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## Using Heidegger's philosophy of dasein to support person-centred research

### Abstract

**Background** Locating and explicating philosophical frameworks, which enable a person-centred approach, is important for nurses undertaking research to respect and value participants during the process. This reflects the ideals of person-centred care.

**Aim** To explore how Heidegger's philosophical concept of dasein and its relationship with the hermeneutic circle can support person-centred research.

**Discussion** Dasein is described as 'being in the world' and encourages thinking about the ways in which people are bound to their surroundings and history. Understanding and applying it to nursing research is important as it enables researchers to explore the 'lifeworld' of another and promotes person-centred research practice.

**Conclusion** Developing a person-centred approach to research can be achieved by using Heidegger's concept of Dasein, which can enable the development of new insight into another person's lifeworld.

### Implications for practice

- Understanding the concept of *Dasein* enables nurse researchers to undertake person centred research.
- *Dasein* recognises the person in the holistic context of their world and values what is important to them
- Situating findings contextually allows nurse researchers to influence nursing practice and policy.

### Keywords

*Dasein*; Heidegger; hermeneutic circle; Person-Centred Research; Phenomenology

### Background

Person-centred care involves an individualised approach that recognises another person's unique needs, capabilities and priorities. Crucially, it involves the person being centrally located in all decision-making about care and treated with respect and compassion. Person-centred care has its roots in humanistic psychology and person-centred therapy, an approach established by Carl Rogers (Rogers et al 1951). Rogers was inspired by Abraham Maslow (Maslow 1943), whose hierarchy of needs focused on the fulfilment of one's personal potential, which Maslow called 'self-actualisation'. Rogers was also influenced by Snygg and Combs (1949), which reflected the phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl (Dutra 2016). However, as Rogers developed his theories of the self, his work started to draw parallels to Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic approach (Gendlin 1970, Heidegger 2010).

Rogers (1951) theorised that personal growth required genuineness, acceptance and empathy from others, which in turn would assist with openness and disclosure in a therapeutic relationship. Enabling such openness requires the nurse to be 'person-centred'. Person-centredness is grounded in the formation of respectful relationships that value the uniqueness of the individual in the healthcare partnership (McCormack et al 2017) and can enable deeper self-knowledge. Rogers (1951) humanistic approach suggests that people need to understand themselves by recognising and accepting their emotions and past experiences and learning to live in the moment, which in turn will enable them to set individualised goals for the future. The ethos of person-centredness was intended to replace previous care models, which were centred around service needs, patient condition and the medical model (RCN 2020). In contrast, person-centred care should reflect uniqueness and ensure care provision respects another's social context, culture, networks and needs (McCormack et al 2017). This approach is more in line with the social model of care, which goes further than the medical model to consider a person's economic and environmental context, since the medical model does not take account of the context and concentrates on the medicalised approach.

There are some similarities between the terms person-centredness and patient-centredness. However, patients are people with needs beyond the medical model of care – patient-centredness focuses more on functioning, whereas person-centredness highlights meaning in life (Holmström and Röing 2010) and is more in line with Rogers et al (1951)'s theory. Person-centred research is an approach that encompasses the principles of person-centred care (Reeve et al 2012). Its aim is to centralise the person contextually in their personal world, and ensure they are engaged with, respected and valued throughout the research (Epstein and Street 2011). Person-centred research is important as it enables participants to engage in research as equals by recalibrating the power dynamic between the researcher and the participants, enabling the participants to be heard, respected and empowered (Jacobs et al 2017). Situating the research and the positionality of the researcher are also important considerations, with the incorporation of their relational, contextual and political perspectives (Jacobs et al 2017). Person-centred research should promote person-centred nursing care by using a philosophy that underpins these ideals and makes visible the process that has been followed, as well as the influence the researcher has had on the collection and interpretation of the data.

## **Aim**

The aim of this article is to demonstrate the relevance to person-centred research of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger – specifically, the concept of 'dasein'. The paper will explore the ontological and epistemological approaches that underpin his work, to show these central philosophical tenets can promote person-centred research and offer new insights by exploring research participants' *lifeworlds* and experiences holistically.

## **Phenomenology**

The terms hermeneutics and phenomenology are often used interchangeably, despite the two philosophies being epistemologically and ontologically very different. Edmund Husserl is credited as being the founder of phenomenology and went on to develop 'descriptive (eidetic) phenomenology', a philosophical theory that posited that truth could be found in experience, as it is lived, and that insights could be developed from these first-hand perspectives (LoBiondo-Wood and Haber 2002). Husserl's work (Husserl 1970) focused on consciousness and used 'eidetic reduction' or 'bracketing' to reveal 'universal essences' or truths about experiences or phenomena (Natanson 1973). 'Eidetic reduction' involves researchers acknowledging their preconceptions about phenomena, so that they can put these views aside – bracket them – and not cloud the research process. Ultimately, the aim was to achieve 'transcendental subjectivity' as researchers continually appraise their own influence and eliminate any biases (Lopez and Willis 2004).

## **Hermeneutics**

Heidegger used the foundations developed by Husserl to develop hermeneutics, a philosophy concerning the interpretation and understanding of human existence. Heidegger (2010) took an ontological focus, rejecting Husserl (1970)'s subject-object conceptualisation of how we interact with the world to focus on the meaning embedded in the practices and experiences of everyday life. Taking an existential perspective enabled him to focus on the very question of being, understanding people through their contextual 'lifeworlds'. By developing Husserl's work from a descriptive method to an interpretive approach, Heidegger asserted his belief that all knowledge is an interpretation (Amos 2016). Heidegger posited that before we can understand anything, we must first understand what it is to be. Adopting the word 'dasein', he explained that we all exist in the world and are connected to the world – and just as the world influences us, we too influence the world. This fundamental interdependence can be seen in the expression 'being in the world' (Heidegger 2010). This existential perspective led Heidegger to conclude that to understand someone, we must understand their lifeworld and look at the way the world has influenced them and been influenced by them. He asserted that someone cannot be removed from their lifeworld and we should explore the ordinary, everyday practices shaped by our history and culture. He viewed personal experiences and prejudgements as offering value to enquiry, causing him to reject Husserl's views about eidetic reduction. Another fundamental difference was Husserl's epistemological assumption that there were 'universal truths' to be uncovered in people's experiences (Husserl 1970) – Heidegger believed that everyone's experiences are unique (Heidegger 2010).

Heidegger is often criticised on two counts – his political affiliations and the impenetrability of his thinking (Wolin and Rockmore 1992 Dreyfus and Wrathall 2005). His work is accused of being elitist, shrouded in elaborate prose and made difficult by the use of specially created vocabulary (Dreyfus and Wrathall 2005). However, Watsuji (1996) specifically criticises Heidegger's (2010) conception of dasein, arguing that he made an incorrect assumption in his connection of the self, authenticity and

inauthenticity. Watsuji (1996) contended that Heidegger's view of the self or 'I' as an isolated individual ignored the role others play in the world, rendering *dasein* an abstract concept. Culbertson (2019) countered this by highlighting Heidegger's analytic of *dasein* (Heidegger 2010) in which he demonstrated the centrality of social connectedness and the influence of others. Certainly, it is Heidegger's belief that there is a pre-ontological importance of *dasein* that represents a pre-reflective phase of 'being in the world' (Heidegger and Krell 1993). This is particularly significant when we use the concept of *dasein* in a person-centred approach, where the researcher engages with the participant to explore their experiences of their world and their reality (Orbanic 1999), enabling a unique understanding of the participant and what matters to them to emerge (Lopez and Willis 2004).

## **Dasein**

Heidegger was fundamentally a teacher and used the concept of *dasein* to uncover what lies beneath our everyday practices and interactions in our lifeworld, to give us new perspectives and insights. The importance of understanding an individual's lifeworld is critical to understanding the person and how they subjectively experience their everyday life from cultural, social, historical and political perspectives. Leonard (1989) illustrated this well by describing the facets of the Heideggerian concept of a person as: having a world; a being for whom things have significance and value; self-interpreting; embodied; and experiencing time. Heidegger used the concept of 'temporality' (Heidegger 2010) to enable thinking at this level – not restricting the analytic to the present time but instead exploring past ways of being and thinking about one's future self, which allows for a more holistic understanding of the research participant.

## **Temporality**

The exploration of our personal and cultural past and current situation is seen in Heidegger's concept of temporality as he conceives the temporary nature of our existence in the world – he argued we can discover new perspectives and insights using our experiences not as emotional baggage to hold us back but as opportunities to inform new decisions (Heidegger 2010). Temporality has intrinsic links with *dasein*, since we are born into a culture and a class system and this world matters to every person in one way or another (Heidegger 2010). Our past, present and future are integral to our exploration of *dasein*, as we look at the future in terms of possibilities. This belief that our experiences are interconnected with our culture, history and context enables a hermeneutic approach to explore emotions and wholeness (Wojnar and Swanson 2007) while valuing the individual's experience and beliefs (Reiners 2012).

## **The hermeneutic circle**

In person-centred research, the 'hermeneutic circle' represents a vision of wholeness. This is positioned in the individual's *lifeworld* and incorporates *dasein* and *temporality*. Any interpretation is therefore viewed in the contexts of the individual's culture and history. The hermeneutic circle is a

metaphor for the cyclical movement of interpretation and reinterpretation of data between the whole and the parts then back again until new understandings are created. The hermeneutic circle allows researchers to develop an inter-subjective understanding through the 'lived human. Human relations in this context refers to the relationships, interactions and communications we have with others – how these are created and shared with others, as the process encourages researchers to interpret, revise and find meanings as they encounter new situations (van Manen 1990: 10). They can use the hermeneutic circle to uncover meanings by looking at the whole text – which is informed by the parts of the text – and allowing the parts of the text to uncover meanings in the whole text. It can also be used to look at the detail of an experience in relation to the whole experience, as it is an iterative process (Gadamer 1989). The hermeneutic circle shows us that life is not lived in a vacuum, but is connected to others, one's history, one's culture and one's environment. Therefore, we cannot separate one element and look at it out of the context of another person's lifeworld or vice versa. As researchers adopt this reflective self-awareness and an understanding of their and others' lifeworlds, they develop new insights through interpretive discourse; importantly, they also uncover their situatedness in the world through their 'being there' or *dasein*. This poses the fundamental question of 'what it means to be'. Understanding *dasein* must therefore be of critical importance to nurse researchers who want to increase their understanding of individuals' experiences by exploring their life practices.

The need to look at and understand ourselves and our beliefs to uncover the nature of our being is a central thread that runs through Roger et al (1951)'s person-centred work, with the self as a person's inner personality, likened to the soul. This resonates with Heidegger's use of the term *dasein* to depict one's being in the world and the importance of understanding who we are and how we exist in our own lifeworld (Heidegger 2010). Heidegger (2010) observed that our being or *dasein* can be influenced by others and society – 'the they' – leading us to conform and sometimes become inauthentic. Rogers et al (1951) echoed that with the observation that the views and evaluations of others can profoundly influence self-belief, self-worth and behaviour. When we are born into a culture, a place and a history ('facticity of thrownness'), we learn to live and conform with the society around us, and we can choose whether to conform or fulfil our potential ('fallness') (Heidegger 2010).

The fundamental importance of exploring these everyday influences and the contextual importance of the individual's 'lifeworld' is central to Heidegger and Roger's work, and lays the foundations for person-centred research, enabling nurse researchers to look at the everyday, taken-for-granted assumptions in participants' data and explore how participants are influenced by societal norms, culture and others (Chesterton et al 2020). An important caveat to person-centred research comes from McCormack and McCance (2017), which highlighted the importance of respect, understanding and 'healthful relationships' between all people involved in the process. In hermeneutics, this is perhaps best seen in the value attached to researchers and participants, as researchers reflect on their experiences and values to make transparent their influence throughout the process (van Manen 1984) while respecting the participants' unique situations (Mead and Bower 2000). In nursing

research, the participant often relates these experiences using personal stories, enabling them and the researcher to understand the temporal, social and spatial aspects of the experiences, as well as the relational aspect between them both (Josselson 2007). In hermeneutic research, the aim is to 'unveil' what is already present and uncover someone's unique experience of their lifeworld and their interpretation of reality, to present new understandings and insights. This provides a different perspective of the phenomenon being studied.

### **Criticisms of nurse researchers using a hermeneutical approach**

Critics of nurse researchers who use a hermeneutical approach often focus on the fact that they have failed to understand Heidegger and Husserl's philosophies, as they have learned them from other writers rather than the original texts (Paley 1998). However, Crotty (1996) asserted that it is less about poor understanding and more about a failure to apply the philosophical underpinnings to their work. He argued that studies are often descriptive, subjective or lacking in critique. Phenomenology can be a daunting prospect for novice nurse researchers because it offers no definitive method to follow (Spiegelberg 2012). Such freedom of style can be helpful in developing person-centred research, for example, but this lack of prescription can be a hindrance, as it can lead to different interpretations of how to undertake a phenomenological study (Burns and Peacock 2019); this can lead to criticism, if others disagree with the approach taken. However, selecting the right methodology is vital, and it must resonate with the researcher and the phenomena being explored (Green 2014). Giacomello and Melo (2019) usefully demonstrated the interplay between the participant, researcher and Heideggerian discourse, which facilitates a new perspective of caring, well-illustrated by co-constituting Heidegger's (2010) key tenets with exemplars. We recognise the difficulties in understanding and applying this philosophy. But there are important benefits to nursing from using this approach, as the researcher and the participant share experiences of what it means to be in the context of their lifeworld, leading to a reflexive approach in research.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is helpful in hermeneutic research as it enables the researchers' thoughts and feelings to become visible to inform the interpretation of the data. Using a reflexive approach can lead researchers to a different understanding of the issues being explored. Enosh and Ben-Ari (2016) described reflexivity as a continuous movement between the participant, the encounter and the researcher. It involves researchers looking at their own preconceptions, values and behaviours, and noting any influence these have on the research process. For nurse researchers, who are adept in reflexivity, selecting a hermeneutical approach offers a way of using these core skills and finding a holistic way to uncover different understandings of another's lifeworld.

## **Relevance of Heidegger's work to person-centred research**

Heidegger's philosophy is valuable to nurse researchers who want to pursue person-centred research as it enables thinking about ways to perceive the world through an interpretive or hermeneutical approach. It also mirrors the prerequisites for a person-centred practitioner, who explores people's unique situations with respect and self-awareness to find out their needs and priorities. Heidegger believed that interpretation could aid our understanding of other people's lifeworlds and vice versa (Heidegger 2010). Lifeworld, from a hermeneutical perspective, describes someone's existence as being inseparable from the social, cultural and historical context in which we live. Heidegger (2010) suggested that interpretation can be thought of as having a staged development, through the notion of 'fore-structures of understanding': 'fore-having' (background practices), 'fore-sight' (socio-economic background) and 'fore-conception' (socio-cultural background). This is important for nurse researchers, as it enables them to explore how they have been influenced by their own background, culture and environment. They can identify and understand their own prejudgements about the subject they are researching – for example, how their own biography and experience are connected to the research. This exploration occurs before and during data collection – essentially, before any attempt to interpret and understand another person.

Self-exploration is particularly significant in person-centred research, as it enables researchers to examine the pre-judgements they could bring to the study, such as their political or cultural beliefs, which may influence their interpretations. Once aware of their own prejudgements, researchers can use them to co-constitute the data, which can lead to new and important understandings of phenomena. Such participation can support the sharing of power in the relationship between the researcher and the participants, the development of non-judgemental interactions and the flourishing of the participant and the researcher (McCormack and McCance 2010). Along with articulation of researchers' prejudgements, hermeneutic phenomenology enables researchers to explore the first-hand experiences of participants (Ranse et al 2018) and reflects the humanistic and holistic values of nursing.

## **Dasein in person-centred nursing research**

There are several examples in the nursing literature of how Heidegger's concept of dasein has been used in person-centred research. Heidegger's thoughts on dasein (Heidegger 2010) complement the art of nursing and the central importance person-centred care places on the need to engage, respect and value the person (Epstein and Street 2011). Dasein's most basic mode of being is to be in the world with care ('sorge'), which reflects a nurse's role to provide comfort by becoming involved in the patient's lifeworld (Draucker 1999). Wilson (2014) provides an example of how dasein informs person-centred nursing research, as she explored dasein in relation to practice educators to gain a new perspective of their experiences and practices. She used the Heideggerian concept of 'verstehen' (understanding) to show how exploring dasein causes the possibilities that are present through



understanding and interpretation to emerge (Wilson 2014). The importance of keeping interpretation within the context of the participant's lifeworld were also highlighted through her engagement in the hermeneutic circle, as interpretation and new understandings were uncovered through dialogue.

Giacomello and Melo (2019)'s study exploring the meaning of care from the perspective of nurses caring for hospitalised children provides another example. It explored the meaning of being in the world for the nurses involved and considered their everyday practices to reveal insights into the nurses' ways of coping and of being, as well as the influences of 'the they'. Jack and Wibberley (2014) discussed how dasein can be used to support person-centred research. Their study explored the lifeworld of the preregistration nursing student and the nature and meaning of emotional relationships between nursing students and patients. The authors took dasein as a central focus to look at the participants' need for dwelling, as the inseparability and interconnectivity of being in the world influences dasein. This person-centred approach enabled them to use their findings to discuss the practical issue of how to provide appropriate support to preregistration nursing students.

Heidegger's philosophy enables researchers to explore individuals' first-hand experiences, perceptions and feelings by understanding their lifeworlds and the everydayness that encapsulates their dasein. Certainly, the ability to explore the ordinary, often taken for granted aspects of another's lifeworld and reveal new insights and perspectives makes Heidegger's philosophy an exciting prospect for researchers to use. Furthermore, in adopting a person-centred approach to research by using hermeneutics, we learn to understand and value ourselves as researchers, and understand participants by learning about them as unique individuals, their lifeworld, history, culture and experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Person-centred care has become the cornerstone that underpins the nursing process. It embodies the need for nurses to give individualised and coordinated care, based on the uniqueness of every individual. This approach marked a steep departure from the medical model and task-orientated provision of care, encouraging nurses to take a holistic view when planning and delivering care. Using Heidegger's concept of dasein and what it means to be can enable researchers to uncover what is present in everyday practices. The main prerequisites for a person-centred researcher reflect those of a person-centred practitioner: self-awareness and treating individuals with respect, while exploring their circumstances, environment and life practices to find out what matters to them.

This paper has identified the need for nurse researchers to understand some of the philosophical and theoretical perspectives that could be used in person-centred research. It has focused on Heidegger's tenets of dasein and the hermeneutic circle and their application to nursing research. Researchers can use them to look for meanings in the everyday life practices of human existence, which we often take for granted yet can generate new insights into how we interact with others and how we are influenced by our social, cultural and historical lifeworlds. It is vital that nurses can show a defensible philosophical framework underpins their research, including the connections between

the philosophy and the concepts. By contextually situating findings, nurse researchers can use a person-centred method to understand people's experiences and usefully contribute to nursing policy and practice development.

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