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Existentialist-Informed Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Carla Willig and Abigail Billin

This chapter introduces a version of the phenomenological method that is particularly suitable for the exploration of embodied human experience. Like Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which was introduced in the preceding chapter, hermeneutic phenomenology belongs to the interpretative strand of phenomenology. This means that as a method of qualitative data analysis it seeks to capture and portray the quality and texture of research participants' experience and to explore its meanings and significance. In order to do this, hermeneutic phenomenology, like IPA, acknowledges the importance of the frames of reference which the researcher brings to the data during the process of analysis. Indeed, all forms of interpretative phenomenology take the view that interpretation is both desirable and inevitable; desirable because it serves to amplify the meanings contained in accounts of experience, and inevitable because understanding of an account cannot take place without us making some preliminary assumptions about its meaning. From this point of view, understanding involves a movement from pre-supposition to interpretation and back again, whereby the researcher's pre-suppositions (e.g., about the meaning of a word or the significance of an expression) are tested in the light of the evolving meaning of the account he or she is trying to understand and make sense of. This process has been referred to as the hermeneutic circle (for a helpful introduction to hermeneutics see Schmidt, 2006). It follows that in hermeneutic phenomenology the researcher both works with and continually challenges their own background knowledge, assumptions and pre-suppositions.

Influences and Affinities

Hermeneutic phenomenology has affinities with existential philosophy. Van Manen (1990, p. 101) proposes that '[A]ll phenomenological human science research efforts are really explorations into the structure of the human lifeworld'. Although there are innumerable, and unique specific lifeworlds, corresponding to the wide range of possible and actual human realities and existences, there are also fundamental existential concerns which form part of the structure of the human lifeworld in general. These have been examined by existential philosophers such as (perhaps most famously) Martin Heidegger (e.g., Heidegger, 1962).

Fundamental existential themes include our relationship with time, our bodies, our physical environment and with other people. From an existential point of view, as humans we cannot but engage with these concerns in one way or another even if our way of engaging with them is characterized by a refusal to engage – think of the hermit whose way of engaging with the social is to exclude it from everyday life. Existentialist-informed hermeneutic phenomenological research involves both participant and researcher in a process of trying to make sense of what it means to 'be (human)', that is to say, what it means to live as an embodied being in a (particular) physical and social world. We want to emphasize that phenomenological exploration involves more than trying to understand what a participant is thinking. Whilst thoughts (i.e., a participant's ideas, beliefs, memories and so on in relation to a particular topic) are important, there is (much) more to human experience than this. Phenomenological exploration requires that the researcher engages with the participant's felt sense, their experience of 'how it is' for them to be in a particular situation, of 'what it is like' to have a particular experience. This is why existentialist-informed hermeneutic phenomenology is particularly suitable for the exploration of embodied human experience.

Epistemology

The aim of existentialist-informed hermeneutic phenomenological research is primarily to deepen our understanding of the quality, texture and meaning of a particular experience for those who undergo that experience. In addition, we may also seek to gain further insights into the human condition and to find out more about the many ways in which people can engage with fundamental existential concerns. Epistemologically this means that such research may be described as constructivist (Ponterotto, 2005) or contextual constructionist (Madill *et al.*, 2000) in that the knowledge sought is knowledge about how participants are constructing meaning within particular contexts. Phenomenological knowledge is knowledge about the subjective experience of research participants. As such it can be contrasted with both realist knowledge (which seeks to identify the social and/or psychological processes or structures that underpin subjective experience) and social constructionist knowledge (which seeks to find out how people construct versions of social reality through the use of cultural resources such as discourses and symbolic practices).

1 Phenomenological knowledge aims to *understand* human experience. In order to do
2 this, the researcher needs to find a way of getting as close as possible to the research
3 participant's experience, to step into their shoes and to look at the world through their
4 eyes – in other words, to enter their world. This means that the researcher assumes
5 that there is more than one 'world' that can be studied. The question driving phe-
6 nomenological research is, therefore, 'What is the world like *for this participant?*' (for a
7 more detailed discussion of the epistemological bases of qualitative research including
8 phenomenological research see Willig, in press).

9
10

11 Research Questions

12

13 Existentialist-informed hermeneutic phenomenology lends itself to the exploration
14 of embodied human experiences which speak to our relationship with time, with
15 our bodies, our physical environment and with other people. The kinds of research
16 questions this method is best suited to address are concerned with lived experience and
17 meaning-making. They are questions about what it may be like to undergo major life
18 events, transitions between life stages, and physical or psychological transformations.
19 They are questions about the ways in which we as humans negotiate and process
20 fundamental existential concerns. Such research can focus directly on experiential
21 phenomena (such as suffering, love, anger or joy) or it can attempt to access them
22 through exploring participants' experiences of particular situations (such as being
23 diagnosed with a medical condition, being made redundant, getting married or giving
24 birth to a child). In either case, the focus of the research is upon the ways in which
25 participants themselves interpret their experiences.

26 In addition, as indicated earlier, existentialist-informed hermeneutic phenomenol-
27 ogy is interested in understanding participants' embodied experience, not simply in
28 recording their thoughts and reflections about an experience. This means that such
29 research needs to find ways of capturing and representing those aspects of experience
30 that can be hard to talk about. For example, Radley (1993) draws attention to the
31 importance of embodied practices (such as gardening) in the experience of recover-
32 ing (a sense of being healthy) after major illness. Existentialist-informed hermeneutic
33 phenomenological research is challenging in that it requires the researcher to engage
34 with the (the meaning of) 'being' (human) as such rather than staying with partici-
35 pants' cognitions. Because of its holistic orientation, which foregrounds the unity of
36 the mind-body complex, this approach to research has been embraced particularly
37 by researchers in nursing studies (e.g., Cohen *et al.*, 2000; Lemon & Taylor, 1997).
38 Langdrige (2007) identifies a number of examples of hermeneutic phenomenological
39 research relevant to the area of mental health including a study on client experiences of
40 psychotherapy (Sherwood, 2001), one on living with severe mental illness (Dalhberg
41 *et al.*, 2001) and one on the meaning of parental bereavement (Lyndall *et al.*, 2005).

42 Existentialist-informed hermeneutic phenomenological research is ideally suited to
43 address questions about what it is like to traverse existential challenges and how people
44 make life meaningful and how they experience their world as a result. Along with most

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1 qualitative research, however, it is not suited to answer questions about relationships
2 between variables or about cause–effect relationships. It is not designed to generate
3 predictive models of behaviour nor does it allow us to generalize findings or to draw
4 conclusions about the experiences of those who did not take part in the research. How-
5 ever, it does aim to generate insights into the nature of human experience which means
6 that it is interested in particular individuals' subjective experiences only in so far as
7 they shed light on the phenomenon of interest. In other words, existentialist-informed
8 phenomenological research is primarily concerned with experiential phenomena (e.g.,
9 the phenomenon of suffering, of loss, of joy, etc.) rather than with the individuals
10 whose accounts help the researcher to illuminate the phenomenon. Whilst its focus
11 on individual subjective experience means that this type of research may appear to fail
12 to provide us with much information about the wider social, cultural and historical
13 contexts within which such experiences are located, it could be argued that in order
14 to fully understand the meanings participants create and to fully appreciate their sig-
15 nificance, the phenomenological researcher would need to locate them within their
16 wider contexts (see also Chapter 8; Langdrige, 2007). This argument chimes with
17 Gadamer's (1989) view that hermeneutics involves the study of texts in their widest
18 sense (i.e., as tissues of meaning and signification) and that 'meaning takes place when
19 a particular tradition – that is, the language of a group of people – is interpreted by
20 a speaker' (Cohen *et al.*, 2000, pp. 5–6). In other words, meaning is not created out
21 of nothing, it is not conjured by individuals from meaninglessness; rather, meaning is
22 made out of cultural resources (including language) whose availability depends upon
23 socio-historical conditions. Thus, as Cohen *et al.* (2000, p. 6) conclude, 'the individual
24 and the tradition must both be considered in hermeneutic phenomenology'.
25

26 Research Process

27
28
29 Phenomenological research is interested in (the quality, texture and meaning of) lived
30 experience. Since it is impossible to directly access someone else's lived experience,
31 phenomenological researchers rely upon descriptive accounts of experience. Such ac-
32 counts can be spoken or written, and they can be supported by the use of images or
33 music and sounds. Data for phenomenological research can take the form of recordings
34 and transcriptions of semi-structured interviews, of written or spoken recollections
35 of experiences, video-diaries produced by research participants or, indeed, of other
36 types of visual data (see Reavey, 2011). Whatever form the data take, it is important
37 to remember that such accounts are already one step removed from the original lived
38 experience itself; therefore, they constitute transformations of the experience (see van
39 Manen, 1990, p. 54). Furthermore, it is easy for phenomenological research to further
40 transform the data in such a way as to lose the original account's emotional tone and
41 vibrancy. This happens when the researcher analyses the account by extracting and
42 labelling themes, which capture the content but not the felt sense of what has been
43 described (for a discussion of this process see Willig, 2007). Van Manen (1997) has
44 argued that the thematic dimension in phenomenological inquiry tends to dominate the

1 expressive dimension, and that it is important that we find ways of letting the emotional
2 tone of our research participants' narratives speak to the readers of our research texts.
3 Ohlen (2003, p. 565) endorses van Manen's (1997) critique when he observes that the
4 formal and rational language used by researchers 'does not have the power to give life to
5 the mysteries of life'. In order to redress the balance, these researchers recommend the
6 use of poetic narrative in the analysis of accounts. These are constructed from direct
7 quotations from research participants, with the aim of evoking the original experience.
8 According to van Manen (1997, p. 353), '[E]vocation means that experience is brought
9 vividly into presence so that we can phenomenologically reflect on it.'

10 Phenomenological analysis is a very time-consuming and demanding process. This
11 means that researchers tend to work with relatively small numbers of participants in
12 any one study. Because the aim of the analysis is to shed light on the nature and essence
13 of a particular human experience, participants need to be recruited on the basis of their
14 ability to provide accounts that will illuminate the quality, texture and meaning of that
15 experience. This means that they need to have had the experience and they need to
16 be able and willing to reflect on it in some detail and in some depth. The quality of a
17 phenomenological analysis depends to a large extent on the richness of the data. It is
18 difficult, if not impossible, to produce a fertile reading of a very short, monosyllabic
19 account (although, of course, the very absence of colour and texture from an account
20 may tell us something rather important about the quality of the experience). It follows
21 that the applicability of the phenomenological method is limited by its dependence
22 upon 'high quality' accounts and the consequent exclusion of the experiences of those
23 who may not be able to articulate them in the (relatively) sophisticated manner required
24 by the method (see also Willig, 2008, pp. 67–68).

25
26

27 **Role of Research Participants**

28

29 Because phenomenological research aims to capture the quality, texture and meaning
30 of research participants' experiences, one might expect that one way of validating one's
31 findings would be to check with participants that one 'has got it right'. This is indeed
32 advocated by some phenomenological researchers (e.g., Colaizzi, 1978; Cohen *et al.*,
33 2000). Indeed, research participants in phenomenological research are often referred
34 to as 'co-researchers' in order to emphasize their active participation in what can be a
35 highly collaborative research process. For example, Colaizzi (1978) recommends that,
36 following data analysis, the researcher returns to the participants with a descriptive
37 account of the phenomenon under investigation in order to find out to what extent
38 the researcher's account reflects their original experiences. Each participant is invited
39 to let the researcher know whether any important aspects of their experience have been
40 omitted from the account and whether the account contains anything that does not
41 fit with their original experience. Participants' comments are then used to produce a
42 revised version of the account. The process of validation continues, by taking the revised
43 account back to the participants for further validation. This cycle of validation contin-
44 ues until there are no more revisions to the researcher's account. However, Colaizzi's

1 (1978) approach to phenomenological research is descriptive rather than interpretative,
2 which means that participant validation of the findings is a much more straight-forward
3 process than it is for more interpretative approaches such as hermeneutic phenomenol-
4 ogy. Langdrige (2007, pp. 81–82) identifies three challenges associated with seeking
5 participants' feedback on the analysis. First, there is the issue of accessibility of the
6 analysis. Langdrige (2007) points out that in order to obtain meaningful feedback,
7 the researcher would need to ensure that the analysis is written in accessible language
8 and that it is explained to participants if necessary. This, although desirable, is not
9 always practically possible. Secondly, there is the issue of power. Participants may find
10 it difficult to provide feedback which they feel may be interpreted as a challenge to or
11 a criticism of the researcher's analysis. Finally, Langdrige (2007) argues that because
12 an interpretative approach to phenomenology takes the analysis beyond the original
13 description provided by the participant, it is possible that participants may not recog-
14 nize the interpretation as being relevant to their experience. This does not necessarily
15 mean that the researcher has 'got it wrong'. It may be that the participant retains a
16 partial perspective on their experience, perhaps in order to avoid confronting some
17 (perhaps painful or disturbing) aspects of their experience. In this case, there are also
18 ethical concerns about a research process that brings participants face-to-face with po-
19 tential meanings of their experience which they may not be ready or willing to engage
20 with. After all, agreeing to take part in a research project is not the same as entering a
21 therapeutic relationship.

24 **An Example of Existentialist-Informed** 25 **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

26
27 To demonstrate how to use existentialist-informed hermeneutic phenomenology, we
28 describe a study conducted in order to explore the process of meaning-making at the
29 end of life (for a more detailed account of this research see Taylor, 2009). Finding
30 meaning when facing a diagnosis of advanced cancer can be a challenging experience
31 as it requires engagement with some of the dimensions of human existence (such as
32 mortality and suffering) which may not be foregrounded when we are healthy and
33 feeling well. Spirituality has frequently been cited as an important source of meaning,
34 yet there is no consensus over what this term actually means. We were interested in
35 exploring how those who are facing the lived reality of their own mortality make sense
36 of this experience. We wanted to know more about how meaning is made of life when
37 its end is in sight. We were also interested in the extent to which 'spirituality' is a
38 meaningful concept within this context.

41 **Aims of the study**

42
43 Given that spirituality is such a difficult concept to define, we started the research with an
44 open, orientating question: what is the experience of 'spirituality' and meaning-making

1 at the end of life? The word 'spirituality' was left undefined to allow participants to
2 explore their own definitions during the research. In order to allow participants to
3 decide for themselves whether or not 'spirituality' was relevant to their experience, we
4 made it clear in our recruitment materials that we were primarily interested in their
5 experience of the end of life and that 'spirituality' may or may not be a part of this.

6 A hermeneutic phenomenological method was employed because this was considered
7 a creative approach to explore such an elusive concept. Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic
8 phenomenological technique was chosen as it offered the openness and flexibility
9 required by our research question. Van Manen (1990) emphasizes that there is no
10 prescribed method in hermeneutic phenomenology. Instead, he argues that the focus
11 of phenomenology should always be on creative engagement with language in order to
12 reveal something that was previously concealed.

13

14 Data collection

15

16 Eight participants (three males and five females) were recruited from a hospice, with
17 ages ranging from 44 to 80 years. Participants identified themselves as wanting to
18 talk about their experience of 'spirituality' and meaning-making and as being in the
19 advanced stages of cancer, defined as having a life expectancy of less than 1 year. Because
20 the concept of 'spirituality' was left undefined in the research question, there was a risk
21 that individuals would not consider themselves appropriate for the study depending
22 on their definition of 'spirituality'. To avoid excluding potential participants, it was
23 explained to potential participants that 'spirituality' did not necessarily have to imply
24 religion and was only a suggested label to describe their experience of finding meaning
25 in their experience.

26 Data were collected in the form of relatively unstructured interviews conducted by
27 the second author. This is a popular method when using hermeneutic phenomenology
28 because it helps the researcher to take a fresh look at the phenomenon without imposing
29 any preconceived ideas (van Manen, 1990). Also the pace and timing of this kind of
30 interview is flexible and can be adjusted to the individual, which was particularly
31 important given that participants may have had limited concentration spans as a result
32 of pain or fatigue.

33 Participants were told that we wanted to understand their experience of 'spirituality',
34 or whatever term they preferred to use, and how they made sense of life at the end of
35 life. The opening question in the interviews ('What is life like for you at the moment?')
36 was broad and open-ended. Further clarifying and probing questions were then asked
37 to facilitate rich descriptions of participants' experiences.

38 Given that understanding in hermeneutic phenomenology is a product of reflec-
39 tions on interpretations and experience, a reflexive diary was kept by the second author
40 throughout the research to record thoughts and feelings during the study. An important
41 aspect of interpretative phenomenology is inter-subjectivity, particularly with respect
42 to how the researcher influences the research process. Keeping a reflexive diary ensured
43 that the researcher was not separated from the findings. For example, when she felt sur-
44 prised about the results she considered what this told her about her own preconceptions.

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1 Similarly, she considered how her own good health might have changed the way people
2 spoke to her, and what message they might have been trying to give to someone who is
3 not close to death.

4
5
6 Analysis

7 The purpose of a phenomenological inquiry is to make us ‘see’ something in a manner
8 that enriches our understanding of experience, not just cognitively but also emotionally.
9 Ohlen (2003) proposed poetic condensation as a method that can engage the reader
10 at a deeper level of meaning by preserving the expressive content of a narrative. The
11 transcripts were therefore formulated into lines of poetry using Gee’s (1991) model
12 of poetic condensation by making use of accentuation, pauses and rhythm in the
13 participant’s speech. This meant that the interview transcripts were transformed into
14 poems which then constituted the data to be analysed.

15 Hermeneutic phenomenology deliberately moves away from the mechanical appli-
16 cation of coding to allow the researcher to engage in the ‘free acting of “seeing”’ (van
17 Manen, 1990, p. 79). Van Manen (1990) suggests three approaches to analysing data
18 whilst engaging in the hermeneutic circle of moving between the parts and the whole
19 of the data in the process of distilling meaning:

- 20
21
22 1. *Holistic reading*. This involves attending to the text as a whole and finding phrases
23 that capture the fundamental meaning of the text as a whole.
24 2. *Selective reading*. This requires reading the text several times to find sentences or
25 phrases that seem particularly significant, essential or revealing.
26 3. *Detailed reading*. This is achieved by reading every single sentence or sentence
27 cluster and analysing what the sentence reveals about the phenomenon.

28
29 The analysis was supplemented by the reflexive observations noted during data
30 collection and the analytic process. As each poem was analysed, the previous poems
31 were used to help enhance the analytic process, rather than as a source of comparison.
32 Thus, another dialogue between the parts and the whole was established by thinking
33 about one poem in the context of all the poems, as well as comparing the parts and
34 the whole within the text. This shifting back and forth between the parts and the
35 whole revealed new issues and new questions which were then used to further interrogate
36 the data.

37 For van Manen (1990), writing is not a process that characterizes the final stage
38 of research, but instead is an essential part of the hermeneutic phenomenological
39 investigation. Consequently, the analysis involved a constant writing and rewriting
40 of reflections on the parts and the whole, showing a clear trail of evolving thought.
41 Each analysis of individual participants’ interviews as well as the reflections on the
42 overall experience was written and rewritten several times. Themes were derived as a
43 way of creating structure and making sense of the phenomenon rather than the result
44 of a formal application of coding. The process of generating themes in hermeneutic

1 phenomenology is less prescriptive than in most other qualitative approaches as it is
2 derived from the researcher's dialogue with the text (van Manen, 1990).

4 Findings

6 Analysis revealed two modes of being that were available to the participants: the *everyday*
7 *mode of being* and the *transcendent mode of being*. These had implications for the
8 experience of 'spirituality' and meaning-making at the end of life. The modes of being
9 were not mutually exclusive and there were times when participants would change their
10 mode of being depending on the context of their environment.

11 For participants in the everyday mode of being, the experience of 'spirituality' and
12 meaning-making was associated with doing their usual everyday activities. By carrying
13 on with their everyday lives despite their physical limitations, individuals in the everyday
14 mode of being felt a sense of belonging in the physical world and being physically present
15 with other human beings. For example, in the following extract Sandra emphasizes the
16 importance of making an effort in order to ensure that she was able to share memorable
17 and joyful experiences with her children whilst this was still possible:

18
19 I try and do things with the kids
20 My son's 16 and we went to the zoo on Thursday because he was on half-term
21 And we had such a fantastic time
22
23 It was really nice
24 On his sixteenth birthday
25 It cost me an arm and a leg
26 But I hired him a mini bus, took all his friends to paintballing
27 So things that they can all remember together (Sandra¹)

28 Having a relationship with another human being was an important source of meaning
29 in the everyday mode of being. The quality of these relationships was fundamental,
30 because participants expressed the need to have people connect with them as a person
31 and not a patient. By interacting with their family, friends or the hospice (as referred
32 to in the next quote) they retained their sense of belongingness to the social world,
33 reducing their sense of isolation.

34
35 Coming here helps because you meet other people
36 You know that are suffering just like you.
37 And you see some of them that are worse
38 Often than myself
39
40 And when you meet with other people who have it as well
41 You can talk
42 And they can tell you how they feel
43 And you can say how you feel (Lucas)

44 ¹ All names have been changed to protect anonymity.

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1 The participants in the everyday mode of being did not want to spend time on their
2 own reflecting on their situation. Their experience of 'spirituality' and meaning-making
3 was associated with gathering their inner resources to carry on with life. They felt that
4 they wanted and needed to be strong to face the physical demands of their existence
5 and carry on with their physical interactions and social relationships.

6 And even now
7 Even though the doctors have said
8 Well the Macmillan nurse said that it might have been my last Christmas
9 I feel strong enough, I reckon I can see the next Christmas (Sandra)
10

11 'Spirituality' and meaning-making in the everyday mode of being was associated
12 with a strong sense of purpose and future goals. It was about letting the world and
13 other people matter, to remain invested and interested in the social world and to
14 maintain a connection with it. The awareness of temporal limits made life's purpose
15 more pressured, and idle time was seen as wasted time. In this mode, participants also
16 thought a lot about their local community and were concerned about how people's
17 behaviour and social policies affected their immediate world.

18
19 There was a program on TV last night
20 I think somewhere in north London
21 One big estate will be without electricity and gas, water for the rest of the year right
22 over Christmas
23 And yet they send all this money overseas
24 Instead of getting this country organized properly.
25 I mean I believe in charities to a certain extent
26 But the truth is
27 That charity always begins at home (Bob)

28 For those in the transcendent mode of being, interacting with their day-to-day
29 physical and social world as specific individuals was not as meaningful as for those
30 in the everyday mode of being. Instead, viewing themselves as part of a whole and
31 understanding how they fit into the bigger picture was important to their experience of
32 'spirituality' and helped them create meaning. In this mode of being, participants did not
33 focus on their individual physical bodies. Instead, they meditated on the pattern of the
34 universe and thought about how their lives were only a tiny part of a much bigger whole.

35
36 I went to a place right in the South of Japan
37 And there is a volcano there
38 It was actually billowing
39 It was sort of more or less alive
40 And the whole earth
41 Trembled
42 It was just an amazing thing
43 The power of it was just immense
44 And you realize what an insignificant little bunch we are. (John)

1 Participants' experience of 'spirituality' and meaning-making in the transcendent
2 mode of being involved detaching from unhelpful relationships in order to maintain
3 their peace and quiet. Connecting with people at the hospice and those who understood
4 their perspective was still key to their experience but these relationships were few and
5 far between. They found meaning from their relationships with their family, but there
6 was a need to not over-attach in order to prepare them for their death.

7 I need to not become involved
8 Just stay happy in the other world, in my world where I want to be
9 I feel that I can let go
10 There's nothing stopping me
11 Not people demanding (Kate)

12
13 In the transcendent mode of being, participants identified reflecting on their being-
14 in-the-world as a fundamental part of their experience of 'spirituality' and meaning-
15 making. Their sense of self became more fluid as they detached from their physical
16 and social worlds, transcending their immediate reality and reviewing what mattered
17 to them now that they were dying.

18 What is life like at the moment?
19 Peaceful and quiet
20 Well I attempt to make it as peaceful and quiet
21 And withdrawing really from the well world
22 I sort of divide into the well world and the ill world
23 Where I am
24 And I don't want to be in the well world
25 There are just so many demands I am not really interested in anymore
26 I want to be in this side (Kate)

27
28 In the transcendent mode of being, an important part of the experience of 'spiri-
29 tuality' was finding meaning from thinking about the whole of the world or universe.
30 Participants felt that they had fulfilled their purpose and had nothing left to do. They
31 were living in the present moment and not driven towards a goal in the future other
32 than death itself. Having individual beliefs was important for their experience of 'spir-
33 ituality' and meaning-making, in terms of politics and religion. It seemed as though
34 their thoughts about the state of the world reflected their reduced need for individual
35 meaning and instead increased their desire to think about collective meaning.

36
37 What is my purpose in life?
38 That has gone now
39 Because I have lived my life
40 I have raised my three children
41 I thought that I'll probably sat down and talk with them and say I have no regrets
42 Maybe I might have done some of it differently
43 I have no regrets
44 I enjoy my life (Edith)

Conclusions

Our existentialist-informed hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of the data has identified different ways of making sense of life when living with advanced cancer. Finding meaning in life at the end of life can take the form of maintaining a connection with the social world (via the everyday mode of being) or it can take the form of detaching from the physical and social world and one's personal investment in it (via the transcendent mode). The transcendent mode of being offered meaning by transcending the personal, individual situation of being terminally ill and viewing the world from afar. In contrast, the everyday mode of being offered meaning through the experience of belonging-in-the-world. These two modes of being have important implications for the way the person experiences the givens of existence (van Manen, 1990). In the everyday mode of being, primary meaning is found in lived human relations and the enhancement of positive relationships in one's lives. In contrast, in the transcendent mode of being, withdrawal from lived human relations and a turning towards one's inner self become more meaningful. It was interesting to note that the decision to stop treatment seemed to be associated with the transcendent mode of being. However, it is important to stress that people can, and do, move between the two modes, depending on the context within which they find themselves. Regarding the usefulness of the notion of 'spirituality', although some of our participants (particularly when in the transcendent mode of being) did use the term, we conclude that what mattered to participants was that their lives remained meaningful and valuable and that 'spirituality' seems to be very much in the eye of the beholder.

Reflections

We hope that our example of an existentialist-informed hermeneutic phenomenological study has demonstrated how this method can be used in order to distil, capture and foreground meanings which structure the human experience of the end of life. We want to conclude by offering some reflections on how one may go about evaluating this type of research and how it might be used in order to inform practice. As one of us has argued elsewhere (Willig, in press) whilst the criteria traditionally used to evaluate quantitative research (i.e., reliability, representativeness, generalizability, objectivity and validity) are not applicable to qualitative research, such research does involve a process of systematic, cyclical, critical reflection whose quality can be assessed. However, the criteria we use for evaluating a qualitative study must be informed by the study's epistemological position. In the case of existentialist-informed hermeneutic phenomenology, this means that scrutiny of the study's use of reflexivity and the researcher's awareness of their use of their own thoughts and feelings about what the participant is saying in order to uncover meaning will be an important part of an evaluation. In addition, an examination of the extent to which the study explores (and ideally theorizes) the relationship between accounts (i.e., both the participants' accounts, that is to say the data, as well as the researcher's analytic account) and the

1 context(s) within which these have been produced, would also be useful. Regarding
2 the usefulness of this type of research we would argue that an increased awareness of
3 the diverse ways in which people engage with fundamental existential concerns and
4 how this can be shaped by the (social, psychological, material) contexts within which
5 they find themselves, can only improve social–psychological policy formulations and
6 interventions.

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