like a different condition, different situation, and
> so, I kind of want to get involved with that.

However, there was an absence of discussion or acknowledgement that the skills used to manage multi-morbidities are important and complex. This absence of discussion about multi-morbidity management, when brought from the background into the foreground, led to the interpretation that the participants do not recognize or value managing multi-morbidities as a skilled activity.

Conclusion

Hermeneutic phenomenologists subscribe to the view that experiences and pre-understandings inevitably influence their research. They also propose that this is not entirely problematic, because experience, knowledge and pre-understandings facilitate understanding of the complexities and paradoxes of phenomena. Literary hermeneuticists extend this argument, proposing that because of their pre-understandings, readers become 'writerly

readers' i.e. they play a part in 'producing' the text, a process which supports deeper understanding of others' experience, modification of the self by enhancing knowledge and opportunities for self-reflection, and reconsideration of accepted social and cultural norms. These consequences of writerly reading can be vehicles for change. As social research often aims to contribute to change by exploring how emerging insights might modify and enlighten views and processes, maximising the potential for a writerly reading outcome in social science research is desirable.

However, if researchers are to use their pre-understandings as valid interpretative tools rather than predilections which direct interpretations, then strategies to promote awareness of, and reflexivity about, the influence of preunderstandings on interpretation need to be developed and integrated within the research process.

By using a recent study of NuH nurses' views and experiences regarding occupational role and status, and work identity, this paper has suggested how strategies such as 'shared intelligibility' and episodic interviewing can be used to narrow the range of potential interpretations, minimising the risk of hermeneutical anarchy. 'Oppositional arrangement of perspectives' can act as a check to reduce the possibility that researchers immersed in social and cultural norms and contexts fail to challenge these norms and contexts, but rather take their apparent authenticity for granted. Despite the use of these two strategies, what researchers expect data to be about may also influence their interpretations. 'Figure and ground relationships' can be used to recognize the influence of reader expectations concerning what is significant or in the foreground of a phenomenon. 'Backgrounding' can be used as a tool to explore reverse perceptions and uncover aspects of texts that may assume significances not identified upon first readings. If used in hermeneutical research, this approach can provide a means by which researchers can diminish the chance of overlooking valuable data.

This paper argues that if strategies to enhance reflexivity and validity are implemented, social science research can benefit from the strengths of writerly reading in promoting understanding and reappraisal of social and cultural norms, while achieving interpretative validity.

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