

## Book Review

### *Interpretative Phenomenology. Embodiment, Caring, and Ethics in Health and Illness.*

Patricia Benner (Ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994. 349 pp.  
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Reviewed by Vangie Bergum and Susan James

Phenomenology and hermeneutics, philosophical approaches in research, are aimed at understanding human experience as it is lived, that is "understanding human concerns, meanings, experiential learning, and practical everyday skilful comportment" (p.xv). In this book, these philosophical traditions are explored from the perspective of research in nursing. The editor, Patricia Benner, states three aims of the book: (a) to offer a philosophical introduction to interpretive phenomenology, (b) to guide understanding of the strategies and processes of this approach, and (c) to provide a wide range of high-quality interpretative studies that show the central premises of interpretative enquiry within a variety of phenomena under investigation. The philosophical grounding of this book is focused on (and limited to) the work of Martin Heidegger, with Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor offering extensions of Heidegger's thought.

In the first section of the book (chapters 1-7) authors explore theoretical and philosophical foundations as well as methodological criteria for accomplishing interpretive research (including beginning work on a computer program to assist in analysis of data). In chapter 3, Victoria Leonard skilfully demonstrates how the Heideggerian view opens up understanding of the person as always situated in the world, for whom things have significance, and as self-interpreting, embodied, and temporal. These views challenge the root of Cartesian thinking with which we have become comfortable. As with any approach that invites different ways of thinking, new words (e.g., throwness, clearing, ready-to-hand, etc.) are difficult to grasp. Leonard and Karen Plager (chapter 4)

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effectively lead us to increased understanding through their use of examples. Leonard, Plager, and Benner (chapter 5) demonstrate why and how interpretive phenomenology methodology needs different standards (for evaluating rigour, for methods of data collection, and for analysis) than used in natural science research. Benner's chapter on method is abstract with a tendency to prescription and leaves us with a number of questions: Is engaged reasoning merely a form of comparison to uncover differences and similarities as in natural science? How can one understand sample size chosen to accommodate the researchers? How does one locate the paradigm case? Are themes the same as categories? What are the implications of mixing methods such as (clinical) ethnography and hermeneutic phenomenology.

The second half of the book (chapters 8-15) achieves the third aim of presenting a wide range of interpretative studies about embodiment, caring and ethics. Lee Smith Battle's study of teenage motherhood and Nancy Doolittle's study of stroke recovery are good examples of use of differing methods that accomplish enlarged understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Smith Battle, especially, shows the strength of narrative, which focuses on immediate experiences of the mothering experience of young women, rather than on gaps or deficits that others might identify. Attuning to their experience will increase understanding and encourage health professionals to rethink how to encourage and support the mothering abilities of these young women rather than to judge them. After all, as she says, it is the baby that calls out the moral claim of a changed life (p. 160). Doolittle describes the experience of the physical and social body following a stroke and the meaning of recovery as functioning in self-chosen activities. This level of understanding challenges nurses to go beyond an approach of coping with physical impairment to incorporating the experience of impairment into the personal concerns and meanings of that person (p. 223). The inclusion of discrete and sometimes quantified categories reported in some of the studies may result in confusion about the distinctions between the interpretive method and the empirical traditions in natural science. However, the various approaches to interpretive phenomenology and the attention to practice implications in the studies suggest a range of possible applications of the method in nursing practice and research.

There is a tension in this book that is somewhat troubling. On one hand, a desire for theory building is evident (chapters 1 and 2); and, on the other, there is a need to push off theory in order to reveal meanings, skills, and practices, the practical knowledge so hidden in traditional empirical research. In our view, hermeneutic phenomenology must

return us to practice (to human experience) rather than to theory (about experience). In this book the role of theory is not resolved.

Nursing practice and research will benefit from this timely and comprehensive book. To further the development of knowledge in nursing, outcome style research reflecting explanation or prediction through causal laws and formal theoretical propositions needs to be balanced with an understanding of how people experience health and illness. Interpretive inquiry encourages nurses to listen to people's experience in their particularity (personal narratives), attend to the language used in a thoughtful life deepening way, create meaning with participants in research (not just report it), and continue to learn about and enhance respect for our common human experience.