A critical analysis of articles using a Gadamerian based research method

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Abstract

It is over 20 years since Michael Crotty's ground-breaking critique of phenomenological research in nursing. However, rather than entering into the acrimonious discussions that followed, we developed a research method that we believed translated Gadamer's philosophy into the world of empirical research. Fundamental to that work was our differentiation of hermeneutics from phenomenology. The aim of this paper is to provide a critical analysis of the citations from publication in 2003 until the end of 2017.

We identified 402 citations of which 362 were included. 163 articles mentioned the article in passing, usually in a list of authors who had discussed hermeneutics. Sixteen citations misrepresented the method mainly claiming that we discussed a method for hermeneutic phenomenology (or phenomenological hermeneutics). Of the 117 citations that partially used the method, the main focus was the four steps of data analysis. Sixty studies used our method in totality although they derive from varying philosophical standpoints. Disappointingly, there has been little critique of our Gadamerian research method. For health disciplines to truly make progress in the academic stage it is vital that we engage in with critique, some of which will come through open and honest reflexive engagement with our topics.

Key words:

Gadamer, hermeneutic, phenomenology, critical analysis, nursing research.

Introduction

In the last half century, qualitative research has gained in prominence in many disciplines including most of the health sciences. While initially such publications were criticised as lacking the scientific integrity of the more established quantitative approaches (Mays, & Pope, 1995), gradually there has been a recognition of the added and discrete value that qualitative methods can bring to a problem. The history of qualitative research has been well documented (Alasuuturi, 2010) and it is not our intention to repeat it here but rather to acknowledge the in-depth insights it can offer, thereby complementing quantitative approaches designed to elicit a large amount of material from many subjects.

One of the most well-known, at least to nurses, early pieces of qualitative research is that of Patricia Benner (1982). The findings from her study "from novice to expert" have been used and adapted for use in several Anglophone countries throughout the world. She claimed to have underpinned the study with the philosophy of Heidegger (1927/93) and method of Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1980). Further studies following this work also claimed to have their methodological roots in a number of philosophers such as Heidegger and Ricoeur, although the most popular appeared to be Husserl, in particular his focus on bracketing. Thirty such articles formed the basis of a critique of nursing research by Michael Crotty (1996) who, in this very constructive work, suggested that many of the nurse researchers appeared to be misreading the intention of the original philosophers in which they were claiming to ground their work. This critique continued in an article by the same author (Crotty, 1997) who suggested that the only way for nurse, and presumably other, researchers interested in rooting their work in Heidegger's philosophy, need to return to Heidegger's "Being and Time" and give it a closer reading.

We were able to recognise some of the difficulties experienced by our fellow researchers, especially those who were unable to read the philosophical texts in their original language. For those concerned it was necessary to rely on a translation, which is, in itself an interpretation. At that stage in our careers we were particularly interested in the work of Hans Georg Gadamer whose hermeneutic focuses on how we come to develop a greater or different understanding of a phenomenon. This has been extensively discussed in his seminal text "*Wahrheit und Methode*" (Truth and Method) (Gadamer, 1962/1992). Rather than entering into the critique and counter critique of some of our colleagues such as Paley (2008) and, as we both speak German, we set ourselves the challenge of reading the text. Together with another colleague, a native German speaker, we then developed a research method that we believed faithfully translated Gadamer's philosophy into the world of empirical research (Fleming et al, 2003). This comprised five steps:

deciding upon a question, identification of pre- understandings, gaining understanding through dialogue with participants, gaining understanding through dialogue with text and establishing trustworthiness. Gaining understanding through dialogue with text contained four sub steps: examining the whole text, examining parts of the text, relating the parts to the whole and selecting passages that seem to be representative of the whole.

Furthermore, in developing that paper, we stated "that hermeneutics and phenomenology are not one and the same, nor is there one phenomenology or one hermeneutic" (p. 114) and went on to provide a robust defence of that statement. However, we later discovered that some authors had been saying we had provided a method for hermeneutic phenomenology or phenomenological hermeneutics. This prompted us to seek out all the citations of the work, and provide a critical analysis of them. This article reports our analysis.

Method

We initially searched for citations of our original article in Scopus, Medline and Web of Science and cross checked and supplemented our findings with google scholar, which contains many theses not in the mainstream databases. The time line we used dated from the article's publication in 2003 until the end of 2017.

Findings

We identified a total of 402 citations. Three were in a Chinese dialect and we had no means of reading them. A further seven had been miscataloged in the databases as they did not contain any reference to our original article and 21 were unobtainable despite attempting to contact authors directly following failed inter library loans. A further one, though technically available, could not be downloaded in a readable form. Five coursebooks in which the article was referenced in passing were also removed as were two conference abstracts as no further material from the presentations was available. Finally an annotated bibliography with no synopsis was also removed. This left us with a total of 362 useable citations for this review.

We included 158 Master's or PhD theses and 204 were journal articles. Their countries of origin are shown in **Figure 1 below**.
Figure 1 here

In terms of the discipline, as might have been expected, the majority by far were from nursing but also showed contributions from 21 other disciplines as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 here

Six theses and two journal articles listed the parent article in the references but no mention could be found in the text. One of the theses (Beals, 2004) wrongly attributed the article only to the first author.

One hundred and sixty three articles (86 theses and 77 journal articles) mentioned the article in passing, usually in a list of authors who had discussed hermeneutics. Because these do not discuss the method in any depth they are not analysed in this article. Two appeared to be secondary references although not acknowledged as such (Deemster, 2012, Ratta, 2016). Seventeen citations: three theses and 14 journal articles, misrepresented the method. Eighty journal articles and 33 theses made some use of the method, mainly using the four steps of analysis and finally 31 journal articles and 30 theses used the method as it had been intended.

Discussion

In this section, we critically analyse the citations that either misrepresented, partially used or used the method. By including the articles that partially or wholly used the method we are going further than Crotty whose main focus was constructive criticism of nursing research claiming to be carried out in a phenomenological framework.

Citations misrepresenting the method

As noted in the previous section, 16 of the citations misrepresented the method. In most instances this resulted from removing sentences from their context or claiming that we discussed a method for hermeneutic phenomenology (or phenomenological hermeneutics). Lee et al (2011), however are somewhat more obscure, attributing "unstructured interviews … to create narrative texts for analysis" (p.984) to us. In the original article we neither discuss unstructured interviews nor narrative texts" Alboliteeh (2015) has also completely misquoted our original article saying "In the literature a number of authors have recommended methods to carry out phenomenological hermeneutic studies" (p. 123) and later "The first step of this training involved a discussion around interviews and interviewing in phenomenological research; this was followed by practical training on how to conduct a phenomenological interview" (p. 129). The original paper states, "this paper begins from the stance that hermeneutics and phenomenology are not one and the same, nor is there one phenomenology or one hermeneutic" and "finally, we propose a five-step approach to conducting nursing research in the Gadamerian hermeneutic tradition" (Fleming et al, 2003 p. 114). Davies (2013) goes even further, misquoting the original text which reads "Disagreements in analyses were resolved by returning to the transcripts and sometimes by returning to participants" as "the research subjects must be consulted for feedback in Gadamerian phenomenology" (pp 140-

141). Not only do we clearly discuss differences between phenomenology and hermeneutics but we consistently emphasise Gadamerian hermeneutics. Likewise, at no time did we use the term "research subjects" and we did not suggest that transcripts must be returned to participants, although we acknowledge that this is an integral part of some other research methodologies. It is also not wrong in hermeneutics, but we simply do not believe it is a requirement.

Another area is which there is confusion is in that of "pre-understanding, which we acknowledge to be a cumbersome word and which we address in the revision of our method. Msiska et al (2014) write:

> Equally, Colaizzi's method does not overtly suggest that all understanding is dependent upon pre-understanding. Gadamer greatly upholds the importance of pre-understanding in facilitating understanding of the phenomena being investigated. Therefore, recognising that Gadamer's philosophical tenets underpinned this study, this was considered a significant limitation of Colaizzi's steps for phenomenological analysis. The modified framework for analysis incorporated some ideas from other phenomenologists

 attributing this to our article (Fleming et al, 2003, p.99). Msiska et al's insertion of the word "overtly" into our sentence "He [Colaizzi] did not suggest that all understanding is dependent upon preunderstanding" (p.116) completely changes its meaning rendering the third sentence meaningful in her own terms but not a true representation of what we wrote when we noted that Colaizzi's work was in direct contrast to Gadamer's and thus unsuitable for research rooted in a Gadamerian tradition.

Similar misrepresentation is encountered in the article by Ruggiero and Mong (2013) who advocate for the use of a thematic analysis following "data condensation" (p.5) referencing our article for the latter. From Ruggiero and Mong's article it is not clear what is meant by this term; one which certainly was not generated by us and is either a mistake in referencing or an invention by the authors. It is, however, a topic that may be worthy of further exploration by other authors if its creators were to give some more detail as to its meaning.

Klicoyne and Dowling's (2007) study has a number of fundamental errors, both in its content and its spelling: "Although some authors suggest this [Colaizzi's] framework is usually used in descriptive phenomenology….this framework is also suitable for a study utilising a Heideggerian phenomenological framework (Flemming (sic) et al 2003)". As the method we developed was neither in reference to phenomenology nor Heidegger it leads one to question the authors' comprehension of the original article.

Citations that partially used the method

Of the 117 citations that partially used our article by far the majority (n = 64) used only the four steps we associated with "dialogue with the data" i.e. data analysis. Several of these studies are based in hermeneutical frameworks though it is not always clear whose hermeneutic underpins the study (Pettersson & Bergbom, 2010; Moser et al, 2009). While we cannot claim to have tested the four steps in hermeneutic research using philosophers other than Gadamer, it seems appropriate that they be used as we ourselves said they were similar to those of van Manen's (1997) approach. Of particular interest are those authors who use the four steps of analysis in studies that are not hermeneutic. Several studies, whose authors have identified them as phenomenological, have used these four steps (Granero-Molina et al, 2016; Hurst et al, 2014) and in each case that we examined they seem to have been used appropriately thereby rendering the transferability aspect of the method visible. A number of studies use a mix of hermeneutics and phenomenology (Kanji & Camerson, 2010; Kitzmüller et al, 2012). While it is not the aim of this article to critique the methodologies adopted in this developing school, we were surprised to note uncritical acceptance of our method by all these authors as we had particularly emphasised that phenomenology and hermeneutics are different philosophical schools of thought. Another study of interest is that of Cotter (2013) who, in a descriptive survey, which is quantitative in nature, claims to have used the four steps of analysis in our method. Unfortunately it is not clear from his work how he used them, indeed the application of the steps to numeric data when, in keeping with Gadamer, we were concerned with the language does not seem appropriate and has not been shown to be so here. While the application of the four steps of the "dialogue with data" dominated, other authors have used other parts of the method such as interaction with participants (Mander & Melender, 2009) coming to a fusion of horizons (McDonald & Brown, 2008) or in relation to reflexivity (Osuki & Hirst, 2013). The final point is particularly of interest as our method did not discuss reflexivity, a weakness which we are currently seeking to address in a revision. Nåden's (2010) article is also of relevance here. Although it is not a research report, it examines the use of observations as a tool for hermeneutic research and discusses our method, in relation to the place of language in hermeneutic research and "wordless" language in particular and offers useful observations on the method.

Citations that used the method

Sixty studies were noted as having used our method from beginning to end. Twenty five of these came from the Nordic countries. It thus appears that the method has applicability in the culture of these countries, culture being a vital component of Gadamerian hermeneutics.

As with those studies that have partially used the method, those that appear to have embraced its totality come from varying philosophical standpoints. Most of these adopt the same amalgam of

hermeneutics and phenomenology. One study in this field (Hornjatkevyc & Alderson, 2011) uses the method exactly as intended and appears to be purely hermeneutic. Why it should claim to be "hermeneutic phenomenology" (p.804) is thus somewhat obscure. A similar situation is found in another study (Fernandez-Sola et al, 2016) making claims initially to be a "phenomenological qualitative study" (p. 494) and later to be a "qualitative study based on Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology" (p. 495). With the aim of the study being to reach an understanding of their participants' experiences rather than simply describing the experience itself, their focus on time and culture and their adherence to the method it is clearly a hermeneutic study and nothing else. Thirty seven citations claim to be hermeneutic and generally follow the method as it was intended (Thorkildsen et al, 2013; Söderhamn et al, 2013). Amongst the hermeneutic studies, however, Tranvåg et al (2016) use a combination of our method with that of Zimmer (2006). The study itself, although identified as hermeneutic is somewhat muddled in its approach. The key question was "which dimensions are crucial in constituting dignity experience in the daily lives of persons living with mild to moderate dementia?"(p. 581). This would appear to lend itself more to a grounded theory than hermeneutic study. The findings section includes a theme of experiencing, suggestive of phenomenology. The use of Zimmer's work may have contributed to this misunderstanding as she argues for a synthesis across qualitative methodologies, in complete contrast to us with our somewhat purist approach. Amongst the studies that were true to the method, however, unfortunately none offer a critique of it amongst their limitations. Even Marynowski's (2014) thesis, which was true to the method and provided an eloquent reflexive statement towards its conclusion did not note any limitations of the method.

Critical analysis of the method

As noted in the above sections, there has been little critique of our Gadamerian research method. This is somewhat surprising and disappointing in that not only does everything have its flaws but many of the citations derive from doctoral studies. An integral part of any such work should be considerations of the strengths and weaknesses of the method used and the steps taken to compensate for the latter. Even our own, small scale study did not offer any critique, which we now accept as a limitation of that study (Fleming & Robb, 2017).

However, although limited there has been some critique. Rudolfsson et al (2007) note that our method "presupposes that the research will be adequately reported" (p. 912) and go on to highlight the need for reflexivity, which as previously noted, is a limitation of our method. Conversely Heidinger (2009) suggests that the "Gadamerian research method adopted, [is] arguably cyclical and protracted". Unfortunately, he does not propose an alternative. Jiminez et al's (2017) phenomenological study uses a "modified form of the method" (p. 1649) in which the pre-

undertsandings' phase is expanded to be more reflexive in nature. Martin's (2017) study provides a rationale as to why the author has not used it suggesting that "the relationships between the researcher, as university lecturer, and participants, as students on a university course, were such that working as co-researchers was untenable given the potential power differential." (p. 67). However, this shows a lack of attention to our text in which the proposition of co-researchers was never raised.

de Witt and Ploeg's (2006) article critiquing rigour in interpretative, phenomenological nursing research cites our method amongst those analysed. The authors, however, do not offer specific criticism but list it among others as using traditional qualitative frameworks for rigour. This is a criticism worthy of further exploration. Walent's (2008) critique is perhaps most useful as he notes that our method

> is incomplete since it fails to recognize the position of the participant and changes in his or her understanding of the researcher. Furthermore, events that occur between research encounters will also reshape preunderstandings for each party. Thus, each research encounter involves a repositioning, fusion of horizons (sets of transformed preunderstandings) and reformulation of understanding. The encounter inevitably affects both the researcher and the participant. (p. 9).

These examples, all relating to the concept-of preunderstandings, are highly relevant and indeed highlight a weakness of our method. It is, also noteworthy that several authors stated that they identified their pre-understandings but not how they did this or what their effect was on the outcome of the research. We shall be developing this point further in a forthcoming article.

Conclusion

Having been prompted by a chance remark to seek criticism of the Gadamerian research method we developed over a decade ago, we pursued all the literature that cited the source article. It soon became clear however, that a necessary first step was to examine the published research reports claiming to have used the method as it seemed that unsubstantiated claims were being made. As shown above, this was indeed the case and even 20 years after Crotty's well justified and well argued criticism of published phenomenological research in the field of nursing it appears that many researchers, some of whom have published in well respected journals, are failing to make accurate or appropriate citations. Our concerns remain where authors claim to use the method but misquote, misapply or make false assumptions about it.

On a more positive note several authors used or partially used the method as intended. However, it was never our aim to make this a prescriptive approach, rather offer it as one choice from many. Many of these authors expanded its usage beyond Gadamerian hermeneutics to other approaches, notably the developing area of hermeneutic phenomenology. It was also encouraging to see this well used in a number of disciplines other than nursing, such as midwifery, radiography and generic health sciences and moving even beyond the health disciplines to education, business, tourism and informatics. Similarly, the fact that it had been used in articles or theses published in 28 countries and in six languages speaks for its universal applicability. However, there appears to be for the most part an uncritical acceptance of its propositions perhaps engendering a sense of complacency. For nursing or other health related disciplines truly to make progress in the academic stage it is vital that we can engage in the need for critique, some of which will come through open and honest, reflexive engagement with our topics.

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