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“Doing” Phenomenological Research:
Connecting Nursing Education, Research, and Professional Practice

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Abstract

The interactive practices associated with faculty teaching and students learning to conduct phenomenological research provided an important opportunity for advanced practice nursing students to reevaluate their world view of patient care and the lived experience of health and illness. Further, these students demonstrated transformation in their personal perspectives on nursing education, research, and practice. The investigators examined a variety of classroom action outcomes to explore the effectiveness of current teaching strategies in our masters research study course.

To describe graduate students' new understandings of health care, nurse educators analyzed self-evaluation documents and reflective narratives from masters nursing students who were learning to conduct phenomenological research. The following themes were identified (a) finding the exceptional in the routine, (b) resonating with stories of health and illness, and (c) putting this research into daily practice. We conclude that "doing" phenomenology not only results in excellent clinical research directly applicable to nursing practice, but served to transform the professional practice perspectives of graduate student nurses engaged in this research methodology.

Doing Phenomenological Research:

Connecting Nursing Education, Research and Practice

Since Florence Nightingale's time, efforts have been made to unite the conversations between nursing education, research, and practice on a grand scale (1859/1969). Unfortunately, the interrelationships between these three aspects of the nursing profession remain elusive and these topics are often addressed as if each were unrelated to the others. The investigators found the classroom actions for completing phenomenological research resulted in student research that was philosophically grounded, methodologically sound, and useful to nurses caring for individuals and families with chronic illness. Further, the students described how the activities associated with actually *doing* phenomenological research resulted in transformation of their personal perspectives on nursing education, research and practice. Further, they developed new understandings of patient care and the lived experience of health and illness.

The investigators used interpretive phenomenology to explore the many facets of the students' self-described transformation through *doing* phenomenological research. The following themes were identified: (a) finding the exceptional in the routine, (b) resonating with stories of health and illness, and (c) putting this research into daily practice.

Classroom Actions for Students Learning to

Conduct Phenomenological Research

Adult and family nurse practitioner students completed eight months of independent research in clinical areas of their choosing to meet the final requirements for the masters in nursing science degree. These projects were approved by the Indiana University Human Studies Committee. To date, thirty-five students have participated in the phenomenological research option. Phenomenological research is useful in describing and understanding a human experience (phenomenon) through analysis of narrative text. Heidegger's (1962) phenomenological view of the person centered on "lived experience" as an interpretation of the person in relation to his world, as a being for whom things and events have significance and value, and as the experience of things and events as they are self-interpreted through the person's perception and interpretation of physical body experiences, time, and those things they care about (Leonard, 1994).

Students used interpretive phenomenology methods to understand the phenomenon of chronic illness. The investigators used the same methods to explore the phenomena of students learning to use phenomenology methods of research. The objective of the course was to teach students to conduct nursing research using a phenomenological approach. From a classroom action research perspective (Mettetal, 2001), our question was to discover what other form(s) of learning were outcomes of these traditional research training activities.

Students met as a group on a weekly basis for round table discussions regarding their research projects. These were facilitated by the investigators in our roles as co-

teachers. Classroom discussions addressed phenomenological research philosophies, methods, and analysis procedures. Early in the learning process, both students and teachers offered stories of their own nursing education, practice experiences and personal experiences with health and illness. These served to bring light to shared meanings and common practices found within our own lived experiences with health and illness.

Each student selected individuals with chronic illnesses as participants in his or her research study. Family members were invited to share their experiences as well. Each student engaged his or her participants in in-depth tape recorded interviews lasting from 1-2 hours each. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and shared with the other students and teachers. The students and teachers read and made independent analyses of each transcript (Diekelmann, Allen & Tanner, 1989). Over the next several months, the students and faculty shared their analyses, made suggestions, and offered readings and literature reviews useful to other students. The expected outcome of this process was accomplished as each student developed his or her own analysis, produced a manuscript of the research findings from his or her own data, and connected the conceptualizations of the individual narratives across all the interviews.

Methods for Classroom Action Research Study of
Lived Experience of *Doing* Phenomenological Research

Data for the present study were gathered from (a) group conversations and

interactions throughout the students' research experience, (b) through statements of topical presence and reflexive evaluation included in individual completed research papers, (c) from course and teacher evaluations, and (d) from oral comments made to the teachers at the end of coursework. Using the same interpretive analysis techniques (Diekelmann, Allen & Tanner, 1989) employed when analysing the transcripts from individuals with chronic illness and family members, the investigators analyzed the students' verbal and written narratives and identified themes and patterns involved in this transformative process. In this process narrative data was read numerous times. Themes within each individual narrative were identified. Themes were clustered into patterns, common and recurring phenomena, which appeared in multiple narratives. Patterns are the highest level of findings coming from phenomenological research.

Findings

Initially, students described how having conversations with patients about various illnesses was a hallmark of traditional nursing care and not a new skill for these much experienced graduate nursing students. They recalled how their nursing conversations were focused to discover the "facts" rather than the "meaning" of a patient's particular situation. By the completion of individual research projects, students found new insights in seemingly routine conversations with patients and families. These insights resulted in an enrichment of the students' own practice base and the possibilities of sharing new ideas with other nurses.

Students who engaged in the phenomenological research of chronic illness

demonstrated significant insight into the illness experience of their participants. Not only did students provide narratives from the study participants, they also provided their own personal narratives from *doing* this research. These personal narratives repeatedly included phrases such as "I will never look at patients the same way again". In learning about health and illness, these students experienced transformation in how they practiced as nurses. We identified three themes related to that transformation including (a) resonating with the stories, (b) finding the exceptional in the routine, and (c) putting this research into practice.

Resonating with the stories.

Heidegger described how learning to resonate with the essence of a lived experience allowed new ways of thinking to come forward (1971, pg. 5):

As soon as we have the thing before our eyes and in our hearts an ear for the word, thinking prospers.

One of the first assignments was for students to write about a personal experience with a health or illness situation describing the experience and its personal meaning. As students shared these with each other, they began to understand "lived experience" as a significant and unique journey. Each found ways in which another's experience reflected his or her own experience or brought new understandings of the illness experience. They then used these skills to find connections and understandings in the participants' stories of health and illness.

No longer did the students interview participants to gather medical histories.

Rather, they participated in "inter-Views" (Kvale, 1996) that allowed new insights into others' stories which resonated with and became part of their own stories as nurses.

One described this phenomenon as:

Listening to and absorbing the life stories, they become a part of my experience and me. Seeing the patient and family at their most vulnerable and weakest times, and sometimes at their best, draws me into their world with an intensity that often only nurses have been privileged to feel.

"Resonating" went beyond seeing or hearing differently. For some, a new bond occurred with patients and nurses as the graduate student nurses came to understand health and illness beyond pathophysiological parameters:

Listening to their life experiences links me to them. The power of their words describes their roller coaster experiences and the overwhelming constraints in their lives. I will take their words with me as I move in and out of other patients' lives. I will listen more carefully to hear exactly what their illness means to them and their families.

Perhaps I can smooth the jagged edges of adjustment from health to chronic illness for another family ...

Finding the exceptional in the routine.

Most of our students had long professional experience in caring for patients with various illnesses and health concerns. In fact they were so experienced they frequently described patient-nurse interactions in language denoting "ordinary" or "routine". Early in the course work, they frequently used proscribed nursing jargon ("inability to care for self secondary to profound mental retardation") or pathophysiological labels (polymicrogyria, polycystic ovary syndrome, or cardiomyopathy) to describe their patients situations. Students also described the "meaning" of these conditions from purely psycho-social or behavioral perspectives (i.e., denial, enmeshment, and noncompliance). These labels reflected an outside-in view of what individuals experience (what one thinks another experiences), rather than the phenomenological inside-out perspective of understanding the unique meaning of the illness experience for those who have chronic illness conditions..

Heidegger described phenomenology as the ability to find the "splendor in the simple" (1971, p. 7). Once students were able to resonate with the stories, they were able to go beyond psycho-social labels. While patients' health problems might be ordinary, the students' found the lived experiences of participants were powerful and unique. In a study of severe rheumatoid arthritis, one student found :

[The woman] kept talking about wanting to be normal.

I believe that she is anything but normal -- she is exceptional.

Putting this research into my practice.

As nurse educators, we expected that students would successfully complete their research projects, develop their research papers, and find the research course to be exciting and challenging. We did not anticipate that students' professional practices would substantively change as a result of *doing* phenomenological research.

Transformation of graduate student nurses' view of health and illness and how they practiced nursing was an unexpected outcome. An example from a student demonstrated this transformation:

...The lived experience of chronic illness (was) very powerful, forcing me to consider my past care for individuals and their families. Although I have been concerned for them and their "living", I have rarely attempted to truly understand their experience. . . .
In the future I will be better able to truly listen. . . .
I believe I will be a more caring person and nurse.

Another graduate nursing student wrote:

I learned that nursing concerns are not always client concerns . . . I will always look at each person as different and unique and will treat them as such. I learned new ways to interact with my clients that I had not thought of before. This will help me be less of a black-and-white kind of person and will enable me to see the gray areas as well.

While each student completed satisfactory research papers, not all students experienced a transformation in their world view of patients and families managing chronic illness. Reflecting on the students who did not demonstrate transformation in their nursing practice, we found the following. These students commonly described their comfort with rigid empirical design methods, statistical analysis, and validity and reliability assurances. Some students struggled initially in adopting qualitative research philosophies, finally appreciation of the method late in the research process. Others never did find comfort in these methods. These students were not able to incorporate reflective interview skills and their research interviews were not very different from the familiar nursing history taking which had always been part of their nursing practices. These students were in the minority as most of the students actually came to embrace phenomenological research methods, engaged in reflective analysis of their narrative data, and described a transformation in the way they practiced nursing care for individuals and families facing chronic illnesses.

The students described how *doing* phenomenological research provided them with a means of "seeing with new eyes" or "hearing with new ears". Further, they were able to find concrete ways to change not only their own nursing practices, but the practice of others as well. As one noted:

I can now play an instrumental role in erasing this stereotyped image (of aging) and replace it with one of an individual who is vibrant and alive.

Conclusions

Graduate nursing students described how active participation in phenomenological research served as a catalyst for them to share their research, education, and practice experiences through conversations with the research team. While the outcome of each student's independent research will advance nursing practice in and of itself, an additional outcome was found in this classroom action research study. Students described how collectively engaging in the interactive process of teaching and learning phenomenological research transformed their individual thinking and changed them as practicing nurses. We find these classroom activities provided graduate student nurses a unique opportunity to connect for themselves the conversations which bridge and enrich nursing education, research, and practice in ways that traditional academic efforts have not been able to provide.

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