The utility of human sciences in nursing inquiry


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Abstract

Aim This paper targets novice nurse researchers to highlight how the perspectives of human sciences are useful in understanding people’s experiences.

Background There is a need to address the utility of human sciences or the humanistic philosophy that values the understanding of subjective experiences in nursing, given that the mainstream development of nursing knowledge is still influenced by the positivist and post-positivist research paradigms.

Data sources Discussion papers on Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology, human sciences, and qualitative research were accessed through the databases Cinahl and Medline over the past 30 years. Seminal works on phenomenology were addressed in this paper.

Discussion Using Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology as a commonly referenced human philosophy and methodology, this paper discusses how Heidegger’s (1962) perspective may be used in nursing practice and research. Van Manen’s (1990) descriptions of phenomenological science are discussed to address the perspective’s value in nursing inquiry and to reveal the biases associated with this humanistic approach.

Conclusion The limitations of human sciences should not deter nurse researchers from using this type of nursing inquiry as it can provide an important framework in nursing research, practice and knowledge development.

Implications for research/practice The author’s perspective as a graduate student highlights the importance of human sciences in exploring the experiences of people vital in the delivery of nursing practice. However, researchers wishing to undertake humanistic inquiry should learn the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of their chosen humanistic approach.

Keywords Human sciences, nursing inquiry, Heideggerian phenomenology, qualitative approach, humanistic philosophy

Introduction

THE DEVELOPMENT of nursing knowledge has been greatly influenced by medicine, which uses a positivist paradigm – a world-view that values scientific objectivity, as opposed to subjective meaning – in understanding human experience (Playle 1995). There has been a push toward a more holistic nursing approach in restoring and maintaining individuals’ health and wellbeing rather than merely focusing on the ‘illness-cure model’ (Playle 1995). However, the mainstream development of nursing knowledge is still dominated by the positivistic perspective and the post-positivist view, a paradigm that emphasises the use of objective knowledge, rather than human experiences, in the development of nursing knowledge. Therefore, there is a need to continue to promote the use of ‘human sciences’, defined in the next section, and the humanistic philosophy in nursing research.

This paper targets novice nurse researchers to highlight how human sciences are useful in understanding the human ‘lived’ experience in nursing research. Using Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology as a commonly referenced human philosophy and methodology, I will discuss how Heidegger’s (1962) perspectives can be used in...
nursing practice and research. I will use Van Manen’s (1990) descriptions of what phenomenological science ‘is and is not’ to address its value in nursing inquiry as well as to demystify the biases associated with this humanistic approach.

I conclude the paper with my personal perspective as a graduate student to highlight the implications of human sciences as a philosophical and methodological approach. I do not attempt to devalue the significance of the scientific way of knowing in nursing, as influenced by the post-positivist paradigm; rather I aim to demonstrate how human sciences can contribute to advancing the frontiers of nursing knowledge.

**Understanding people**

Human sciences involve the study and understanding of human beings (Van Manen 1990). Dilthey summarised human sciences as the ‘sciences of man, society and the state’ and differentiated human sciences from natural sciences as ways to comprehend individuals’ words and actions (Blackburn 2008).

Van Manen (1990) described human sciences as having a philosophy and methodology that are often used interchangeably with the terms ‘phenomenology’ (the study of human beings’ experiences) and ‘hermeneutics’ (a phenomenological perspective concerned with the meaning of the experiences). The phenomenological perspective has been of paramount importance in nursing research as it enables the nurse researcher to understand the individual’s or group’s insights into their experiences in relation to health and quality of life (Cody and Mitchell 2002). In other words, nurse researchers’ dual roles allow them to ask what is to be known, and enables them to gain insights from participants that are valuable and useful to the practice of nursing.

**Heideggerian phenomenology**

Known for developing hermeneutic phenomenology, Heidegger further developed Dilthey’s thinking with regard to understanding. Heidegger, who spurred the evolution of the interpretive paradigm – the belief that research findings are co-created by the researcher and the participants – believed that humans are interpretive beings capable of finding significance and meaning in their lives and those of others (Wojnar and Swanson 2007).

Heidegger (1962) claimed that the meaning of being is an important way of understanding human existence. He used the concept of ‘dasein’ as the way in which humans can question the meaning of their being-in-the-world and to wonder about their existence. He argued that the nature of reality should be analysed in terms of the inquirer’s experience of being in the world.

Heidegger (1962) believed that human experience is temporal, as we are ‘thrown’ into a world that has history, culture and place. Heidegger believed that inquirers must have insight into the history they share with others if they are to understand their experiences. The Heideggerian concepts of ‘being’ and ‘time’ are significant in enabling researchers to understand the contexts and meanings of phenomena.

The philosophical underpinnings of Heidegger’s phenomenology are unique to human sciences because of their focus on human experience. McConnell-Henry et al (2009) gave the example of a patient talking about his or her pain: a Heideggerian-influenced nurse would consider why the patient is experiencing pain, rather than merely accepting the pain level described by the patient. The concept of the nurse being in the world of the patient attempts to understand the meaning of the patient’s context.

The idea of Heidegger’s temporality as being central to hermeneutics may be of use to nursing. In the example from McConnell-Henry et al (2009), a nurse can ask the patient ‘at what point in time’ he or she experiences the pain, as a way to pinpoint when precisely the pain occurred.

The above example demonstrates how Heideggerian phenomenology, which views humans as interpretive and temporal beings, can relate to aspects of clinical nursing practice; it also suggests how the perspective of human sciences is compatible with nursing, as nurses have the ability to highlight the care required by patients through understanding the phenomena of their experiences (Kellet 1997).

Heidegger (1962) proposed that researchers exist in the world and can generate interpretations based on understanding the contexts of individuals’ existing worlds. Gantalao (2002) stated that: ‘The essence of nursing is lived in the moments of being with others.’ This speaks to the real meaning of the researcher being in the world of the participants as a way to understand their experiences in a meaningful context and manner.

Similarly, Cody and Mitchell (2002) articulated their reasons for using the perspective of human sciences in their research practice: ‘Our basic passion, and our rationale for pursuing human science nursing, is the being-with, witnessing, and co-creating quality of life that is lived by nurses in the nurse-person process. It is here that nurses have limitless opportunities to co-participate...’
in individuals’ and families’ experiences and to participate in enhancing quality of life in profound and lasting ways.’ This provides a rationale for the usefulness of human sciences in nursing: the nurse can bring personal experience and understanding to the research inquiry. In other words, when conducting research using the Heideggerian perspective, researchers can draw on their backgrounds as nurses.

Heidegger’s philosophical overviews demonstrate how well the perspective fits into nursing practice and research. Again, it is not my aim to downgrade the post-positivist perspective used in nursing; rather, I want to celebrate how a humanistic approach such as hermeneutic phenomenology can affect the expansion of nurses’ knowledge.

Cody and Mitchell (2002) made a notable point by reminding nurses of the use of human sciences inquiry in exploring and describing the experiences of patients in other health disciplines. This reminder should motivate nurses to have regard for the utility of human sciences and to gain and use highly specified knowledge to guide their practice and research.

**Strengths and limitations of using a phenomenological approach**

As a qualitative methodology, phenomenology is a known approach used in applied social human sciences. The purpose of qualitative research is to create and transform the understanding of new perspectives of knowledge (Sandelowski 1997). Devers (1999) stated that the limitations of qualitative research as a methodology for human sciences are easy to identify when viewed through the lens of quantitative research criteria. However, phenomenology differs significantly from scientific research based on its presuppositions, its methods and its objectives (Paley 2005).

Misunderstandings about the generalisability and trustworthiness of qualitative research, and concerns about its status as a science, mean that qualitative research is often viewed as inferior to its quantitative counterpart. Furthermore, some people view qualitative research by itself as incomplete and regard its methods as useful merely for discovery and description (Sandelowski 1997).

From Van Manen’s (1990) book about researching experiences, four main issues were identified concerning what phenomenological science is and is not. These are:

- Phenomenology does not focus on searching for facts or generalisable answers to questions; nor can it be used to prove experience. Instead, phenomenological inquiries produce in-depth understanding and interpretations of data that cannot be claimed as generalisable reality. The notion of transferability has been used as an alternative to generalisability and to apply the outcome of such qualitative approaches. The determination of transferability is based on whether or not a qualitative study’s applicability of findings can be ‘transferred’ legitimately to a situation (DiCenso et al 2005). Hence, it is not that findings from a qualitative study cannot be applied; rather, the findings should be used with caution in relation to how the description and meaning derived from the inquiry may be similar for different individuals and settings of interest.

- Phenomenology should not be compared to or confused with eastern meditative approaches used to understand the ‘meaning of life’; rather, it should be considered a western research philosophy and methodology. Although the origins of phenomenology are the perspectives and worlds of the people studied, the sources of knowledge are ontology or epistemology combined with the methodological approaches required in inquiring about the unknown (Guba and Lincoln 1994).

- Phenomenology is also characterised by the uniqueness of the everyday experiences of people. The experiences derived using this approach are neither particular nor universal.

- Finally, although uniqueness is valued, phenomenology does not aim to solve the problem of the research question posed. Problem questions are those that ‘seek solutions, “correct” knowledge, effective procedures, winning strategies, calculative techniques, “methods” which get results’ (Van Manen 1990). Understanding the methodological strengths and limitations of a qualitative methodology such as phenomenology is important in demystifying the biases associated with the use of the humanistic approach and in generating nursing knowledge relevant to understanding people’s experiences of their health and quality of life.

**A novice researcher’s perspective**

Understanding the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of a certain paradigmatic approach takes time and effort. Novice researchers should be immersed in a philosophy through reading about the primary founders of a philosophical movement, along with the proponents and opponents of their perspectives. Such reading is essential in enhancing knowledge of the usefulness of philosophical thoughts in generating knowledge.
At the beginning of my graduate studies, I learned about the issues of funding and publication, and the stigma associated with the use of qualitative methods. This persuaded me to undertake quantitative research for my master’s thesis. After taking a philosophy course and a qualitative course in my nursing doctoral programme, my opinion about human sciences has changed and its usefulness in advancing nursing knowledge has been clarified. It is important for nurses to articulate a coherent philosophical foundation for the development of nursing knowledge, whether they choose to undertake a humanist or a post-positivist inquiry.

Writing this paper has also taught me to foster an appreciation for the art of human sciences rather than concern myself unduly about scientific rigour. Malinski (2002) asserted that it is important that we acknowledge our differences rather than debate which approach is better for the nursing profession. After all, human sciences highlight the uniqueness and significance of people and their problems, knowledge that is important in the delivery of nursing practice. Guha and Lincoln (1994) explained the need to appreciate the paradigm differences and, in that context, to master qualitative and quantitative methods. The need to understand the aesthetic or ‘art’ of nursing care and the objective attitude of ‘science’ may present a conflict to a novice nurse researcher in terms of the focus of research, but learning both gives a broader appreciation of the paths nurse researchers should follow.

Sandelowski (1997) held that some practitioners of qualitative research are also responsible for misuse of the discipline because of their lack of good training in the methodology. This lack of training is due in part to a generalisation that qualitative approaches, such as performing interviews and observing experience, may appear to be easy or natural and that one can become an instant researcher. Thus, it is important for novice researchers and for those unfamiliar with human sciences to acquire qualitative training before pursuing its application in research inquiry. Similarly, when undertaking a human sciences inquiry, one should learn about the philosophical underpinnings associated with the chosen qualitative research method.

Conclusion

Human sciences can provide an important framework in nursing research, practice and knowledge development. Heideggerian phenomenology, as a commonly cited philosophy and methodology that underpins the humanist perspective, has contributed to nursing knowledge by revealing the descriptions and meanings of the experiences of the people of interest. The limitations of human sciences should not deter nurse researchers, especially novice researchers, from attempting to use their philosophical and methodological underpinnings when required by their qualitative research inquiry. As nursing goals continue to maintain and restore the health of the individual and groups, the knowledge developed in restoring health should move beyond the medical hegemony by considering the significance of human experiences as a means to advance the frontiers of knowledge in nursing.

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Conflict of interest

None declared

References


