

Creativity in phenomenological methodology

Pia Dreyer ^{1,2}

PhD, is an associate professor at Aarhus University and Aarhus University Hospital, Denmark. Her research is in the clinical field of Intensive Care and Home Mechanical Ventilation. Her focus is on the lived experiences of the phenomenon dependency on mechanical ventilation. Methodologically her particular interests are phenomenology and hermeneutics.

Bente Martinsen ¹

PhD, is an associate professor at Aarhus University, Denmark. Her research is concerned with, peoples' experiences of physical dependency with a special focus on the phenomenon of assisted feeding. Methodologically her particular interests are phenomenology and hermeneutics. Her work is informed by phenomenological research approaches and the resulting methodological implications.

Annelise Norlyk ^{1,3}

PhD, is an associate professor in Nursing Science at Aarhus University, Denmark. Her research focuses on patients' and relatives' experiences of the transition from a brief period of hospitalization post- surgery to a lengthy recovery period at home. Her work is informed by phenomenological approaches. She also has a passion for methodology, and her particular interests are phenomenology and hermeneutics.

Anita Haahr ³

PhD, is a lecturer at VIA university College, Bachelor programme in Nursing, and Head of Program for Research and Innovation in Patientology at VIA University College. Her research activities focuses primarily on the experience of living with a chronic illness like Parkinson's disease, from patients and relatives perspective. Her research builds on hermeneutic phenomenology and she has a strong interest in methodological and ethical aspects of this particular research tradition.

Abstract

Nursing research is often concerned with lived experiences in human life using phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches. These empirical studies may use different creative expressions and art-forms to describe and enhance an embodied and personalised understanding of lived experiences. Drawing on the methodologies of van Manen, Dahlberg, Lindseth & Norberg, the aim of this paper is to argue that the increased focus on creativity and arts in research methodology is valuable to gain a deeper insight into lived experiences. We illustrate this point through examples from empirical nursing studies, and discuss how each of the above approaches allows for creative expressions and art-forms such as poetics, narratives and films, and hereby contributes to a profound understanding of patients' experiences. This creativity generates extraordinary power to the process of understanding and it seems that creativity may support a respectful renewal of phenomenological research traditions in nursing research.

Keywords Phenomenology, hermeneutic, art, creativity, methodology, nursing research

Background

Discussions about credibility and methodological rigour within nursing research seem ongoing. In an attempt to compete with, and at the same time distinguish itself from medical research, nursing research has opted the methodology of the social sciences (Rolfe 1995). Nursing is a relatively young academic discipline and in our fervor to be recognised by the scientific community, our research appears to be obsessed with methodological rigour. Several nurse researchers have argued that nursing has lost touch with the essence of its subject matter; the people and their lived experiences (Rolfe 1995) and have questioned whether the methodology commonly used in nursing research is a hindrance to originality and creativity in an attempt to be rigorous. Thus, an increased focus on acknowledging a more creative approach to nursing research, where alternative research methods such as storytelling, role-play, poetry, and literature and artwork have been attempted (Rolfe 1995). Finlay (2009) furthermore discusses the challenge researchers' face when aiming to be both scientifically

“distant” and open to the experiences of the participants. She asks whether phenomenological methods are science or art, as prominent phenomenologists describe different views. She puts forth the belief, that researchers should address the audience they are writing to. To write in a manner and language that speaks to the reader of the text (Finlay 2009).

Since the late eighties, the traditional interfaces between art and science have been explored and discussed. It is often argued that science is understood as the process that generates knowledge, and art as the process that expresses that knowledge and exemplifies quality and moral rightness (Mitchell & Cody 2002). In this form of inquiry, art is characterised by imagination, creativity and aesthetics, and it is fluid, dynamic and flexible (Holloway & Todres 2007). The researcher communicates with the audience or readers while going beyond traditional limits. Therefore, communication is a crucial element of the art in relation to the findings (Holloway & Todres 2007). However, the entire research process is also a creative and artistic process. Art is a part of the methodology and the researcher therefore has to argue for its rigour and credibility. Mitchell et al. (2011) maintains that art may expand understanding, but that we need to find new methodological ways where art actually builds knowledge and understanding. For example, could poetry and literature be a helpful research method to explore and understand the content of lived life, as it has a special closeness to life. In this type of research, the balance of art and science is about the distinction between pure expression and scientific presentation (Holloway & Todres 2007). Artful expressions need to be faithful and evocative while still being grounded in scientific practice (Holloway & Todres 2007). Qualitative nurse researchers tend to overcome this scientific challenge by drawing on different methodologies as van Manen, Dahlberg and Lindseth & Norberg, who value art and creativity as crucial aspects.

This paper questions how art and creativity in three methodological approaches is a way to gain deep insight into lived experiences. Thus the paper contributes with new ideas and an increased focus on creativity and art in nursing research, by illustrating how creative expression and art-forms may be presented in empirical nursing studies.

van Manen

Van Manen argues that human science research consists of a phenomenological sensibility and a hermeneutic interpretive approach and thus distinguishes himself from human scientists who see phenomenology as purely descriptive (van Manen 1990). Artistic and creative endeavours are crucial in van Manen's thinking, and the process of writing is more artistic, more creative than merely putting words together in sentences. With reference to Merleau-Ponty, he states that a good phenomenological description enables us to grasp the true nature of a phenomenon in a way that goes beyond the spoken word:

“when a phenomenologist asks for the essence of a phenomenon – a lived experience – then the phenomenological inquiry is not unlike an artistic endeavour, a creative attempt to somehow capture a certain phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is both holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive” (van Manen 1990; p 39).

Through the story of the Orphean gaze, van Manen illuminates how it is not possible ever to come to a complete truth, or to understand an experience in its fullest. One must be driven by a desire that makes one wonder, and requires the ability to engage in the text in an openhearted and passionate manner. When we just search for facts, or convert lifeworld experiences into “results” it limits our possibilities of really understanding. Thus artistic expression must favour the ability to wonder (van Manen 2006).

Narratives, poetry or literature, may be sources for data or ways of presenting of lived experiences, using metaphors, illusions or stories to create a felt sense in the reader (van Manen 1990). In fact, we need, says van Manen, “*a mantic language of poetic reach to get beyond the realm of what, in Kockelmans's (1987) words, can be said clearly and distinctly*” (van Manen 1997; p 349-350).

Examples of creativity in research dissemination

Van Manens methodology is a popular research method among nurse researchers, but a search that combined van Manen and

nursing with the words creative or art surprisingly retrieved only a few hits.

At a glance, the studies revealed the use of a metaphor or a sentence from an interview as part of the title of the paper. Such as "Being in an alien world" (Hall 2005) "Being in it together" (Haahr et al. 2013), or "You'd think this roller coaster was never going to stop" (Foster 2010).

When randomly looking in to the structure of the studies, data were often collected through narratives, interviews or observations, and findings were described in themes, using metaphors and rich descriptions of the lived experiences with a variety of quotes to underline the statements made. A few studies seemed to engage more in creative activities, such as Hammer and colleagues (Hammer, Hall & Mogensen 2013) who used drawings as the source of data when aiming to picture womens' experiences of hope when newly diagnosed with gynaecological cancer. Finally, a study by Lane (2005), transformed interviews into personal stories and exemplified the themes that emerged from the interviews.

Paul Ricoeur and creativity

Another common used methodology within phenomenological hermeneutics in human science research is described by Lindseth and Norberg (2004), who are inspired by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeurs interpretation theory. They explicitly describe phenomenological hermeneutics as a methodology that:

"Lies between art and science. We use our artistic talents to formulate the naïve understanding, our scientific talents to perform the structural analysis and our critical talents to arrive at a comprehensive understanding" (Lindseth & Norberg 2004; p 152)

Ricoeur (1976) states, that we often have more ideas than we have words to express them, and therefore we have to stretch the significations of those we do have beyond their ordinary use, or we may use figurative words in order to please or perhaps seduce our audience. In other words, making the audience sense the meaning and understanding, not in a truths seeking way, but to gain a deep understanding. This is possible using poetic language e.g. through

poems, metaphors, narratives and lyrics. An important argument is that this creative act does not reflect reality, but a re-description of meaning in text form, and through poetry we take in a new way of being-in-the-world (Ricoeur 1973). This poetic discourse articulates sensation that projects a new way of reflecting, to reach the essence of things, and through language, the reader may be touched and moved by the text (Dreyer & Pedersen 2009).

Examples of creativity in nursing research

When looking into randomly chosen studies that refer to Ricoeur's way of thinking, most of them build on data collected through narratives, interviews or observations, and only when presenting the findings are narratives, stories and poems used. The titles reflect metaphors or quotes from the interviews (Flaming 2005, Lohne 2008), e.g. "The battle between hoping and suffering" (Lohne 2008). The titles may touch the reader with a sense of connectedness to the article right from the start when confronted with the researchpaper, and this will, as Ricoeur states, please or perhaps even seduce the reader. Furthermore, the findings are mostly described in themes or metaphors, and rich descriptions of the lived experiences are often used with a variety of quotes to affect and convey the interpreted meaning.

Different creative methods are used in some studies. One study uses poems to enhance the evocation of the meaning of experienced bodily suffering (Öhlen 2003). An example of this poetically condensed transcription (only the two first sections) is this narrative of suffering:

How it was when I got ill?
Well, the thing is
that I do not remember it
That's what's so odd
I don't really know when it was
I do think
I must have become
more tired little by little (Öhlen 2003; p 561).

Öhlen (2003) argues that poetic expressions help to articulate suffering as a supplement to the common use of formal and rational

language of researchers. Another study uses photo stories to understand how psychiatric patients construct and reformulate meaning to their disease experiences, and the patients review their life story with a photographic essay (Sitvast et al. 2008).

Other studies uses poetic narration linked to the meaning or understanding of what all the text (interviews) is communicating (Dreyer & Pedersen 2009, Martinsen & Dreyer 2012). For example the meaning and understanding of the postoperative period:

“Thousands of small holes are flowing together in an odd pattern. Sometimes it is far away, and suddenly it is heading directly towards me, but then I close my eyes. I hope it is the ceiling. I am awake, but I don't think they know. My mum is sitting in a chair, and she is asleep” (Dreyer & Pedersen 2009; p 70).

Such creative studies generate extraordinary strength to the presentation of the essence of meaning and aim to provide the reader with a different and hopefully deeper understanding.

Reflective lifeworld research

Drawing on the four philosophers Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Gadamer, (Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nyström 2008) seek to bridge the gap between the phenomenological and hermeneutical research traditions, arguing that the notion of the lifeworld is a unifying theme running through both the phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophy. Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nyström (2008) states that individuals can never be fully understood without taking their lifeworld into account and develop a descriptive approach called Reflective Lifeworld Research (RLR).

RLR does not explicitly describe creativity as an aspect of the research process. However, creativity can be disclosed in least two dimensions of RLR. Firstly, the authors state that lifeworld research requires a variety of methods, techniques and means to facilitate the gathering of rich data, which they object to consider as a mechanical process comparable to picking flowers. Instead, data evolves in the relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon under study. Since the phenomenon presents itself to the researcher, i.e. is perceived by the researcher, the activity of data collection is

an intersubjective relationship. The nature of the phenomenon, the specific research question and an honest intention of being open throughout the entire research process should direct the method for data collection, and RLR suggests a variety of possible methods (Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nyström 2008) such as interviews, narratives, observations/ fieldwork, drama, drawings, paintings as well as other forms of art.

Creativity is also called for in the data analysis, when the researcher attempts to identify the essence of the investigated phenomenon without including any external source interpretation, explanation or construction. This work is characterized by the balancing of free discovery and attachment to scientific guidelines. Drawing on Husserl Dahlberg et al. (2008) argue that the process of illuminating essences begins in particularity and gradually becomes more and more arbitrary, when the researcher uses his or her imagination to describe all possible variations of the phenomenon.

Examples of creativity in data gathering

The question is whether nurse researchers who base their studies on RLR, use a variety of creative methods for data collection. Ekebergh (2011) aimed at developing a new model for learning support in nursing education; and performed an intervention study where groups of students reflected upon patient narratives. This reflective work was '*carried out with the help of caring science concepts and theory, and with elements of creative didactics of in the form of drama activities*' (Ekebergh 2011; p. 385). Data could be collected using a combination of photographs and interviews in a study dealing with the experience of being cared for in a critical care setting (Olausson, Lindahl & Ekebergh 2013). Interview is a predominant method among nurse researchers using RLR, even when data is collected with more than one method. The motivation to use other methods seems to be ignored.

Turning to the concretisation of the investigated phenomena's essences described in the above scientific papers, it is difficult to see through the underlying processes of the analysis, as they build partly on the imagination of the researcher. However, the linguistic elegance of the essence may sometimes indicate the character of the work behind the final wording.

Four narratives were formulated aiming to describe the meaning of living conditions related to an adolescent girl's health: *'Approaching everyday life in a balanced way –feeling harmonious'*, *'Approaching everyday life with ambiguity –feeling confused'*, *'Approaching everyday life as an intellectual project – striving for control'* and *'Approaching everyday life as a struggle –feeling forlorn'* (Larsson, Sundler & Ekebergh 2012).

The headings mirror that the authors pay attention to the significance of consistence in the naming of themes. They also seem to balance between abstract formulations to be contextual and mundane formulations to be enlightening.

Discussion

Human science research based on the hermeneutic – phenomenological tradition in nursing science faces several challenges, being faithful to the research traditions chosen where artistic endeavors and evocative descriptions are more or less an important and essential part of the research, and on the other hand fulfilling the academic and scientific demands of sound research.

It seems that both smaller parts and the entire research process can be a creative and artistic process. The question is though, to what extent it is a possible and well-argued part of the methodology. We have exemplified with studies where the researchers were drawing on approaches that explicitly favour creativity. For example, in the analytic process van Manen emphasises that our interest always has a certain pointing to something (van Manen 1990). So the challenge may be to integrate this in the dissemination of nursing research regardless of the methodological approach. In this way, researchers may methodologically bridge the gap between science and art.

With reference to Holloway and Todres (2007), we ask: *"How, and to what extent, can research findings be transformed whilst still being faithful to the essential meanings captured in the research process?"* Here, the notion of transparency for the reader cannot be underestimated. In response, we find it important to present the research process and the results to the reader as complete and transparent as possible (Dreyer & Pedersen 2009). Sandelowski (1998) furthermore stresses that researchers are obliged to clearly convey to their readers when they are moving from research participants' accounts to accounts of their own. This is not common in research papers based on RLR,

where the analytical processes identifying the essence and its constituents are normally invisible, as they are not part of the paper. According to Gadamer (1993), it is customary that the reader does not have access to the full account of the participant's experiences, why the reader has to trust the researcher's judgement. Both art and research findings are essentially incomplete even when finished, since both require an interpreter to make meaning of the artist's/ researcher's creation. Referring to Bernstein and Gadamer, Mitchell and Cody (2002) state that understanding of phenomenology and art requires involvement of the spectator or the reader. Meaning comes to realisation only in and through the 'happening' of understanding. This line of thought may be parallel to the use of 'free discovery' in RLR, which imposes the reader to indulge in the task of understanding not only the essence, but also the connection between the investigated phenomenon, data analysis and the identified essence. As Ricoeur (1973) and Gadamer (1993) describe, the aim in phenomenological hermeneutics is to identify and interpret the most appropriate and significant meanings in the lived world, interpreted through history and horizon. Creativity is key in the process of understanding, but lies in the reader why it can't be described as an exact 'step'. It seems that creativity may support a respectful renewal of qualitative methodology in nursing research. Good qualitative research adds imagination and creativity, combining art, science and craft (Holloway & Todres 2007).

Concluding remarks

We have found excellent examples of the use of creativity in the dissemination of nursing research, and we have argued that the most used methodological approaches allow for these creative forms of data collection and presentation of findings. We found that creativity and art is very useful and gives extraordinary substance to the understanding of lived experience. This on the other hand leaves us puzzled as to why there are not more studies that use artistic expression – are we still running the risk of converting lived experiences into mere "results" in our fervor to keep nursing research pure and free from subjective contamination to be representative for nursing practice? Several methodological approaches as described in this paper weight the use of writing methods like metaphors, poems, novels and even theater play. This may be both pro-

vocative and strange to some nursing researchers but it seems very useful to achieve insight into lived experiences. Therefore, with this article we want to encourage nurses to use creativity and art in nursing research and bring nursing and research to a different and deeper level of understanding.

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Notes

- 1 Aarhus University, Institute of Public Health, Section of Nursing Science, Høegh-Guldbergs Gade 6A, building 1633, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark.
- 2 Aarhus University Hospital, Department of Anaesthesiology and Intensive Care, Nørrebrogade 44, building 21.1, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark
- 3 VIA University College, Bachelor Programme in Nursing, Hedeager 2, 8200 Aarhus N, Denmark, Kontor 42.16 Tlf. 87552012.