Horizons Revealed: From Methodology to Method

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Abstract: In this article, the author reports on a method crafted to interrogate the data of a Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenological study that explored hope seen through the eyes of a small number of Australian youth. She advocates for transparency throughout data analysis, by commencing with an explication of Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology, followed by a description of the manner by which the data were interrogated. It is a basic premise of this work that all too often authors have adopted thematic analysis uncritically, and have used this method of analysis without considering its fit to the philosophical or methodological orientation of the study, and this practice has remained, by and large, unchallenged. While not advocating against thematic analysis per se, the author disputes that this analytical method is appropriate for studies that are grounded by the philosophical underpinnings of Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology, and therefore offers a unique method of data analysis.

Keywords: phenomenology, Gadamer, Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology, hermeneutics, thematic analysis, themes, data analysis, nursing, hope

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Introduction

I recently completed a study that explored hope seen through the eyes of a small number of

Australian youth (Turner, 2003), in which the philosophical underpinnings of Hans Georg

Gadamer (1972/1989) were used to explore this phenomenon. Concepts from Gadamer that

were used included pre-understanding, *Bildung,* fore-projection, prejudice, and fusion of

horizons. As each of these concepts has particular meanings, as explicated through the work of

Gadamer, I inculde in this article a brief explanation of these concepts, followed by a more

indepth discussion of how I used them to craft this study, and in particular to undertake data

analysis. Permission to conduct this study was given by the Deakin University Ethics

Committee, and all participants gave their written, informed consent prior to their participation.

In this article, I focus on the manner by which concepts from Gadamer were used to illuminate

and distil the essence of hope, as seen through the eyes of the study participants. It is a premise

of this article that though the phenomenological method has been used extensively within

nursing research (Crotty, 1996), a number of published studies claim to have utilized

phenomenology in the conceptualization of their study without giving a clear indication of which

philosophical tradition informed their work (Lillibridge, Cox, & Cross, 2002; Koivisto,

Hanhonen, & Valsanen, 2002; Thomlinson, 2002; Locsin & Matua,, 2000; Mukherjee, Slopec, &

Turnbull, 2000; Usher, 2001), report that they have undertaken a "hermeneutic phenomenology"

without specifying which philosophical tradition(s) influenced their thinking (Todres, Feelbrook,

& Albarran, 2000; Hemsley & Glass, 1999; Boughton, 2002; Dunniece & Slevin, 2002), or

report undertaking a Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenological study, without giving evidence

of their work being grounded by this philosophy (Breeding & Turner, 2002; FitzGerald, Pearson,

& McCutcheon, 2001). These observations raise a number of questions, among them whether

novice or early career researchers have the acumen to focus their studies through a particular methodological lens. Another question is whether researchers feel it is important to make the theoretical/philosophical assumptions of their work known. A third question that arises is whether it is useful to report a work as having a particular philosophical orientation, if it does not appear to permeate all aspects of the study. Yet another is why do Gadamerian studies uncritically report using thematic analysis, despite claims made by Koch (1995) and Walters (1994) that this method of analysis is clearly aligned to Husserlian phenomenology. Though I do not claim to have the answers to these questions, I have considered them over a long period of time, and suspect that because many philosophers do not present a research method per se, some researchers may find it difficult to translate philosophy into clearly articulated research strategies. Therefore, in this article, my aim is to add to the body of research knowledge by offering a method of data analysis which is clearly aligned to Gadamer's philosophy of understanding.

Foregrounding this study: The exploration of hope in youth

As mentioned above, in this study I explored the phenomenon of hope as seen through the eyes of ten Australian youth between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, a generally accepted definition of 'youth' (Bowes, Suris, & Buhlmann, 1995). My interest in this topic arose, in part, out of a belief, supported in the literature, that many youth in Australia are facing severe challenges to their physical, emotional, social, psychological, and cultural integrity. For example, examination of key reports, detailing the incidence of early drug-taking behaviors, homelessness, self-harm behaviors, depressive disorders, and youth crime statistics, suggests that many of the youth in Australia have lost resilience as well as vital connections to their community (National Mental Health Strategy, 1998; Australian Health Ministers, 1992;

Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services, 1996; Commonwealth Department

of Health and Family Services, 1997). Bessant and Watts (1999) claim that "although there are

problems with estimating the youth unemployment rate, the ABS [Australian Bureau of

Statistics] rate has stayed consistently high though the 1980's and 1990's" (p. 256), with the rate

of youth unemployment for 1996 being 20.7%. In 1994, Australia was found to be the world

leader in suicide rates among 15 to 24 year olds (Lewis, 1994), and the Australian Bureau of

Statistics reports that "Youth suicide rates are higher than many other countries, and are

increasing … claiming around 17 lives per 100,000 population per year" (Australian Bureau of

Statistics, 2003). When suicide is seen as the only alternative to life, this demands that hope be

placed on the agenda at all levels, that is, within federal, state, and local government initiatives,

research, school curricula, health care, and community action initiatives, and within family units.

Thus, this study was particularly timely because it provided an indepth understanding of hope

from the unique perspective of the participants of this study, providing an opportunity for health

care professionals to re-examine their understanding of hope in youth, from a contemporary

perspective.

Gadamerian phenomenology and its application to this study

Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, extended the existential, ontological exploration of

understanding through placing emphasis on the study of language (Koch, 1995). He also

presented a phenomenological view that denounced the notion of the scientific method as the

exclusive avenue to truth. Unlike Husserl (1964), Gadamer refuted the notion that experience or

Erfahrung could be studied from the position of a neutral observer, detached or removed from

the immediacy of experience. As stated by Palmer, "Gadamer's argument rests strongly in his

detailed critical analyses of previous thinking about language, historical consciousness and the aesthetic" (Palmer, 1969, p. 166).

A fundamental tenet of Gadamer's phenomenology is the rejection of the notion of subject-object (Pascoe, 1996). According to Gadamer, "The purpose of my investigation is to discover what is common to all modes of understanding and to show that understanding is never a subjective relation to a given 'object' but to the history of its effect; in other words, understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood" (Gadamer, 1972/1989, p. xxxi). Further, Gadamer believed that pre-understanding was a condition and necessary part of understanding or *Verstehen*. He believed that we must be firmly situated in the world before understanding can take place. In other words, "We understand the world before we begin to think about it; such pre-understanding gives rise to thought and always conditions it" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 11).

Gadamer advocated a return to a humanistic tradition because, in his view, the modern concepts of science were insufficient to generate understanding of human beings and their activities (Gadamer, 1972/1989). He believed that understanding was not an epistemological problem, but rather an ontological one. He also believed that the task of hermeneutics was to "clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning" (p. 292). In his writings, Gadamer embraced the notion of the hermeneutic circle, where we must "understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole" (p. 291).

Consistent with the views expressed above, the hermeneutic phenomenological method used in this study acknowledged that the phenomenon of hope could best be understood in the context of the participants' experiences of being in the world. All understanding is self-understanding, which is Gadamer's version of the hermeneutic circle. In this sense then, "Understanding is projection and what it projects is expectations that precede the text" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 166).

Within this study, one of Gadamer's key concepts that underpinned my approach to my participants was *Bildung* or openness to meaning (Gadamer, 1972/1989). Bildung, which originated in medieval mysticism, first suggested cultivating the image of God in man. In the post-Renaissance period, the usage of the term suggested the realization of human potential (Palmer, 1969). The structure of Bildung is crucial to understanding, as elucidated by Gadamer. In Bildung, one "leaves the all-too-familiar and learns to allow for what is different from oneself, and that means not only to tolerate it but to live in it" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 70). Bildung is keeping one's self open to what is other and embracing more universal points of view; or detaching one's self from one's immediate desires and purposes (Gadamer, 1972/1989). Openness to meaning is essential to understanding a phenomenon being explored because, in the words of Gadamer, "Working our appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed 'by the things' themselves, is the constant task of understanding" (p. 267).

Bildung was manifest in this study in several ways. First, as part of my methodology, and prior to meeting my participants, I dwelt extensively on the topic and wrote a journal of my own ideas, attitudes and understandings about hope. This enabled me to develop a clear (yet evolving) understanding of what I knew about hope at any particular point in time. This movement

towards identifying my own initial understanding of hope was crucial, as I could not know if I

was moving towards an understanding of my participant's experiences of hope unless I

understood my own prior assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes about hope. To illustrate this point

consider the following excerpts from my journal.

> *I realize now that I have commenced this study, that my own understanding of
> hope is severely limited. I have not dwelt on the concept or experience of hope
> over time – instead, I have taken its existence for granted. Also, I have not
> really had a passion to identify the essence of this phenomenon – I am getting
> one, but I don't feel like I know much about hope at all. Whilst I do know that at
> times I have been very hopeful, there also have been times in my life when I have
> been flat; but I can't precisely say why, how, or if my feelings are related to the
> phenomenon of hope. I am not clear whether there were any real differences
> between hope and other similar life experiences such as optimism, joy, wishing
> and determination. I wonder whether the people who will be a part of my study
> will have hope or whether they will be hopeless – I suspect that a lot of them
> may have lost hope along the way, but I guess that I'll just have to wait and see.*

My journal goes on:

> *Having said this though, because I have been dwelling on the meaning of hope I
> actually realize that I spend little time or energy thinking about hope and feeling
> desperate for things to go well in my life. I don't think this is a consequence of
> general maturing (ha ha, getting older you mean) or being hopeful – I think it's
> an outgrowth of developing a rich and deeply meaningful relationship with God.
> Actually, when I think about it, it surprises me to realize that I have stopped
> hoping for things in my life to turn out for the good – I just believe, from a
> Christian perspective, that they will. This is not to deny the day-to-day 'niggles'
> and struggles of living and life – rather it attests to the fact that I am assured on
> a personal level that my life will go well, and I will spend eternity with God. I
> acknowledge this statement as a personal reflection of who I am and what I
> believed in. But, I think this belief is a faith statement, not an expression of
> hope.*

Bearing in mind that Gadamer (1972/1989) describes things that we know and believe as our

horizons, and asserts that in order to understand another we must first understand ourselves, I

will continue to share my reflections from my journal on my initial thoughts about hope:

> *For me, hope is about expectations for the future and a life that has meaning,
> purpose and is richly fulfilling. It is also about the belief that people have the*

right to experience all the good that life has to offer and a hope that there will not be too many crushing disappointments or blows along the way. What I mean is that hope is about future expectations and a wish that life will be kind. Hum, I just realized that for me hope and wishing were deeply enmeshed – I hadn't really thought about that before. Also, my hope is about determination, will and a zest for life – the capacity to face life square on, without regrets and fears that cripple or stand in the way. If I had to sum up all of these sentiments in one succinct statement, it would be that hope for me is the belief that we can and should look forward to a life that is good.

A further journal entry revealed the following sentiments:

Well, I've still been thinking about hope and I've come to the conclusion that I hope humanity will work towards preserving the integrity of our world – preserving it to ensure that its resource is abundantly available for future generations. It seems to me that this is what hope is about – caring, having compassion and participating fully in achieving the desires of our hearts. For me hope is also about the possibilities of living in a world that is safe, predictable, reliable and dependable. Having said this though, I am deeply aware that the world in which we live is under threat from many different sources. When I think about threats to the biophysical integrity of our world it turns me to hoping that we will wake up in time to realize that our world is precious, its resources finite and our responsibilities to protect it great. So for me, hope in this instance emerges from fears and threats – interesting, that's what the literature says.

 As I summed up these statements on hope, I wrote the following:

For me hope is the capacity to look beyond one's self and embrace a way of living that includes respecting and treating with reverence all that the world has to offer. So, if I put together my first hope statement with this one, I believe that hope is an enduring capacity to look forward and to embrace life, believing that it has purpose and is rich and meaningful.

From these descriptions of my hope, it can be seen that my expressions of hope were not

unique, nor were they original. I carried this knowledge and experience of my hope

with me when I interacted with my participants, and I used them as them filter through

which I heard their stories, explored the literature, and interacted with the texts of my

participants. However, I did not hold my thoughts in a place of supremacy, as I was

prepared to learn something new about hope. I was also prepared for the texts of my

participants to tell me something new about the nature and experience of hope, as seen

through their eyes. Again, as Gadamer (1972/1989) asserts, it is important to be aware

of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness, thus asserting its

own truth against one's own fore-projections.

The second way Bildung was manifest in this study was in my decision to undertake interviews

that used an open-ended, non-linear approach that was conversational in nature, when interacting

with the participants of the study (Geanellos, 1999). However, this is not to suggest that the

interviews were without intent or object, for the intent – understanding the phenomenon of hope

– was clear from the outset. In other words, "The object of the conversation is what both want to

understand, and it is by reference to this object that they reach a mutual understanding. This

joint object, not the partners, conducts the conversation" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 209).   On a

practical level, although I certainly thought about questions on hope prior to conducting my

interviews, based on my own understandings and my review of the literature, these questions did

not serve as an interview guide. Instead, they served as a rich ferment of ideas that enabled me

to probe with my participants as they engaged in a deep and rich exploration of the phenomenon

of hope.

As the interviews unfolded, I expected that my own concept of hope may differ from that of my

participants and in this regard I was guided in my interactions by what my participants had to

say. In fact, each time my participants mentioned some aspect of hope that I had not previously

considered, I was encouraged, because I realized my horizons were expanding, and I was gaining

a more thorough understanding of this phenomenon. Throughout the interviews, I attended to

the subtleties of intensity of the speaking voice, the contradictory moments, emotional content

and tone and the extent to which whole sentences rather than recursive speech patterns were used

(Opie, 1989). I also offered interpretations of the participant's comments, sought clarification by

questioning and probed for deeper explanations on numerous occasions (Geanellos, 1999). Each

of these actions demonstrated an attitude of being open, which facilitated moving towards

understanding and interpretation. In the words of Gadamer (1972/1989), "Working our

appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed 'by the things' themselves, is the

constant task of understanding" (p. 267).

According to Gadamer (1972/1989), a movement toward understanding consists not only of

Bildung, or remaining open to meaning, but also of fore-projection or developing an early

understanding of what has been said. In attempting to understand the story of another, the

movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole again.

Thus, the circle of understanding is not a methodological circle, but describes an element of the

ontological structure of understanding or being (Gadamer, 1972/1989). The hermeneutic task

becomes of itself a questioning of things, whereby early understandings or fore-projections

become replaced by more suitable projections, as it becomes clear what the meaning is. In other

words, fore-projections are constantly revised as new meanings emerge from the text,

constituting the movement of understanding and interpretation (Gadamer, 1972/1989).

Throughout this study, particularly while undertaking data analysis, I engaged in constant and

incessant dialogue with the texts in an attempt to understand what was there, and to use the

understandings gained to further explore meaning. As I sifted through the texts and early

understanding arose, I challenged myself to dwell extensively on what I found. That is, I read

each text multiple times each day, over several consecutive days, and then put it aside while I

thought deeply about what I had learned and what it could possibly mean. Often this thinking

time took several days, and when I reached a point where no new thoughts or questions surfaced,

I returned to the text to read it again, to see what points would stand out and what new ideas

would emerge. I did not put a text aside until I was confident that I had a thorough recall of its

expressions of hope, and only then moved on to the next text. I also made a conscious decision

to not close out on early impressions, but to wait to see what new ideas would surface as I

progressed on a text by text basis with the analysis. As I read the next text, having remembered

the unique expressions of previous ones, I made margin notes of points of similarity and

difference, to be returned to at a later time. For example, I noted that a number of participants

talked about the importance of love as it related to hope, though others talked about the

importance of relationship and still others talked about the importance of closeness. I sensed

these thoughts were interconnected, while also appreciating that there were both similarities and

differences in each of these expressions, as one participant was talking about romantic love,

another was speaking of the importance of their relationship to the earth, another was speaking

about befriending a stranger in need, another was speaking about getting in touch with the self,

another was speaking about loving their family, and another was referring to being close to God.

Rather than attempting to group these expressions in particular ways, in the early stages of data

analysis I raised questions about what each person was saying, and noted in my margins, "Is this

about love? Is this about relationship? Is this about caring? Is this about connecting? Is this

about reverence for the earth? Is this about the importance of family?" I asked myself what was

beneath each expression, and whether they could be seen in a similar light, one to the other, or

whether they were expressing quite different ideas or concepts. My margin notes pointed me to

particular segments across transcripts, reminding me to read and re-read the stories that were

relayed, so that I could apprehend the fullness of what was being said.

An important distinction to be made regarding the nature of understanding being is that, within

Gadamer's phenomenology, objectivity consists not in avoiding preconception but in its

confirmation. As we have seen, interpretation of lived experience begins with an assumption of

familiarity and proceeds to listening with openness to the unexpected and a readiness to revise

our preconceptions (Gadamer, 1972/1989). This idea is similarly expressed by Parse (1995) in

her discussion of valuing, where she indicated that valuing is determining that which is

cherished, by either confirming or disconfirming it. Gadamer believes "A person trying to

understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something" (Gadamer, 1972/1989, p. 269). Within

the notion of understanding, it is important to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can

present itself in all its otherness, thus asserting its own truth against one's own fore-projections

(Gadamer, 1972/1989). For example, one bias that I carried into my study was a belief that some

participants would probably be without hope, that is they would be hopeless. This belief,

however, was challenged as I attentively listened to their stories. I realized that although there

were times in their lives when they expressed that they felt bleak, they did not define these

moments as hopelessness, and further said it would be impossible to live without hope. Their

revelations caused me to redefine my concepts of hope and hopelessness, coming to the

conclusion that the opposite of hope is not hopelessness, but despair. With these thoughts in

mind, it can be seen that when constructing a study using Gadamerian phenomenology, there is

an imperative to present information to the reader regarding our own understanding and unveil

our own prejudice, so that our readers can determine for themselves whether there is any truth-

value to our findings.

I come now to discussion about the nature of prejudice, which is crucial when one considers the hermeneutic rule where we must understand the whole in terms of the parts, and the parts in terms of the whole. In my research on hope, I maintained that I was a part of the whole, as the story about hope that was being relayed, was filtered through my ears and my own understanding. Further, the participants of this research were not telling their story in a vacuum, nor was I receiving it in a vacuum. As Dunbar (1998) states, "all scholarship involves implicit or explicit value positions…scholarship does not exist in a vacuum" (p. 460). If we consider Gadamer's (1972/1989) notions of understanding, he says, "All understanding inevitably involves some prejudice" (p. 270). Rather than proceeding from a belief that prejudices are subjective accidents, which are remediable, it is imperative to think of prejudice not as a false judgment but as a condition of truth, because as Gadamer explains, prejudices are "historical reality itself and the condition of understanding it" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 170).

Thus, within this research, I embraced the notion that prejudices are expectations or projections about the whole that are continually revised as more parts of the whole come into view. Gadamer asserts that understanding involves discriminating among prejudices, not eliminating them; questioning our beliefs about our understanding and becoming prepared for it to say something new; and responding with an openness to the unexpected (Weinsheimer, 1985). Therefore, in this study, making use of prejudices and sorting them out was the process of interpretation itself.

Understanding is a productive activity rather than a reproductive one and as such involves mediation, integration, and assimilation (Weinsheimer, 1985). The things that are within our immediate world, that are a part of our own understanding, are our horizon; that is our particular

view point, which is constantly in the process of formation and being shaped by our past and our

awareness of the present. Additionally, things that are beyond our immediate standpoint are also

part of our horizon. Thus, acquiring a horizon means that we embrace near- and far-sightedness,

to the extent of our own capacities and limitations (Weinsheimer, 1985). This concept is

markedly different from that of polarity of thought, which "limits one from seeing the cosmic

view and the multiple possibilities and options" (Reeder, 1992, p. 22).

Gadamer explains that our horizon is something that moves with us, rather than something into

which we move, adding that when we find ourselves in situations that we wish to understand, our

task is to throw light into it. This task is never entirely finished, thus it can be seen that we have

an infinite capacity to refine and extend our understanding of things. Gadamer determined that

fusion of horizons occurs when our own horizon is understood in order to understand that of

another. He further said that an act of understanding occurs when there is a conscious act of

fusing two horizons, creating historical consciousness (Taylor, 1991). For this study, fusion of

horizons occurred on multiple occasions, as a cyclic activity, as the phenomenon of hope was

identified, not only within each participant's story but also across their stories. Further, fusion of

horizons will occur again and again, each time another reads the finding of my work, forming

their own understanding of the phenomenon being explored.

Reflecting on the above descriptions of Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology, this

methodology was selected for the conduct of my study for several reasons. It offered me, as the

researcher, an opportunity to richly and deeply probe the phenomenon and experiences of hope

with my participants, without having to assume that there was an Archimedean point of view

from which this phenomenon ought to be seen. It enabled me to hold particular positions and

understandings about what I know and think about hope, without having to posit that this prior

knowledge was of any great importance, or was of any greater importance, than that which was

held by my participants or within the literature. It enabled me to explore my prior assumptions

about the nature and understanding of hope, while also insisting that I remain open to all other

possibilities, and to the otherness to which I was exposed throughout the duration of this study.

Additionally, it offered an opportunity for my participants to be genuinely and authentically

heard as they expressed their thoughts and ideas about hope, what it is and what is meant to

them. Thus, for the participants and myself, our engagement in creating meaning had the

potential to be liberating, whilst it also held a possibility of being both humbling and frightening.

Going to the place where being resided did, in many instances, open Pandora's box, and I

remained conscious and aware of the need to be both respectful and non judgmental of my

participants, not only during our time together but also during the process of data analysis.

The study method explicated

From the outset of my study, I always believed it would be difficult for my participants to

articulate their ideas about hope. Because I found it difficult to put into words what hope was to

me, I believed it would be difficult for my participants as well. This belief was reinforced

through the literature, most notably by Hall (1990), who wrote that hope is "so integral to

humanness it is difficult to describe in words" (p. 179). Therefore, in my study I used

photography, as well as openly dialogical indepth interviews, as a means of prompting the

participants' revelations about hope. In relation to this, I supplied each participant with a

disposable color film camera, and asked them to imagine that they were being paid to mount a

photographic exhibition of hope. Keeping this request in mind, they were asked to take pictures

that in their view showed hope. I explained that the photographs would be developed at my

expense, and that I would bring them along to their interview, to prompt our discussion about

hope. Interviews were audiotaped and conducted in a private location which was free from

distractions, and they lasted anywhere from 1 1/2 to 2 hours. During the interviews, photographs

were used not only as triggers to prompt discussion, but also as prompts to assist the participants

to put into words ideas that they were finding difficult to express. For example, at times I would

say to a participant who was struggling to express their thoughts, "Well, why don't you look at

your photographs, there may be a picture there that shows what you are trying to say". This

prompt often led to discursive as well as lively discussion that possibly would not have occurred

otherwise.

During each interview I was exposed to the power of photographs and the capability that they

had to create passionate and lively discussion, a point raised in the literature by Collier (1967),

who stated that as a research instrument, a camera has the capacity to enhance what occurs in an

interview setting. He claims that this is because once a picture is taken, a photographer enters

into a period of excitement, in which there is an anticipation of feedback, as well as the

excitement of seeing the images that were taken and sharing them with others. I certainly found

this to be true, and felt the phenomenon of hope become alive, feeling energy and excitement

about what my participants' were telling me. As mentioned previously, based on my own

assumptions, I thought talking about hope would be an arduous task, but it was not. It became

relatively simple. For instance, through photographs, my participants showed me images of hope

that were close to their heart. I was taken on a journey about their hopes and passion to fulfill

their dreams and achieve great heights. Whereas our conversations prior to the introduction of

photographs were friendly and informative, they were not passionate, swift-flowing, or filled

with yearning. However, the dialogue that accompanied the photographs was animated and full

of life. Though these descriptions may seem like exaggerations, when photographs were being

discussed, the audiotapes reveal a marked difference to the tone, tempo, and animation of speech.

This is reflected in superscript annotations on my transcripts, which show such things as ^{voice really loud and rapid here,} or ^{said with merriment in the voice} or ^{said with a whisper} or ^{whimsical and sad}. My experiences in using

photographs were very positive and rewarding, and I found I grew in confidence about how to

introduce photographs into the course of our conversations. For instance, I learned it was a good

technique to hand over the photographs at the outset of an interview, which clearly

communicated their authorship. In handing over the photographs, I encouraged my participants

to take their time reviewing them, saying we would commence our interview when they were

ready. When they leaned over to comment about a particular shot, I shared in their enthusiasm

and delight and there were many moments when we laughed and shared our companionship. For

some participants, after this initial review they put their photographs aside, as if they were

signaling "Okay, I'm ready to get down to business now". For others, they launched into

insights about hope straight away, explaining why they took a particular photograph and what it

meant to them, thus commencing our interview. I quickly learned to adapt my interview style to

the tempo and mood of my participants, and I believe this attitude not only demonstrated my

respect, but also my determination to enact relationships of equality. In essence, I found

photographs to be conversation enhancers, just as the literature suggested and, in every instance,

using photographs enabled deeper and more reflective positions to be unveiled about hope than

had been possible up to that point in time. Following each interview, I personally undertook

verbatim transcription, creating the text for analysis.

The method of data analysis

One of the greatest challenges that I faced in this study was to select a method for data analysis

that was congruent with the philosophical underpinnings of Gadamerian hermeneutic

phenomenology. This was a challenge for a number of reasons, not the least of which was that

there were no exemplars presented within the literature to guide my analysis. Indeed, as noted

by Roberts and Taylor (1998), "many of the so-called phenomenological methods leave

prospective researchers wondering just what to do" (p. 109), and as asserted by Lawler (1998),

"One of the great dramas …is making the transition from philosophy to methodology to design

and the selection of data collection methods" (p. 109). Further, as Caelli (2001) says researchers

"must look long and hard to find materials to assist them in developing their research plans" (p.

273). Although numerous contemporary research textbooks incorporate discussion on data

analysis (Cantwell, 1976; Crookes & Davies, 1998; Bowling, 1999; DePoy & Gitlin, 1994;

Polgar & Thomas, 1995; Talbot, 1995; Grbich, 1999; Nieswiadomy, 1993), these texts often do

not provide detailed descriptions of how to undertake data analysis when a study is

conceptualized using particular philosophical orientations, and some omit discussion about

analysis of qualitative data altogether (Polgar & Thomas, 1995). For instance, although Grbich's

(1999) text is devoted to qualitative research, and identifies that there are "four ideal modes of

analytical procedures that can be generated" (p. 222), little information is given on how to use

these modes in the process of data analysis. Additionally, although numerous texts have chapters

devoted to qualitative data analysis, many of these texts limit discussion to methodologies

advanced by authors such as Spiegelberg (1971), Van Kaam (1996), Giorgi (1970), Colaizzi

(1978), and van Manen (1997), whose methods ultimately specify pathways of thematic analysis;

or they advocate for grounded theory analysis (Roberts & Taylor, 1998; DePoy & Gitlin, 1994;

Talbot, 1995). Others discuss qualitative data analysis in a superficial or cursory way, giving

little insight into how to undertake data analysis (Nieswiadomy, 1993). Thus, the extent to

which the researcher has access to information regarding how to undertake data analysis with a

particular philosophical orientation in mind is limited, and tacitly a message is given that there is

little need to consider philosophical orientation when devising one's method of analysis.

If we consider the philosophical ideas espoused by Gadamer (1972/1989), a movement towards

understanding takes place not from the position of a neutral observer, who is detached or

removed from the immediacy of the experience, but through the intimacy of understanding that

occurs as a part of the hermeneutic circle. Within this context, understanding occurs because we

circle from the whole to the parts and back to the whole again, constantly forming and

continually revising our understandings or projections about the whole as more parts of it come

into view. During this process, prejudices are formed and reformed, and it is important at this

point to remember that prejudices are not false judgments. Rather, they are conditions of

understanding. Thus, instead of eliminating our prejudices, we discriminate among them;

constantly questioning our beliefs and our understanding as we become prepared for the

phenomenon we are exploring to say something new to us.

According to Gadamer (1972/1989), throughout the process of achieving understanding we begin

with and remain committed to a determination to reject the notion of subject-object, instead

actively acknowledging that "understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood" (p.

xxxi). In other words, we seek to discover what is common to all modes of understanding by

responding with openness to the unexpected and a willingness to embrace more universal points

of view. Throughout, we fully acknowledge that pre-understandings and fore-projections, that

are a part of our being in the world, will be constantly revised. We begin with an assumption of

familiarity and proceed to listening with openness to the unexpected and a readiness to revise our

preconceptions (Gadamer, 1972/1989). Thus, in identifying the findings of this study, I

advocated for transparency by disclosing the thoughts and opinions I had about hope (my

preunderstandings) prior to interacting with my participants:

1) by identifying early ideas that emerged (fore-projections) as I contemplated the

   wholeness of what my participants had to say about hope;

2) by revealing prejudices that emerged throughout the analytical process;

3) and by explicating hope as a fusion of horizons between myself and my participants.

Having considered these essential points, the manner in which I interrogated my data to achieve

a fusion of horizons is now identified.

Following each interview, the audiotape(s) were transcribed verbatim to create the text for

analysis, which was undertaken using an iterative process that is closely aligned to the tenets of

Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology. That is, I listened to and read the text and audiotapes

over and over again, while adopting an initial attitude of Bildung, or openness to meaning. It is

difficult to precisely describe when I moved from attentive listening and reading, to listening and

reading for the purpose of gaining early impressions or fore-projections of each participant's

personal meanings of hope. Perhaps this is best described by saying that I reached a point where

each participant's expressions or story became evocatively intimate; that is, as I read each

transcript, I could also hear what each participant was saying, even when the tape was not on.

When this happened, I knew that I was ready to begin interacting with each participant's story on

a new level. From this point, data analysis proceeded, in the main, through interaction with the

texts. As mentioned previously, as I reread each participant's text, I began to note key ideas in

the margins, so that I could return to them later. I returned to the text and these margin notes

again and again, and as I did so I circled from the whole to the parts and back to the whole again,

which is Gadamer's version of the hermeneutic circle (Weinsheimer, 1985; Gadamer,

1972/1989). I began to deliberately search for patterns in ideas and recursive thoughts that were

expressed, as well as singular or unique ideas. I dwelt extensively on ideas as they began to

emerge, and formed projections about the whole of each participant's story of hope, embracing

some prejudices and discriminating among others. I constantly questioned my beliefs about what

each participant said, eagerly looking for points of similarity, as well as differences, between

each participant's expressions of hope. I also began to actively dwell on elements of my

participants' expressions that were similar to my own, as well as those that were distinctly

different. For example, as my journal revealed, I took the existence of hope for granted and

believed it was an enduring capacity to look forward throughout life. However, through deeply

contemplating the ideas put forth by my participants, these thoughts about hope were challenged.

My participants helped me to understand there was passivity about the way I thought about hope,

that is that hope just existed. This was in clear contradiction to the ideas expressed by my

participants, who shared that hope was something you had to struggle to hold on to, it was a

driving force of life, that enabled them to fight for what they believed in, and what they aspired

to. Their revelations caused me to abandon my prejudice that hope just existed, instead

acknowledging that hope sometimes is hard work. Ultimately, this, and many other shifts in

understanding, enabled me to work toward a fusion of horizons, whereby the phenomenon of

hope for the participants of this study was identified.

The period that I spent undertaking data analysis and developing an early understanding of the

phenomenon of hope was a very exciting time for me. I found that once I developed intimacy

with the participants' dialogue, I began to accommodate their views and develop an early

understanding of hope from their perspective. Ideas began to tumble out of my memory of my

participants' stories and from the pages of their texts into my consciousness. At first, these were

a jumble of thoughts, impressions, feelings, emotions, and expressions. I realized that it was

imperative to bring some order into the thoughts that were amassing, as well as the way I was

thinking about my participants' expressions of hope. To facilitate this process, I made a

conscious decision to interact with the texts one at a time. On each of the texts, I returned time

and time again to the extensive margin notes that I had made, as I dwelt on what the participants

said. Eventually all margin notations and salient items were transferred onto separate computer-

spread sheets, so that I could see the data of each participant in its totality while I contemplated

them. This technique was helpful because as I looked at the data sets, while comparing it to the

original text and in the context in which it was said, I realized that I needed to make some

adjustments to each to enable them to more faithfully reflect the words of the speaker, to the best

of my ability.

Prejudice – moving closer to understanding the phenomenon of hope
Having identified some early understandings or fore-projections of what my participants were

telling me about hope, the next step of the analytic process was to allow prejudices or

expectations/projections about the whole to surface and to discriminate among them. This

involved carefully contemplating each data set in its totality, while asking myself "What is this

person saying and how can these ideas be understood in meaningful ways or be encapsulated

under prejudices that reflected their major concerns?" As I worked with the data sets, I found it

necessary to circle back and forth from the original texts to the data sets many times over. In

doing this, I found that as I moved things around, both on paper and in my head, I became

increasingly confident that prejudices were beginning to surface. At times I changed my mind

about my reflections, feeling that the words I selected to exemplify a prejudice did not portray

the essence of what a participant was telling me. So I again returned to the text to explore the

context in which the discussion took place, and finally I was able to identify a number of

prejudices from the data of each participant. To illustrate this point I offer the following

example.

One of my participants, Keisha, centered her discussion on hope around the difficulties of her

life. She relayed that, at the age of fourteen, she became pregnant. She left home to live with

her boyfriend's family, because she said her father treated her and her siblings in a harsh, strict

way, without any freedom. She said that even if she hadn't become pregnant, she would have

left anyway, because she was tired of being treated like a prisoner. She reflected that her mother,

who should have protected her from her father's abuse, used to seek her father's approval by

telling him all the bad things that she and the other children had done, and although she wasn't

the one that harmed them, she didn't stop it from happening either. Three months after she left,

her son was born, just as she turned fifteen.

After her son was born, Keisha continued to go to high school, taking him to childcare at her

school. She completed Year 11, but did not think she was ready to progress to Year 12, so she

re-enrolled in Year 11. However, she did not complete this year, because her son was killed in a

house fire, for which she blamed herself because she had left a lighted candle in his room. He

was three years old at the time and, about a week after he died, Keisha found out that she was

pregnant again. She said that she had to make a decision on whether to go ahead and keep the

child she was carrying, and wanted to make the best decision, not based on wanting to replace

her son. She had counseling, and in the end she decided to go through with the pregnancy, and

she gave birth to her daughter.

When her daughter was one, Keisha met and moved in with two women who subsequently

adopted her daughter, after they had all lived together for about four years. Adopting out her

daughter was an extremely hard decision for her to make. It caused her to explore numerous

avenues and options before she made it, because she wanted to do what was best for her child.

She also realized that, following the death of her son, she had not really grieved for him, and this

in some ways had stunted her growth. Following the adoption of her daughter, Keisha moved

interstate and had since met a woman with whom she had formed a deep and loving relationship.

They are now living together. Her daughter comes to see her, and although she said the decision

to give her daughter up for adoption was hard, she felt it was necessary, to enable a lot of healing

to take place – both for her daughter and for herself.

Remembering that prejudices are not false judgments, but conditions of truth, or as Gadamer

(1972/1989) asserts "historical reality itself, and the condition of understanding it" (p. 170), as I

contemplated Keisha's story many of her prejudices surfaced, some of which were: being

abused, having to make hard decisions, loss of connections, living without love, finding love,

loss of choices, getting on with your life, sorrow, loss, trust, loss of trust, doing the right thing,

becoming whole, and healing. Keisha's was a powerful story, it invaded my thoughts, and I

dwelt in and on it for long periods of time. However, as I dwelt on this story, I began to

appreciate that, although the pain of Keisha's life was potent and powerful, it was not the whole

of her story. Though on the surface her story was full of pain, going deeper into Keisha's story

showed me that her prejudices of hope were not about the pathos of loss, but the victory of

winning. In the midst of sharing her story, she described her determination to do what ever it

took to become whole again, to be happy and to experience inner peace. In the wholeness of

Keisha's expressions of hope, as I circled from the whole to the parts, and back to the whole

again, the prejudices of growing and changing, having and establishing connections, loving and

being loved, release from uncertainty and fear and hopelessness were identified.

Fusion of horizons

Gadamer (1972/1989) says that our horizon is something that moves with us, rather than

something into which we move. He further says that when we find ourselves within situations

that we wish to understand, our task is to throw light into it. A fusion of horizons occurs when

our own horizon is understood in order to understand another's and understanding occurs when

there is a conscious act of fusing two or more horizons, creating historical consciousness.

Bearing these thoughts in mind, the next imperative of data analysis was to achieve

understanding, through fusion of the multiple horizons of hope that were expressed by my

participants. This was accomplished by carefully considering the prejudices that were revealed

in the texts, while constantly thinking about how to make meaning of what had been said.

Throughout this phase of data analysis, the questions that I kept asking myself over and over

were: What do all these prejudices mean?; How can their expressions be understood in light of

each other?; and How can their expressions be grouped in meaningful ways that give rise to a

rich and deep understanding of the phenomenon of hope? As I grappled with these questions I

realized that initially I was filled with tension, anxious to 'get it right' and to produce a work that

was meaningful and worthy of consideration by those interested in the phenomenon of hope in

youth. However, I began to relax when the full realization dawned that mine was just one of

many interpretations possible from exploring the data of this study. This is because my horizons

or particular viewpoints, which express who I am, are unique and constantly forming. They are

shaped not only by my past and my awareness of the present, but also by the fact that my

understanding changes over time. Throughout the time of this study, my understanding of hope

was continually enlarged, not only by what my participants told me, but also by what the

literature told me. Utilizing Gadamer's philosophy of understanding, I fully embraced the belief

that the task of understanding is never entirely finished, because we have an infinite capacity to

refine and extend our understanding of things. It is highly likely that if I interact with the data in

years to come I will see them differently, because (presumably) I will have grown and changed

over time! Also, each person who reads a report of the findings will also see these data in

different ways, bringing their own horizons into play. These comments are not given as an

excuse for conceptual sloppiness, nor are they meant to imply that there was a lack of rigor in

exploring the data. They are, however, consistent with the methodology of this study, which

acknowledged that understanding has multiple realities and multiple, almost endless possibilities.

To make explicit what occurred in the final stage of data analysis, during this stage I interacted

with the data in a number of different ways. I grouped and regrouped the prejudices of all the

participants, such as: having purpose fulfilled through hard work, looking forward in

anticipation, having the courage to change, being at peace with yourself and others, the triumph

over evil and ugliness, loving and being loved, reaching my full potential, having choices,

achieving things that are out of your reach, being useful to others, and having fulfilling dreams. I

tried to make sense of the totality of what my participants shared with me, by fusing our ideas to

create a cogent whole that could articulate the phenomenon of hope. As I engaged in this

process, four dominant horizons of hope were apparent, not as rigid boundaries that defined the

essence of hope, but rather as complex ideas that, when taken together, provided an

understanding of this phenomenon from the perspective of those engaged in its explication. I

returned to my participants, to discuss the horizons of hope and to ask them whether they

resonated within them. Their responses were affirmative, and they indicated that they felt

comfortable and right to them. Thus, these horizons were used to develop a definition of hope

that reflected the complexity of our understanding of this phenomenon.

Conclusion

Though there are similarities to the method of analysis that I devised to interact with the data of

this study and thematic analysis, there are also striking differences. Among them is the

philosophical intent that guided the analytical process, as well as a commitment to using

language consistent with the philosophy of understanding advocated through Gadamer.

Throughout the analysis of data, I was consciously aware that I was seeking to identify a fusion

of horizons, points where the multiple thoughts and realities of the various participants, myself

included, intersected and drew apart. I was also consciously aware of how my own thoughts and

ideas about hope changed as a consequence of my immersion in this study, drawing these

thoughts into the analytical process, not to occupy a place of supremacy, but to test emerging

ideas and develop new insights. I suggest on a philosophical level this is quite different from the

intent and processes of thematic analysis offered by Colaizzi (1978), Giorgi (1970), van Kaam

(1966) and Parse (1990), who recommend moving data to higher levels of abstractions, without

necessarily having a conscious drive to fuse multiple realities within a particular space in time.

It also does not align well with van Manen's phenomenology (1997), which suggests bracketing

as a strategy to research lived experience.

Despite the longevity of the phenomenological tradition, particularly within nursing, for those who use this research tradition, methods of analysis are still not adequately described within the literature, and those that are, do not always align with particular philosophical intents. I am not advocating for "methodolatry" which Janesick (1994) refers to as a "preoccupation with selecting and defending methods" (p. 215), nor am I advocating for a "recipe" approach to data analysis, which is highly prescriptive and leaves no room for creative license. However, I am suggesting it is timely to question whether the methods we have employed in the past will serve the needs of the future. Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect that generic research texts can, and will, identify every issue germane to a particular research tradition, and timely to call for the development of specialist texts, that expertly identify how a selected philosophical tradition or intent guides not only the conceptualization of a research study, but also the development of the methods of analysis.

In this article, I have described my experiences of designing an analytical pathway to interrogate the data of a Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenological study. It is hoped that this contribution will enable those who are interested in this research tradition, but are hesitant to undertake work that is underpinned by this philosophy, to gain greater confidence and understanding about how to analyze data using this philosophical orientation.

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