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## Editorial: Philosophical Basis for Phenomenological Research

Over the past four decades, there has been an increase in the number and quality of nursing studies using a qualitative research approach. When nurse scholars first started to carry out qualitative research, results of their studies were met with skepticism by scholars in other health care professions. Many non-nurse scholars believed the research findings were based upon soft science and, thus, failed to provide sound scientific contributions. Fortunately, such beliefs have changed and qualitative nursing studies now are embraced and supported with substantial funding. Unfortunately, today, a number of novice nurse scholars, although they use a qualitative approach in their research, fail to understand the philosophical basis upon which their specific research design is based. Therefore, the purpose of this editorial is to provide a brief overview of two approaches to the philosophy of phenomenology.

Phenomenology, the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view, was developed as an alternative to the empirically based positivist paradigm.<sup>1</sup> Phenomenology, as a philosophy, supports the qualitative research approach of phenomenology, which is used by numerous qualitative nurse researchers. Although there are a number of schools of phenomenology, which have some common, yet distinct, features, this editorial will deal only with the phenomenological perspectives of Husserl and Heidegger. It must be kept in mind that Husserl and Heidegger did not aim to produce a specific research process to guide research, but rather a philosophy.

The person credited as the father of phenomenology is the German mathematician, Edmund Husserl, who regarded experience as the fundamental source of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> The central structure of an experience is its “intentionality” or the internal experience of being conscious of something.<sup>3</sup> Husserl believed the aim of phenomenology was the rigorous and unbiased examination of things as they appear in order to arrive at an understanding of the human consciousness and experience.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, an attempt must be made to understand the essential features of a phenomenon (event or incident) that are as free as possible from cultural context. Thus, to clearly perceive a phenomenon, one has to suspend his/her preconceptions and view lived experiences through fresh eyes. Accomplishment of this task requires one to set aside or “bracket” beliefs about the world so as to allow a phenomenon to speak for itself, rather than through beliefs about it. “Bracketing” world beliefs, according to Husserl, facilitates a more accurate and precise description of a phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> As a result, Husserl’s phenomenological perspective involved examining the world from a pre-reflective stance.

Heidegger, a research assistant of Husserl’s, became critical of the direction Husserl had taken in the development of phenomenology and, thus, took a divergent view of how phenomenology should proceed. While Husserl’s goal was to describe a phenomenon, Heidegger sought to understand a phenomenon. Thus, out of Heidegger’s divergent view of phenomenology grew the development of hermeneutical phenomenology.

Hermeneutics involves cultivating one's ability to understand things from someone else's point of view, and to appreciate the cultural and social forces that may have influenced their perceptions.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Husserl, Heidegger was opposed to "bracketing" one's beliefs about the world when examining a phenomenon. Instead, Heidegger believed prior understanding of the world augmented interpretation.

Fundamental to Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology is the meaning of "being" within the framework of time, which is referred to as "being-in-time." "Being" does not refer to things in the world, but rather to existence within the world, which has meaning within the context of that being.<sup>7</sup> As a result, existence has meaning.<sup>8</sup> Heidegger believed since we always understand from within the context of our disposition and involvement within our world, we do not and cannot understand anything from a purely objective position.<sup>9</sup> In other words, our reality is constructed from our experience of "being-in-the-world."

Regardless of whether a researcher selects Husserl, Heidegger or another philosopher's (Girogio, Colazzi, van Manen, van Kaam) approach to phenomenology, it behooves the researcher to truly understand all the nuances of the philosophy selected so as to be true to how data are gathered, handled and interpreted. The chosen philosophy needs to be compatible with the researcher's perspective.

The basic broad question phenomenologists seek to answer is: "What is the meaning of one's specific lived experience?" Therefore, the only reliable source for information to answer this question is the person (informant) who actually is living the specific experience (event). To understand the specific human experience requires the person to interpret it for the researcher, in order for the researcher to interpret the explanation provided.<sup>10</sup> Informants are individuals who are willing to express their inner most feelings and responses to the experience under examination. Data can be collected by way of various methods: observation, interactive interviews, videotaping and informants' written descriptions. Analysis begins when the first data are collected, and guide decisions related to further data collection. The description and/or meaning attached to data then are expressed within the context of the selected phenomenological philosophy. The results are a theoretical account that responds to the research question that is validated by informants' comments from raw data.

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