SUMMARY

The aim of this article is to encourage midwives to reflect on hermeneutic studies in relation to their own practice or to consider using it for qualitative research, discussing the applicability of Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic approaches take into account the subject’s prior experience and knowledge, making it useful for working with women and understanding their perspectives. This article is grounded in my experience of undertaking my own PhD – a study on the transition to parenthood for couples with an in vitro fertilisation (IVF) pregnancy. It explains some of the broad concepts of hermeneutic phenomenology and how they align with the practice and underlying theoretical concepts of midwifery.

INTRODUCTION

Many readers may be wondering why a midwife would choose to use the work of a white, middle-class male philosopher from 1930s Germany (moreover, one with troubling associations with the political climate of the time) to study the experiences of pregnant women in contemporary Britain. Within this article, I hope the rationale for that becomes evident as the work of Heidegger is explored and its applicability to both my own study and midwifery research will be demonstrated.

IDENTIFYING AN APPROPRIATE METHODOLOGY

On commencing my PhD six years ago, I knew what I wanted to study but had no firm methodology underpinning how. The study focused on the experiences of couples with an IVF pregnancy through the transition to early parenthood, so by definition, it had to be qualitative. In working through a range of possible methodologies – all of which could have been utilised for the study – I found that I was being drawn between a more sociological perspective – social constructionism or ethnography, for example – or a more psychological one such as interpretive phenomenological analysis. In considering methodologies, it is useful to reflect upon what exactly is the focus of the study – differing methodologies are better suited to drawing out different aspects to a study, or indeed to different researchers’ personalities. Thus, there is no one correct or ideal methodology, only the one that best fits both the research question and the researcher
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PHILOSOPHY AS A RESEARCH METHOD

Heidegger was a philosopher; he did not propose methods of research, and it lies with researchers themselves to consider appropriate data analysis. For my own study, I used Diekelmann et al. which I adapted to reflect the time point and longitudinal trajectories of the data. Whilst focusing on individual interviews it also considers the whole – reflecting the concept of the whole being made up of constituent parts and the parts making up the whole. This reflects person-centred care. Themes arising do not relate to how often an idea is mentioned, but instead to its significance of meaning, with interpretation beginning during the interview itself in the areas that are encouraged and followed and those that are not. Data analysis requires technical process and rigour, but also intuitive insight in considering meanings; thus it is both a science and an art – reflecting the midwifery profession itself.

Heidegger and his philosophy encourage us to think for ourselves, not replicating others’ views. This ‘dwelling with’ the data, whilst initially daunting, can enable differing insight than that gained by traditional thematic analysis. The concepts behind the meanings arise from Heideggerian philosophy with findings comprising participants’ insight, the researchers’ understanding and application of philosophical ideas. Thus, it is a unique piece of work itself and its applicability is evidenced in the ‘phenomenological nod’ as others relate to and acknowledge the resonance within the findings. Hermeneutic work is not supposed to develop theory, nor prove a point – instead it is about suggesting how individuals may perceive and interpret their experience, assisting the intuitive health professional to understand and propose support for a mother or parents. Hermeneutic studies of midwives’ experiences enhance management and understanding of possible support needed. Rather than broad data of retention rates and sickness levels, it can drill down to indicate how midwives feel, prior to how they may then respond, to enable proactive intervention. This is why it is useful for midwifery research and knowledge.

Heidegger makes no differentiation about the roles of women or men – only of people, and rarely directly refers to healthcare. The value of using his philosophy within research is that it encourages deeper thinking, maintains a focus on meaning rather than responses and provides a structure in which application to practice becomes possible. As a research methodology it is immersive and reflective, which can appeal to those midwives who seek insight into what may lie behind an individual’s actions or behaviours. The person Heidegger was may not seem relevant to contemporary midwifery studies, but the concept of the nature of being is pertinent to any study seeking to understand experience.

PRACTICE AND CRITICAL LEARNING POINTS

- Consider how your own experiences and perspectives influence the care you provide – in acknowledging this, recognise how it may influence the advice and guidance you may offer women in your care.
- Reflect upon how you interact with those in your care – do you always consider how they may perceive their past and current experiences?
- When reading or undertaking research, maintain a critical approach and consider the synergy between underlying methodology and research aims. TPM

REFERENCES