Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology: an implication for nursing research

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Researchers and educators are increasingly implementing qualitative research methods to investigate issues of concern and interest. Hermeneutics has risen as an option for the qualitative research paradigm particularly after the 1970s. The precedence of the sciences that have applied hermeneutics as their approach to investigation is provided with special reference to nursing. In the nursing science, hermeneutics have been used extensively as a qualitative research method to investigate a variety of issues, through the lived experiences of the participants. In this paper, we introduce important aspects of the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and we discuss the reasons why we have applied this approach in our study titled ‘Quality Nursing Care: perspectives of patients with cancer and the nursing response’. The arguments that are presented here can be generalised to fit other areas of Nursing Science. Through this paper our aim is not only to familiarise the reader with Ricoeur’s work, but also to arrive at an appreciation of his philosophy as a methodological approach for future nursing research.

Keywords: hermeneutic phenomenology, Paul Ricoeur, narratives, nursing research, lived experiences, Ricoeur’s interpretation theory.

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Hermeneutics in Nursing Science

Thompson (1) asserts that from the 1970s onwards there has been an increasing reference to hermeneutics in the methodological literature of the health sciences. Prior to this date, the discussions of hermeneutics were most commonly found in such disciplines as continental philosophy, theology and literary criticism. Hermeneutics has emerged as a philosophy that redefines the scope and nature of the health sciences (2–4). Hermeneutics is recognised as a philosophy that supports an approach to health research which focuses on meaning and understanding in context. This methodological literature is part of a movement among practitioners and scholars in applied disciplines who have become dissatisfied with positivism as an adequate philosophical grounding.

As a consequence of the steady growth of interest that occurred in the 1980s, hermeneutics has emerged as a philosophy whose relevance extends beyond the humanities to the practice disciplines, and even to the natural sciences themselves (1).

The methodological and philosophical views of hermeneutics provide according to Finch (5) a ‘new direction for study not only in philosophy but also across many disciplines, including nursing’ (p 253). Through hermeneutics, the essence of beliefs, values and commitments can become known and clarified. This philosophical stance provides the explanations or perceptions which supports an individual’s beliefs and provides the explanation of meaning. Finch (5) asserts that ‘each person brings to the hermeneutical moment a storehouse of preunderstanding derived from human experiences. Sometimes labelled as baggage of past experience, this preunderstanding provides the ‘know how’ to deal with life’s everyday events’ (p 253).

A considerable precedent now exists for the concurrence of hermeneutics and health research. Database searching of research published shows that researchers in the disciplines of health sciences and particularly nursing have
The hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur

"[For hermeneutics] it is... to seek in the text itself, on the one hand, the internal dynamic that governs the structuring of the work and on the other hand, the power that the work possesses to project itself outside and to give birth to a world that would truly be the 'thing' referred to by the text. This internal dynamic and external projection constitutes what I call the work of the text. It is the work of hermeneutics to reconstruct this twofold work" (18, p. 17–18).

For Ricoeur, following Gadamer, we can no longer define hermeneutics or the theory of interpretation in terms of the search for the psychological intentions of another person which are concealed behind the text, and if we do not want to reduce interpretation to the dismantling of structures, then what remains to be interpreted? (19, p. 141). The answer according to Clark (20) is a Heideggerian one; the interpreter should aim to inhabit and understand the mode of being projected by the text ‘for what must be appropriated through engaged living’ (p. 114). Ricoeur (25) as with Gadamer perceives appropriation as to ‘make one’s own’ what was initially ‘alien’ which is the aim of hermeneutics (p. 185). According to Ricoeur (25) the process of interpretation comes to a closure ‘when reading releases something like an event, an event of discourse, and an event in the present time’ (p. 185). The result of this process provides the interpreter with a new perspective of things which allows him or her to view the world differently. Ricoeur (27) in his work ‘On interpretation’ explains ‘that the condition for understanding and self-understanding is the linguistically mediated tradition to which we belong, the whole treasury of symbols transmitted by the cultures within which we have come, at one and the same time, into both existence and speech’ (p. 192–3).

Ricoeur asserts that interpretation allows actualisation of the meanings of a text and this occurs through appropriation (19, p. 185). ‘By ‘appropriation’, I understand this: that the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself’ (19, p. 158). Therefore, the understanding of the text allows the interpreter to expand his horizons (i.e. to know him or herself). That according to Geanellos (26) presupposes that we can distance ourselves from our preunderstanding (distanciation) in order to perceive new meaning (appropriation)’ (p. 117). ‘Diastanciation’ and ‘appropriation’ stand in a dialectical
Ricoeur (19) addressed the difference between text and discourse, referring to these differences as distancing. The four principles of distancing are: (i) the transcription itself and the meaning of the written word, (ii) the relationship between what has been written and the intent of the person who wrote the text, (iii) the meaning of the text beyond its original intent as well as the author’s original intent and (iv) the new interpreted meaning of the written word and the audience. As described by Allen and Jensen (3, p. 245) the hermeneutical circle of interpretation moves forward and backward, starting at the present. It is never closed or final. Through rigorous interaction and understanding, the phenomenon is uncovered. The interpretive process that underlies meaning arises out of interactions, working outward and back from self to event and event to self.

Ricoeur (28) points out that ‘distanciation is not a quantitative phenomenon; it is the dynamic counterpart of our need, our interest and our effort to overcome cultural estrangement. Writing and reading take place in this cultural struggle. Reading is the ‘φάρμακο’ (pharmako), the remedy, by which the meaning of the text is ‘rescued’ from the estrangement of distanciation and put in a new proximity, a proximity which suppresses and preserves, the cultural distance and includes the otherness within the ownness’” (p. 43).

Wiklund et al. (15) comment that by ‘working within the text, distanciation as the dialectic counterpart of appropriation is possible’ (p. 117). The nature of the text holds within itself the foundations for distanciation as its characteristics objectify the text in several ways and give it a life of its own: it focuses on the ‘what’ of the text, rather than the empirical context. What Ricoeur attempts with the process of distanciation is to remove the authorial intent; that is according to Geanelllos (26) ‘the idea that the meaning of a text resides only with its author’ (p. 113). The way in which the text is constructed to create the narrative will explain something about the text’s meaning for the reader. The meaning of the text, its sense, becomes more important than its reference, thus distanciation is not a methodological concern, a technique, but rather it is a constitutive of the phenomenon of the text as written’ (28, p. 44).

The process of distanciation enables the interpreter to approach the text with an open mind and thereby appropriate its sense through the use of the explanations the text provides the reader with. Those explanations are directed towards a structural analysis of the internal relations of the text and to an analysis of deep structures that could be expressed as metaphors. The meaning of a text is its ‘reference’, but this is neither the psychological intention of the author nor an empirical state of affairs in the so-called ‘objective’ world (ostensive reference). The true referent of a text is what it is ‘about’, what Gadamer calls die Sache, the ‘matter of the text’ (19, p. 202).

Ricoeur calls this the ‘world of the text’. He defines it as ‘the ensemble of [nonsituational] references opened up by the text’ – as when we speak of the ‘world of the Greeks’, meaning thereby not an empirical reality but a particular understanding of the world. The ‘intended meaning of the text’ is the ‘world’ that it discloses; the projecting of a world is ‘the process which is at work in the text’ (19, p. 164).

According to Sodeberg (29), Ricoeur replaced the term ‘reference’ for the term ‘refiguration’. He writes about prefiguration, i.e. our prenarrative world of lived experience; configuration, i.e. the sense narrated; and refiguration as equivalent to reference (30, 31). Fodor (32), p. 208) means that the terms referent and reference ‘project a notion of the world as something static, fixed, given, whereas refiguration more adequately captures the dynamic connection between human action and human being-in-time, revelation and transformation’.

Kearney (21) asserts that Ricoeur argued that the attempt to understand the specifically human must, in the final analysis, assume the form of a narrative: ‘...that human phenomena – texts, action – cannot properly be understood until the results of the explanatory approach have been integrated into a wider, interpretive understanding (19), p. 8 as cited by Kearney).

The identification by Ricoeur that the narratives comprise the best approach (along with metaphors and symbols) to investigate people’s lived experiences has informed our decision to implement this technique in this study as a means to collect the research data. Ricoeur (28) acknowledges that the person’s lived experience retrieved through the narratives cannot directly become another person’s experience. However, what can be transferred from one person to another is not the experience as experienced, but its meaning. Ricoeur (28) asserts that ‘the experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public’ (p. 16). The argument made here by Ricoeur describes the essence of this study; that is to make ‘public’ the meaning of the lived experiences of the patients with cancer and of their nurses.

Hermeneutic phenomenology and nursing research

When the purpose of research is to search for the understanding of phenomena in the world of caring, it is necessary to reflect on ontological and epistemological concerns before choosing a methodological approach (15). In this process of choosing the most appropriate methodological approach as Wiklund et al. (15) assert, the researcher needs to wonder not only about the ‘phenomenon under study, but also about the relationship between explanation and understanding and whether the research
method is consistent with the particular view of human nature that nursing imposes’ (p. 1).

Nursing tends to view the person as one who is constantly interacting with the environment, interpreting impressions and ascribing personal meaning to his or her experiences (15, p. 114). The nurse researcher behaves in a similar way and therefore to claim that nursing is an ‘objective science with one universal truth’ [as Ricoeur asserts (23)] is untenable. Here lies perhaps the most radical move, in the development of Ricoeur’s theory, that of objectifying the text. Ricoeur removed the idea that the meaning of a text resides only with its author, which allowed ‘researchers to move beyond the notion that only one understanding is meaningful or correct; that of the research participant’ (26, p. 113). Therefore, this implies that the researcher has to take a stance not only on the question of what knowledge is, but also on the appropriate way to attain that knowledge within the context of research.

We have implemented a hermeneutic phenomenology approach, inspired by the interpretation theory of Paul Ricoeur (25) to explore the perspectives of hospitalised patients with cancer on the quality of the nursing care. The decision to choose the hermeneutic phenomenological ideas of Ricoeur for this study was mainly based on four fundamental aspects. First, Ricoeur’s theory of interpretation, avoids the Cartesian subject/object split, thereby making it useful for the researcher seeking to explicate intersubjective knowledge. This aligned with our aim to seek to explore the issue of quality of cancer care holistically, focusing both on the experiences related to the body and mind of the patients and nurses. Cartesian thought clearly divided mind and matter, observer and observed, subject and object (33). Descartes (34), p. 97 as cited by Goldberg argued ‘there is a great difference between mind and body, in as much as body is by nature always divisible, and the mind is entirely indivisible’ (34, p. 447). This was appropriate for our identity as researchers that belong to the holistic nursing approach, which aims to overcome this Cartesian mental–physical split (35).

Secondly, Ricoeur asserts that ‘interpretation is the hinge between language and lived experience’ (28, p. 66). This is especially so with research interviews (i.e. narratives) and focus groups where lived experience is expressed through language then transcribed into a text and interpreted.

Thirdly, Ricoeur’s hermeneutic approach takes into consideration the values, beliefs, and culture (i.e. historicity as Ricoeur calls it) of the specific context of the participants (and of the researcher) which are essential elements that need to be explored during the data collection and interpretation processes. Culture and its important influence on the interpretation of text might create a conflict of interpretations and therefore the selected approach needed to be able to address this potential problem. Hermeneutics explore the conflict of interpretations, because the possibility of ‘very different, even opposing methods’ of understanding is a fundamental aspect of our experience as interpreting beings (36, p. xiv–xv). The different modes of understanding and expression led Ricoeur (28) to integrate in his work the creativity in language, and especially the semantic innovations of metaphor.

Finally, Ricoeur rejected the idea of bracketing allowing to the researcher to adopt a more active role in the interpretation process bringing into the study his/her experiences. Therefore, rather than suspending our preconceptions in this study, we were active participants in the interpretive process and not mere passive recipients of knowledge. We re-immersed ourselves into the participant’s world by reflecting on our past and professional experiences with cancer patients. It was deemed impossible and less fruitful to the results of the study to position ourselves outside of the problem under study. This view is strengthened by Benner and Wrubel (37) who argue that researchers come to their studies with their own history, understandings and expectations.

The analyses of this study’s narratives about being treated or providing care for cancer, focus on the meaning of lived experience, i.e., that each narrative contributes one person’s perspective of the phenomenon. Therefore, according to Soderberg et al. (38) the focus of analyses moves from the psychological understanding of the narrators (the utterer’s meaning), to the meaning of their lived experience expressed in the text (the meaning of the utterance). What is analysed is what the text is saying and what it talks about’ (28, p. 74).

Every decision taken by the researcher should be a reasoned one, reflect the theoretical framework of the methodology employed and be made explicit to others (39, 40). All research methodologies hold ideas about the nature of truth and reality, based on alternative epistemologies and ontologies. Researchers must be conversant with these and apply their interpretation of the theoretical framework to the research methods adopted (8).

The value of using a qualitative research methodology such as hermeneutics is embedded in the subjective and often emotional nature of the issue under study. The qualitative paradigm, with its emphasis on description, understanding and interpretation is appropriate for our study which aimed to investigate the quality of nursing care from the viewpoints of patients with cancer and that of the cancer care nurses themselves (41). Hermeneutics has the ability to describe the human experience as it is lived and explores the full nature of the phenomenon (42). It is through hermeneutical inquiry according to Van der Zalm and Bergum (43) that practising nurses have the opportunity to find meaning in and understanding everyday situations with patients, to discuss and commu-
nicate their understanding with others, and as a result, to change their actions or the actions of others in subsequent situations on the basis of that understanding.

Conclusions

Reflecting on the research questions, the aims and objectives, the desired data, the literature review and the methods of research as a whole, hermeneutic phenomenology integrates all the necessary elements for conducting a successful qualitative study based on the lived experiences of the participants. The philosophical approach proposed by Ricoeur is considered to offer a deep, interpretive understanding of human experience.

In our study, it seemed appropriate to explore the experience of the patients with cancer and the nurses involved in their care with the intent not solely to describe their experience, but to actually interpret it. It is believed that interpretation is required in order to understand human action (44). We believe that the basis of Ricoeur’s philosophy is appropriate for nursing and the future nurse researchers can if they so choose take into consideration Ricoeur’s work in their attempt not to reach for ‘the one universal truth’ but the ‘many truths that the text hides’ as Ricoeur was fond of saying.

Author contributions

Dr. A. Charalambous was responsible for the idea of this article as well as the main writing of the manuscript. Professor Irena Papadopoulos and Alan Beadsmoore supervised the preparation of the article as a whole with critical and intellectual revision of the manuscript.

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