

Analysis methods in hermeneutic phenomenological research: interpretive profiles



Review

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Abstract: **Objective:** To describe the development of interpretive profiles for a hermeneutic phenomenological research study.
Methods: literature review was conducted to identify research that has used interpretive profiles. An initial interpretive profile was constructed.
Results: The final outcome was an interpretive profile that contained a case summary and addressed the aims of the researcher's study. The interpretive profile contained background material, coded excerpts, and interpretive comments.
Conclusions: Interpretive profiles can assist emerging scholars in describing self-world relations and experiential variations within and across participants. Interpretive profiles can facilitate the writing of dissertations and manuscripts since the data is systematically archived and easily retrievable.

Keywords: methodology • qualitative research • hermeneutics • phenomenology

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1. Introduction

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a qualitative research method that allows researchers to study how experiences, traditions, and culture shape ordinary, everyday practices.¹⁻⁴ This method elicits stories from participants as a source of understanding.¹⁻⁴ Hermeneutic phenomenology is a beneficial research method since it allows researchers to describe and articulate how ordinary, everyday practices and routines of parents are shaped by their family relationships, childhood experiences, day-to-day challenges, and the resources that support them in raising their child.¹⁻⁴ For instance, SmithBattle used hermeneutic

phenomenology to study parenting practices of teenage mothers.⁵ Pohlman used hermeneutic phenomenology to increase the understanding of fathers of preterm infants.⁶ She analyzed the influence of their work on their early transition to fatherhood and explored their meanings of work.⁶

Hermeneutic phenomenological research is rooted in hermeneutics, a method of interpretation of philosophical text. Initially, the term hermeneutics was referred to the interpretation or understanding of written texts.⁷ In the second half of the nineteenth century, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), a German philosopher, took up hermeneutics in his effort to explicate a philosophy of human sciences. He viewed hermeneutics as a

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methodology that could be used to reveal the unseen world of lived experiences.⁴

2. Experts

2.1. Francis Bacon

At first, it is important to understand traditional philosophies of knowledge and to appreciate why hermeneutic phenomenology offers an alternative approach to developing knowledge. Francis Bacon (1561–1626), an English philosopher, and Rene Descartes (1596–1650), a French mathematician and scientist, influenced the modern study of epistemology, or the philosophy of theoretical knowledge.⁸ They both shared the belief that nature could be explained by experimentation and abstract reasoning.⁸ This base of knowledge has influenced research, practice, and education of the natural and human worlds.

During the seventeenth century, contrary to the dominant Aristotelian ideas of deductive reasoning, Bacon argued for an empirical, inductive approach. His work contributed to the development of the scientific method.⁸ He developed and promoted inductive practices for scientific investigation, which led to the notion that science can be objective, quantifiable, replicable, applicable, predictable, and impartial or free of prejudices.^{8,9} He argued that experimental evidence could be used to dispute contradictory theories.⁸

2.2. Rene Descartes

Descartes thought that the universe operated like a machine, and if we were able to find the laws of the universe, then bodily actions could be deduced and fixed, just like a machine.⁸ His philosophical arguments led to the notion that the body and mind are separate.¹⁰ Descartes was the first to describe the body as a machine, which gave rise to the mechanistic view of the body.¹¹ The living patient is treated in a machine like fashion, and the body is separated into its component parts and their interactions.¹² This led to what is known as Cartesian dualism, which is a view in philosophy where the body and mind, the subject and the object, and the person and the world are considered as separate and distinct entities.¹³

Medical field began to see knowledge as something which is totally exist in the mind and separate from the body.¹² As healthcare professionals developed greater knowledge of the mechanics of bodily processes, it led to the scientific diagnosis and treatment of disease.¹¹ This knowledge permeates medicine and often influences how healthcare providers focus on the

mechanical body while overlooking the patient's meanings or experience of illness. As an example, if a patient has hypertension, a combination of drugs is often used to improve and prolong life.¹¹ This approach does not consider the impact that a stressful job, a difficult divorce, or a poor diet may also have on the occurrence of hypertension in an individual.¹²

2.3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty

In contrast to the above, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), a French phenomenological philosopher, was interested in the concept of “being in the world.”^{14,15} All knowledge, according to Merleau-Ponty, is embodied, meaning that there is union of the body and mind.¹⁴ Although Descartes' mechanistic view of the body provides a framework to understand pathophysiology and disease mechanisms, the mechanistic view of the body consider that the body is separate from the mind, and the person from the world. So, health care providers tend to focus the mechanical body without understanding the patient's experience of illness as shaped by social contexts and historical understanding.¹⁶

As an alternative to Descartes' mechanistic framework, Merleau-Ponty provided the foundations for understanding embodiment and the lived body.^{9,12,15} Embodiment can be understood in the way the body embodies meaning.^{9,15} The lived body was referred as an intending entity that grasps the world directly and is dynamically interrelated with the lived world and other relationships.¹⁶

Merleau-Ponty maintained the belief that hermeneutic phenomenological research methods provide a perceptual lens for overcoming Cartesian dualism.^{9,12,15} In contrast to the mechanistic view of the body which emphasizes pathophysiology and body parts, the hermeneutic stance assumes that a person's background provide the basis for understanding. A parent may take up meanings that are embedded in particular skills and practices of parenting without ever being aware of those meanings. For example, family meals are skillful in elaborating the meaning of family connection, and can remain be meaningful from one generation to the next generation, as embodied skills shift as children age. Meanings such as these are inherent in parenting practices; they are best studied by examining actual events using hermeneutic phenomenology, a qualitative research method.

3. Analysis

Analysis for hermeneutic phenomenology involves a circular process since a researcher's understanding of the data becomes enriched from the numerous readings

of the study data.^{2,17} In 1975, Hans-Georg Gadamer, a well-known philosopher, pointed out that researchers cannot evade their “horizon” of temporal understanding by resorting to the “myth of objectivity,” but they can achieve a “fusion of horizons.”¹⁸ According to Abbey, the word “horizon” refers to the “zone of meaning in which a person operates.”¹⁹ This “zone” is affected by a person’s culture and encompasses meanings that are mostly taken for granted or sometimes invisible. Fusion of horizons occurs when the claims of the text itself enrich and enlarge the initial understanding of a researcher.^{2,19} For example, when a person engages in a conversation with another person, a different “horizon” is encountered. Ideally, when the conversation continues, a fusion of horizons results through careful questioning, watching, intuiting, and listening.^{2,19}

Given the circular nature of hermeneutic phenomenology, data pertaining to the study should be analyzed concurrently and archived, along with the researcher’s interpretations.^{2,17} It can be challenging for emerging scholars to analyze a large amount of data from multiple interviews, field notes, and interpretive sessions. A convenient way to synthesize large amounts of data is by creating interpretive profiles for each case (Figure 1). An interpretive profile is a summary of all the data a researcher collects over the course of a study for each case.⁵

3.1. Interpretive profiles

Interpretive profiles can be used to weave details of a study together, just like a beautiful piece of tapestry, to provide a clear and coherent story about each case. Generally, interpretive profiles contain a case summary and address the aims of the researcher’s study. Interpretive profiles may also contain background material, coded excerpts, and interpretive comments.^{5,20} Researchers should also use interpretive profiles to document any other relevant information that may assist in the understanding of the phenomenon, such as the interview setting, participants’ appearance, their non-verbal cues, and their expressions during the interview.⁵

3.2. Creating interpretive profiles

Researchers should ensure that all the interpretive profiles are configured and arranged in a similar manner to enable comparisons. When creating interpretive profiles, the researcher should begin by providing the definition of a case. A case may be an individual person, a family unit, or a group of people cohabitating together. As an example, a case may be defined as married-couple household (including biological, step, and adopted

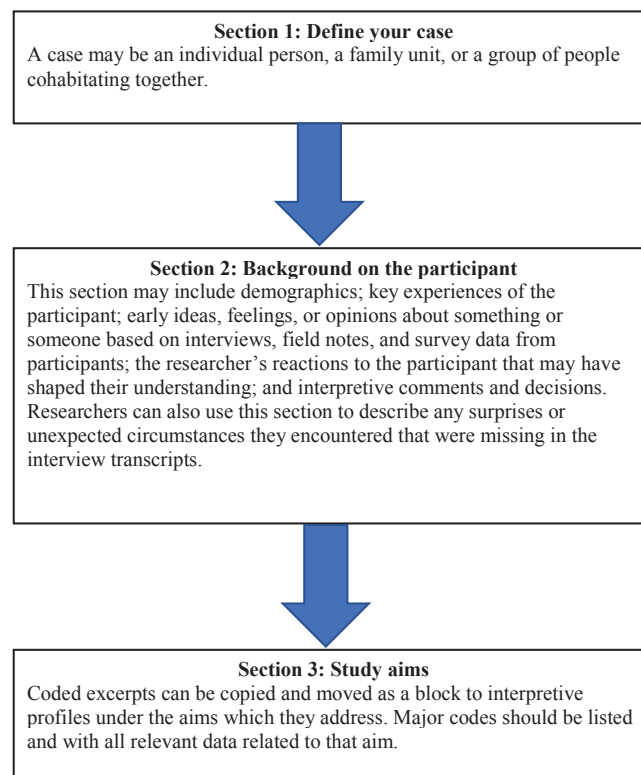


Figure 1. Creation of an interpretive profile.

children of the couple). In another example, an old woman between the ages of 60 years to 80 years may be considered as a case for a different study.

The researcher should describe the participant's personal history in the first section of an interpretive profile. This section may include demographics; key experiences of the participant; early ideas, feelings, or opinions about something or someone based on interviews, field notes, and survey data from participants; the researcher's reactions to the participant that may have shaped their understanding; and interpretive comments and decisions. Researchers can also describe any surprises or unexpected circumstances they encountered in this section that were missing in the interview transcripts. The first section should contain

the features such that researcher is able to find or remember immediately who the participant is since it provides a broad sketch of a participant's demographics and circumstances.

The next sections should be related to study aims, with major codes listed and with all relevant data related to that aim. Coded excerpts can be copied and moved as a block to interpretive profiles under the aims which they address. Major codes should be listed and with all relevant data related to that aim (Table 1). During this process, researchers should allow their voice to be heard strongly by avoiding the use of the passive voice. Occasionally, coded excerpts may be listed under several different codes, so excerpts may be duplicated under numerous aims. This is expected.

Section	Content
Section 1: Provide a definition of a case	A case will be defined as a married or cohabitating parenting dyad from an urban community with at least one teenage child.
Section 2: Background on the participant	White married couple. Carl is 36 and Cat is 32. They have a 14-year-old son and twin boys, who are 10 years old. Carl was born in Nevada and went to school to become a chef. He is currently working full time as a chef at a nursing home. Cat was born in Nevada as well. She earned a two-year college degree and is currently a stay-at-home mom. She homeschools their three children. Their household income is between \$10,000 and \$50,000 per year and they often struggle to pay their monthly bills. They receive Medicaid and generally see their primary care provider at a federally funded health clinic or go to a walk-in clinic if they cannot get an appointment. Neither has served in the military. They do not have a telephone land line but they do have internet access. Everyone in the household owns a cell phone. No family pictures were in the living room. The living room was decorated with interesting decoration from around the world. For instance, the sofa had a blanket on it that was made in Kenya. Cat did most of the talking in the beginning but by the end of the conversation Carl was willing to jump in and seemed to enjoy offering his perspective. They reference "bad fights." Cat struggles with depression. Cat homeschools the children using a method called "unschooling." Unschooling is a form of education at home. Unschooling is different from other forms of home-schooling education in which the education of the student is not directed by a teacher and curriculum. Carl seems to question the benefits of "unschooling" but he seems to support Cat. Carl was very much worried when the oldest child was not able read until he was 9 years old. However, he eventually learned to read, so he is confident their younger children will learn how to read. Cat is very unstructured with "unschooling." Instead of having a routine, she leaves projects around the house that may interest the children, hoping they will decide to engage in the projects. The family owns a Taco truck. When Carl isn't working as a chef, the family travels around the State with their Taco truck. I was surprised that one of the 11 yr. old twins is going through puberty prior to his older brothers. Puberty seems emotional for him. Carl and Cat both seem to favor him because he is more mature than his other brothers. Carl and Cat have a "polyamorous" relationship. They describe their relationship as practice of, or desire for, intimate relationships with more than one partner, with the consent of all partners involved. They view their relationship as a responsible "non- monogamy." Last summer Carl's girlfriend lived with them. This relationship lasted 5 months. According to Cat, Carl was very "bummed" when the relationship ended and all the children were very worried about him. After I turned off the taper recorder, Cat self-described their family as the "Chaos family." She says they have always had a chaotic life. At times they have moved leaving furniture and valuables behind. She said they did this because they were "young and free spirited." She regrets some of these choices. Recently Cat found out she was pregnant with their 4th child. Cat would like to establish more family routines with this child because she is "tired of the chaos."
Section 3: Coded excerpts related to study aims	Aim 1—Reveal parenting demands and practices of parents raising teenage children - Engaging in activities with their children was a common pattern related to parenting pre-teen children. Carl went out of his way to spend time with his pre-teen son. Carl does not make much money, so spending time with his children involved doing things at home. - When asked what they did together, he responded: "I don't have a lot of money most of the time so I like to relax around the house.... we just can't do too much, so when I'm sittin' around the house and I try to talk to my son or play video games with him."

Table 1. Example of an interpretive profile.

4. Benefits of interpretive profiles

Interpretive profiles have three main benefits.

The first benefit of interpretive profiles is that they can facilitate case and cross-case analysis of a study. The data collected should provide an in-depth understanding of the complex lives of a particular population. Analysis assists researchers in understanding the practical lived experiences of their population and their needs. Interpretive profiles compacts lengthy interviews without sacrificing context, making it easier for a researcher to make comparisons and search for and retrieve data.

Second, interpretive profiles can be used to ensure the rigor of a study and commitment to reflexivity. Morse suggests rigor may be demonstrated through attentiveness to participants during data collection and taking care in the analysis, and interpretive profiles can demonstrate these by providing an audit trail of analysis.²¹ Researchers can use interpretive profiles to demonstrate reflexivity by showing how their forestructure has been revised or corrected over the course of the study.^{17,21}

Finally, interpretive profiles can assist in longitudinal qualitative research. Interpretive profiles can quickly orient a researcher to a past (old) participant when they are conducting a follow-up study. For instance, Smith-Battle accomplished this when she analyzed qualitative longitudinal data on teen mothers and housing instability.⁵ She began her study in 1988 and followed

teen mothers and their families for 28 years. Interpretive profiles allowed her to easily describe how housing trajectories were shaped by family resources, housing programs, and discrimination over the course of 28 years. She found white advantaged mothers were stably housed as children and adults. In contrast, she found housing instability was pervasive for black mothers who were from disadvantaged section of the society.⁵

5. Conclusions

Emerging scholars should be encouraged to create interpretive profiles in hermeneutic phenomenological research. Interpretive profiles can assist emerging scholars in describing self- world relations and experiential variations within and across participants. Interpretive profiles can facilitate the writing of dissertations and manuscripts since the data is systematically archived and easily retrievable.

Ethical approval

This study was approved by The Saint Louis University Institutional Review Board (Reference number: FWA00005304).

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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