

**Looking Inward: Philosophical and Methodological Perspectives  
on Phenomenological Self-Reflection**

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**Abstract**

Engaging in early and ongoing self-reflection during interpretive phenomenological research is critical for ensuring trustworthiness or rigor. However, the lack of guidelines and clarity about the role of self-reflection in this methodology creates both theoretical and procedural confusion. The purpose of this article is to describe key philosophical underpinnings, characteristics, and hallmarks of the process of self-reflection in interpretive phenomenological investigation, and to provide a list of guidelines that facilitate this process. Excerpts from an

interpretive phenomenological study are used to illustrate characteristics of quality self-reflection. The guidelines are intended to be particularly beneficial for novice researchers who may find self-reflective writing to be daunting and unclear. Facilitating use of self-reflection may strengthen both the interpretive phenomenological body of work as well as that of all qualitative research.

*Keywords:* interpretive phenomenology, philosophy, qualitative research, self-reflection

### **Turning Inward: Philosophical and Methodological Perspectives on Phenomenological Self-Reflection**

Engaging in early and ongoing self-reflection is critical to the trustworthiness and quality of interpretive phenomenological research. It assists the investigator in several important aspects of this form of inquiry: (a) Recognize the “researcher as instrument”, including the fallible and transient nature of individual interpretation; (b) Confront and mitigate the inevitability and complexity of researcher bias; (c) Promote a deeper sense of openness and receptivity to the often hidden dimensions of human phenomena while expanding our understanding of self and world; and, (d) Contribute to shared meaning making, the sought after outcome of interpretive phenomenological inquiry (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1996; Munhall, 2012; van Manen, 1990, 2011). However, the lack of guidelines and clarity about the role of self-reflection in interpretive phenomenological research creates both theoretical and procedural confusion surrounding reflexivity in general and self-reflection in particular (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006; Gearing, 2004; Jootun et al., 2009; Koch & Harrington, 1996; Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy & Sixsmith, 2013).

The purpose of this article is to describe key philosophical underpinnings, characteristics, benefits, and hallmarks of the process of self-reflection in interpretive phenomenological investigation, and to provide a list of guidelines that facilitate this process. The strategies are intended to demystify and clarify the process, and may be particularly helpful for novice researchers and their mentors. To illustrate the practical application of self-reflection, exemplar reflective statements from an interpretive phenomenological study about the meaning of the relationship between cancer care nurses and American Indian patients are provided.

### **Overview of Interpretive Phenomenology**

To fully appreciate the role of self-reflection in interpretive phenomenology it is helpful to review the philosophical underpinnings and development of this scientific method. Current phenomenological philosophical and methodical approaches emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in response to the positivist paradigm of the previous era in which logical thought and Kant's bifurcating distinction between perception and reality dominated science (Rodgers, 2005). While positivists were consumed with locating truth using empirical means, the ancient Greeks had originally focused on searching for wisdom (Creswell, 2013). Edmund Husserl, a German theoretical mathematician, returned to the classical Greek teachings of Plato by acknowledging the influence of subjective and idiosyncratic interpretations of reality (Parse et al, 1985). Directly responding to the positivist traditions, Husserl suggested that there was in fact no mind-body dualism and that phenomena occur within experience as perceived through conscious awareness (Koch, 1995; Lavery, 2003).

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Husserl's student, Martin Heidegger (1997/2006), questioned if reality or truth could ever be grasped in an unbiased manner. He challenged Husserl by altering the way meaning was uncovered through a hermeneutical approach (Rodgers, 2005; van Manen,

2011). A former theology student, Heidegger transformed the Husserlian phenomenological orientation of epistemology into a deeply ontological orientation by studying the science of Being, or *Dasein* (Reiners, 2012). Heidegger developed his philosophy of Being during the early 1930s in Germany as the Nazi party was ascending (Wheeler, 2017). Although Heidegger's role and level of commitment to the Nazi party remains contested, scholars acknowledge at least a tenuous relationship between his *Dasein* and German imperial fascism. The decision to utilize Heideggerian phenomenology in an investigation concerned with interracial dynamics and the lingering effects of neocolonialism within the nurse-patient relationship was not made lightly. Certainly Heidegger remains a complex pillar in the continental philosophy, despite his involvement with Nazi ideology. While widely considered one of the sources of interpretive phenomenology, later scholars such as Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Rorty succeeded in moving the philosophy forward into its present forms (van Manen, 2011). I primarily relied on van Manen's (1990) approach for eliciting lived-experience descriptions (including those from self) and reconstituting their meaning

Interpretive phenomenology focuses on the way we *are* rather than on what we *know*. Yet Being and our ability to understand "the way we are" is limited by our ability to view our own immediate and past experiences (Crotty, 1996, p. 79). By integrating existentialism and ontology with phenomenology, Heidegger encouraged researchers to concentrate on the situated meaning of being human rather than describing characteristics of phenomena as they are consciously perceived (Koch, 1995; Lavery, 2003; Rodgers, 2005;). Moving beyond description and into meaning requires an interpretive process, and interpretation is further enhanced by self-reflection.

### **Self-Reflection as a Cornerstone of Interpretive Phenomenology**

The word ‘reflection’ comes from the Latin *reflexionem*, meaning “a bending back” or a “turning back one’s thought on some subject” and in contemporary literature, reflection is “something that shows the effect, existence, or character of something else” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2009, p. 1046). It permits the person to appraise unique qualities and characteristics through individual perspective and the passage of time. Reflection assumes a degree of distortion, further compounded by the unreliability of human memory and perception (Crotty, 1996). Effective self-reflection minimizes this distortion through a contemplative process over time and grounded in lived experience.

Numerous scholars such as van Manen (1990, 2011, 2014) have continued to promote the use of self-reflection as a research instrument since Heidegger first described its importance. Contemporary phenomenological thought asserts that the best way to address our own preunderstanding and assumptions about phenomena is through extensive and focused self-reflection, both at the beginning and continuously throughout the research process as directed by the hermeneutic circle (van Manen, 2011).

Self-reflection is one component of a much larger commitment to reflexivity across qualitative research in general. It is important to distinguish here the difference between self-reflection and reflexivity and the limitations of the former. According to Pillow (2003, p. 178), reflexivity is “an ongoing self-awareness during the research process which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analyses of our research”. Reflexivity incorporates both Other and awareness of self in relation to Other. Self-reflection, on the other hand, is a deep turning inward and does not require recognition of Other. Because of its solitary nature, self-reflection is at risk of becoming a narcissistic endeavor that fails to actually strengthen research. Merleau-Ponty in particular was

critical of the incompleteness and neglect of the intersubjectivity found in self-reflection, thus the focus on bracketing in descriptive phenomenology in an attempt to suspend personal belief about phenomena (Wheeler, 2017).

Interpretive phenomenologists do not suspend belief (bracket) because of Heidegger's assertion that it is precisely through ourselves that we experience the world, including others (Heidegger, 1997/2006). Thus, self-reflection is an essential and unavoidable task intrinsic to interpretive phenomenology philosophy and methodology. This "inseparable connection to the world" is deemed "intentionality" in phenomenological terms, reflecting the level of purpose and thoughtfulness required to adequately engage in this reflexive endeavor (van Manen, 1990, p. 5). Interpretive phenomenologists don't avoid intersubjectivity per se, but rather believe that hermeneutics presumes prior understanding and therefore, the researcher is part of every facet of the phenomenon including past and present conscious relationships between people (Reiners, 2012).

Since it is impossible to separate oneself from the phenomena at hand as we are constantly and subliminally engaged in interpretation of the world, this methodology requires that we consciously bring these revelations to the surface and critically examine their influence on our perception (van Manen, 1990). Criticality is essential to this methodology and to self-reflection as a whole. For example, in my own work on the American Indian patient and cancer care nurse relationship, self-reflection enabled me to recount a troubling interaction tainted by subliminal racial tension. I initially viewed the incident as a deeply personal affront, but gradually came to situate it in a much larger sociohistorical context that was often just below the surface of perception as I cared for patients. Recalling this embodied experience aligned with Merleau-Ponty's assertion that we experience the world through our physical self, rendering

characteristics such as race and gender worthy of critical examination (Wheeler, 2017). In addition, a mentor's consistent critique through my self-reflection process enabled me to see the experience for what it truly was.

### **Benefits of Self-Reflection**

Self-reflection is a challenging process, but it can help move the researcher closer to authentic meaning. Additionally, self-reflection facilitates the following capacities in the researcher that are congruent with nursing epistemology:

- 1. Honors the research instrument.** The researcher acts as the instrument during interpretive phenomenological research. However, conscious perception is transient, imperfect, and highly subjective (Crotty, 1996). As human beings within-the-world, phenomenological researchers benefit from deep introspection as a way of fine-tuning and adjusting this instrument of use, to grasp the essence of a phenomenon as it exists in one moment of time as seen through the interpreter's lens.
- 2. Confronts and mitigates bias.** Self-reflection encourages researchers to directly confront their own bias and to recognize the extent that past experiences influence present interpretation and subsequent meaning making. The highly iterative nature of the hermeneutic circle used to guide data collection and analysis increases the potential for bias to contaminate research findings (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006; Lavery, 2003; Reiners, 2012). Disciplined and persistent self-reflection encourages the tempering of bias by making personal thoughts and feelings explicit and exploring their origins and relevance to the investigation (Crotty, 1996; Parse et al, 1985). These preconceptions are then held at abeyance to the fullest extent possible while the phenomenon is examined in a new light (Bevan, 2014; Gearing, 2004).

- 3. Facilitates openness and receptivity.** Self-reflection creates a sense of unknowing/unseeing that fosters a clearer grasp of the phenomenon under study at a particular moment of time (Creswell, 2013; Munhall, 2012). According to Heidegger, the goal is to set reason aside and surrender, contemplate, and listen to what the phenomenon has to offer (Crotty, 1996). Self-reflection also promotes personal knowing in a way that cultivates a deeper appreciation of lived experiences and their meaning (Carper, 1978/2012; Munhall, 2012; Quinn, 2014; van Manen, 1990). Adoption of these perspectives strengthens qualitative research by allowing the researcher to become more receptive and sensitive to the subtleties and often obscured nature of human idiosyncrasies and assumptions.
- 4. Contributes to shared meaning making.** Self-reflection facilitates the subsequent co-creation (between participant and researcher) of meaning by illuminating shared albeit tentative understanding of phenomena arising from data (Crotty, 1996; Laverly, 2003; van Manen, 1990). Meaning is “always in the context of something –one’s humanity, one’s culture, [and] one’s personal situation” (Johnson, 2000, p. 135). Although originally focused on self, when self-reflections are reconstituted with the *emic* and often profound elicitations of study participants in the search for meaning, the subjective becomes increasingly objective. Generalizability is generally viewed as impossible in interpretive phenomenology, so a reconstituted objectivity suffices as a form of collective understanding that resonates across humanity and fosters shared meaning irrespective of individual experience (Creswell, 2013). Self-reflection both counters and authenticates study participants’ perceptions, and from the subsequent reconstitution, meaning is uncovered as a reflection of the universal human experience (Gearing, 2004;



van Manen, 1990). It is an essential component for the process of recognizing self in other, and other in self, once data collection with participants has begun.

### **Hallmarks of Successful Self-Reflection**

Self-reflection requires practice and continued commitment to maintaining elements required to uphold the methodological foundations of interpretive phenomenology. It is a thoughtful and well-organized process that strives for authenticity and depth. Self-reflection is neither a chronological recounting of events nor a story or allegorical narration but rather a focused and structured method based on the same principles that guide data collection with study participants during phenomenological inquiry (Bevan, 2014; Clancy, 2013; van Manen, 1990). Self-reflection assists one in moving beyond memory recall into the often uncharted territory of suppressed or neglected thoughts and beliefs that influence interpretive work. In addition, and particularly for the novice researcher, this process is most productive when supported by a trusted, experienced guide as well as by the investigator's personal commitment.

I distilled four hallmarks of successful self-reflection. The first two are drawn from phenomenological philosophy: *Focusing on the Phenomenon* and *Accessing the Lifeworlds*. My success with them particularly benefitted from targeted feedback from my research mentor, illustrated below, to demonstrate the depth of guidance and iterative pattern required to elicit truly reflective text. Two additional hallmarks of self-reflection worthy of special emphasis are drawn from phenomenological research: *Engaging in the Act of Writing* and *Creating Time and Space*. They entail considerable self-discipline and commitment beyond what a mentor may provide. These two hallmarks are essential to the overall process of phenomenological inquiry and permeate the practices of focusing on the phenomenon and accessing the lifeworlds.

#### **Focusing on the Phenomenon**

Maintaining focus on the phenomenon of interest helps the researcher avoid contamination of the rest of the study by superficial preconceptions or unrelated forays (Clancy, 2013; Tuohy et al, 2013). Despite Heidegger's warnings, phenomenologists often find themselves with a shallow or murky grasp of the phenomenon of interest, due in part to difficulty recognizing that meaning originating with others may actually be interwoven with one's own perception as various accounts of human experience emerge during data collection (Bevan, 2014; Johnson, 2000; Koch, 1995; Lavery, 2003). Constant refocusing allows for deeper comprehension, and surface-level assumptions are made explicit so that the phenomenon can be viewed with a more penetrating gaze (Crotty, 1996; van Manen, 1990).

It is easy to become distracted or to introduce seemingly related topics that are actually subconscious attempts at avoidance, deflection, or even dishonesty. This initial entry from my own self-reflection completed early into the interpretive phenomenological study provides an example of writing that is fairly insipid, even when attempting to recount a specific patient experience:

*There is some fundamental tone of openness and respect that is so quickly sensed by patients. Cancer in particular calls for respect –of the journey people are undergoing, of the fear and immensity felt, the gravity of the situation, the connotations behind the very word ‘cancer’. I stayed consistent with her and her family, always listening more than I spoke, staying calm and respectful. We ended up building a beautiful nurse-patient relationship that brought forth a lot of thoughts and questions for me.*

This passage reveals very little about the phenomenon of focus, *the lived experience* of my relationship as a cancer care nurse with an American Indian patient. This ambiguous and

unfocused ramble fails to provide insight into how the experience of relationship feels, what thoughts and questions emerged, and what significance they might hold.

In response to these initial and unfocused passages, my mentor encouraged me to stop thinking and analyzing and to instead start *feeling* the relationship, to reflect on my own lived experience rather than trying to make the situation better. She asked me to sit with particular terms or phrases to instigate a more thoughtful and contemplative approach to writing. This technique maintained focus by forcing me to pause and consider both semantics and why I chose to recall particular patients and neglect others. It became apparent that some of my inability to focus was related to my need to focus on emotionally safe topics and avoid complex and sometimes uncomfortable nuances of my past relationships with American Indian patients. After further exploration, a more focused reflective writing emerged:

*She required very complicated wound care several times each shift and we would often pass the time by talking. I think it was a form of distraction for her from the physical and mental discomfort of the situation, and many of these conversations evolved into stories about our families or Indian Country. She really appreciated that I could relate to a small part of her world. I think she felt very alone in the hospital, and these casual conversations helped me to understand her isolation and fear. We began to appreciate where each of us came from, and it helped us to connect with each dressing change.*

This passage provides some initial insight into how a clinical task evolved into a connecting moment. It is more detailed and personal, hinting at the underlying structures of this particular nurse-patient relationship calling for further exploration. When performed correctly, focused self-reflective writing provokes questions and exposes gaps

in our understanding of an easily identifiable object such as this specific patient-nurse interaction (Clancy, 2013; van Manen, 1990).

### **Accessing the Lifeworlds**

Originally proposed by Husserl, Heidegger ascertained that lifeworlds are reflected across humanity and are composed of four domains essential for interpretation of self-within-world: corporeality, experienced as physical responses and embodied sensations; spatiality, represented by emotional and spiritual reactions to place, space, and the environment; temporality, or when sensations and impressions occur and descriptions of change over time; and relationality, the characteristics of human connection during these bio-psycho-social-spiritual processes (van Manen, 1990). During self-reflection, repeatedly returning to the lifeworlds serves as a means of remaining close to the foundations and origins of the complex and often subconscious nature of human experience (Crotty, 1996).

Examples of lifeworld-based descriptions of caring for American Indian patients include: *“I felt under attack and very uncertain about my place, unable to resist the urge to physically escape the patient’s room”* (corporeality); *“It made my job seem impossible as I was caught between wanting to provide complete, detailed care while respecting her personal and cultural space”* (spatiality); *“it felt like time had been suspended because that traumatic history was so present in the moment”* (temporality); *“Providing nursing care for her felt like a substantial responsibility, as well as sacred; I did not want to take anything for granted about our interactions”* (relationality).

Accessing the lifeworlds results in writing that is markedly different than typical journaling. It requires significant practice and revision prompted by a specific type of probing applied during and after the creation of self-reflection drafts; the process can be facilitated by a

mentor who offers a more objective and keen perspective of the described experiences (Clancy, 2013; Johns, 1995). Typically, the first-draft tends to be narrative and observational in nature:

*From nearly the beginning she was “pegged” as being difficult to care for by the physicians and the nursing staff. This was not based on her clinical state, but on her perceived behavior and attitude. I found her to be quiet and observant; I can see how this might have been seen as being withdrawn and sullen. She and her husband expressed their distrust of the nursing staff very early on. Somehow I persisted with them. I spoke about my time and experiences in two previous Native communities –this seemed to build a small amount of trust as we could relate to familiar place names and even some people we both knew. Would I have been able to build this bridge as a nurse without previous experience in these communities? I don’t know, but I do believe that there is something in a nurse’s approach that can transcend that common ground.*

Lifeworld-based probes asked by oneself or a mentor facilitate movement beyond the observational toward recognition and expression of suppressed sensations or previously unrecognized areas of significance in narratives (van Manen, 1990).

Lifeworld probes are pointed queries, such as the following:

*What did it feel like when she was quiet, observant, withdrawn? What did that feel like inside of you? What did it feel like to persist despite her demeanor? What did being distrusted physically feel like? Take those sensations and ask yourself about time and timing... Again, what did persistence feel like in terms of timing? How did it affect the timing of other sensations?*

Exhaustive probing is aimed at accessing the authentic lifeworlds of the writer in order to facilitate understanding about abstract lived experiences (van Manen, 1990), as depicted in this later reflection. It is far more embodied -- physically, mentally, spatially, and in relation to others -- and enhanced my understanding and interpretation of a specific experience:

*I walked into her room, and she immediately burst into tears. I began to tear up as well and felt that swelling sensation deep in my chest that arises when you are overwhelmed by a strange mix of love and sadness: I was happy to see her, but disheartened to see her readmitted. It was all we could do for a moment to embrace, and I felt honored. This was a woman who had been labeled “withdrawn” and “standoffish” and who openly admitted to not trusting most of our staff. I knew with every cell of my body that I had managed to truly and authentically nurse this person. I had touched her and I felt privileged that she had allowed me to do so. In that moment I also realized how much she had touched me. In our shared vulnerability we found familiarity, comfort, and connection. Words were not needed between us.*

Lifeworld-based questioning turned a generic observation into a deeply embodied sensation taking place during a transient moment of time, and guidance from my mentor was especially helpful to me as novice phenomenological researcher unaccustomed to such personified and lyrical writing.

### **Engaging in the Act of Writing**

Scholars recommend that self-reflection in interpretive phenomenology be written rather than oral since the act of writing creates a specific type of consciousness and mindfulness (Koch & Harrington, 1998; van Manen, 1990). Writing forces the researcher to proceed at a slower pace

and to contemplate events in a more attentive manner. Through writing, researchers begin to unfold a deeper understanding of not only the phenomenon, but also of their own positionality and personal insights. This style may be unsettling to some researchers in the social sciences who are more accustomed to a formal and depersonalized tone (Pillow, 2003; van Manen, 1990). Reflective writing may feel invasive and out of place, but it is imperative that investigators report their process and findings, particularly with qualitative methodologies requiring interpretation and transformation of text (Clancy, 2013; de Witt & Ploeg, 2006).

Further, writing about deeply personal experiences can feel foreign or even unscholarly and may require significant reassurance and encouragement from a mentor as one strives to keep language and text as authentic as possible and detail the ephemeral sensations that occur during particular moments in time. Mentally and emotionally, it may be uncomfortable to articulate a painful or unpleasant sensation, particularly when another person, such as a mentor, will read the account. Yet, learning to emotionally trust the process can allow more genuine and honest writing to emerge.

### **Creating Time and Space**

Self-reflection requires carefully allocated time and space. It is time consuming to generate extensive, thoughtful, and attentive writing (van Manen, 1990). There is no specific timeline for producing reflective text, and this process must be individually tailored depending upon researcher proficiency and the study timeline (Clancy, 2013; Johns, 1995). Adequate time should be set aside for written self-reflection both at the beginning and recurrently throughout an interpretive phenomenological study, with strategically placed breaks to avoid mental and emotional fatigue.

Self-reflection also requires time allotted to non-writing intervals when the phenomenological technique of *dwelling with* is performed. *Dwelling with* refers to an extended engagement with the data while purposefully avoiding writing (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). This includes dwelling with data that is known prior to the study as well as data collected during the study. Reserving adequate time for both dwelling and writing slows the pace of self-reflection, which has been found to result in heightened awareness and greater insight into the lived experience (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1990).

Likewise, both physical and conceptual space should be set aside for self-reflection to occur. This includes not only a quiet and comfortable physical environment, but emotional and psychological space free of distractions and interruptions.

### **Guidelines for Self-Reflection**

Phenomenological research findings are significantly strengthened through self-reflection, when a researcher “acknowledges his or her suppositions and becomes consciously self-aware of their influence on the phenomenon under investigation” (Gearing, 2014, p. 1449). At times, self-reflection may seem self-contained and its contributions to the larger research study will be difficult to discern (Clancy, 2013). However, findings from the process of self-reflection are a crucial part of the greater whole during phenomenological research.

Given the centrality of self-reflection, it is surprising that much of the extant literature, even by experts who emphasize the importance of self-reflection, omits this process or describes it in vague, abstract terms. This leaves novice researchers in particular uncertain of where to begin and how to proceed. Thus, in offering the following set of steps to facilitate self-reflection, I am willing to risk being overly prescriptive to encourage researchers to use this methodology



and particularly to help nurse researchers who are new to this challenging process. For new researchers, most steps involve one's mentor. The ten steps are in chronological order and occur prior to implementing the study. And as with any guidelines, these suggestions require adjustment and tailoring depending upon the context of each study and researcher.

### **Ten Steps for Producing Self-Reflective Text**

1. *Make a plan.* Planning for an organized and prolonged period of self-reflection is essential. Establishing objectives and an anticipated timeline is recommended. If an investigator has never engaged in detailed self-reflection before, co-creating several open-ended reflective prompts with a mentor is a useful starting point to encourage the flow of writing. Examples of prompts are the following: *Explore a specific time when you provided cancer care for an American Indian patient. What was it like to care for American Indian patients dealing with a cancer diagnosis as opposed to patients from different ethnic/cultural backgrounds? What made it unique?*
2. *Obtain materials, schedule time, and arrange the writing space.* Gather the appropriate materials to facilitate writing the reflection. If possible, set aside regular writing time and space, and regard them as critical to the forthcoming study, creating a sense of self-discipline and commitment to rigor of the method.
3. *Attempt a first draft.* Create an initial description of your experiences with the phenomenon to be studied, avoiding causal explanations, generalizations, or premature interpretations. Acknowledge the extraneous experiences that will arise while making a conscious effort to continuously re-focus on the feelings, moods, emotions, and embodied sensations in alignment with the reflective prompts.

4. *Transcribe and continue reflecting.* For ease of analysis, transcribe the initial draft, if handwritten, into an electronic document. During transcription, new reflections and insights should be incorporated into the draft as they arise.
5. *Dwell with lifeworld-based queries and feedback.* This is a period of stepping back and sitting with the text and feedback. Targeted queries, from self or mentor, guide this step to elicit more elaboration or contemplative descriptions that draw out increasingly lifeworld-based text from the reflector (van Manen, 1990). Examples from my own mentor included *What do you mean when you say 'frustrated'? What does 'being confused' feel like physically and emotionally?* and *How do you feel now looking back on it?* These periods of stillness and restraint may seem restrictive at first, but have value in refreshing and preparing the investigator for subsequent phases of phenomenological analysis.
6. *Resume (more focused) writing.* Re-focusing on the lifeworlds permits movement beyond a surface-level narrative by accessing new deeply held sensations and thoughts. Sometimes an unsettling experience, it also succeeds in triggering memory in a productive manner, as depicted in these two examples of corporeal writing: *I literally felt the burden of her distrust weighing on my shoulders* and *My inability to answer those comments about race felt paralyzing.*
7. *Embrace ongoing critique and probing questions...and dwell (again).* Additional periods of inactivity can be particularly insightful and stimulating as the investigator becomes more comfortable with the personal vulnerability experienced in self-reflection.
8. *Intensify your writing.* Begin drafting a more intense, embodied, and candid self-reflection, and explore potential meaning of the experiences. Feeling more confidence in

the process, I recalled a particularly upsetting incident with a disgruntled family member of a patient, and was prompted if not compelled to contemplate the role of race in my experience of being a White nurse working in a facility on an American Indian reservation:

*He suddenly snapped and said, "I don't want a White nurse anymore!" I physically froze. I remember feeling terrified for a minute –the possibility that it could escalate from verbal into physical violence felt very real... I quickly exited the room feeling stunned, incredibly awkward, and uncomfortable. I wanted to get out of [the hospital room]. It was also fear. I had never been spoken to like that by a patient and the mere mention of my race being an issue felt humiliating in a way I had never experienced before...I had to tell myself repeatedly not to take it personally, but what could be more personal than the color of my own skin?*

Reflecting on this helped me gain “the slightest inkling of what it must feel like to be irrationally and aggressively shouted at because of the color of your skin, something so visible and inseparable from you.”

9. *Evaluate and organize.* Essential elements of the phenomenon are identified in reflective notations and are further illuminated by lifeworld-directed writing (van Manen, 1990). In order to draw attention to repeated patterns, construct a first-level matrix consisting of verbatim excerpts illustrating tentative themes. Prepare a revised draft with the first-level matrix for review, discussion, revision, and approval if working with a mentor. Writing

ceases when both mentor and investigator agree that a preliminary end-point had been achieved as demonstrated by the repetitive and well-supported themes.

10. *Suggest tentative meaning.* Create a summarizing interpretation attempting to capture the whole of the self-reflection, and to suggest possible meaning. This is facilitated by a process of hermeneutical reduction, or “reflectively examining and turning over in one’s textual labor the various preunderstandings that seem to impinge on the reflective gaze” (van Manen, 2011, n.p.). The result is a concise, resonating description that grasps at the meaning of a lived experience. For example:

*Often confused, exhausted, and paralyzed, longing for an anchor or guide  
as I traversed the complex relationships and expectations of my role, I  
found fulfillment and sustenance in the quiet moments of connecting,  
where trust was built and lives touched.*

This final step of self-reflection echoes analytical methods in interpretive phenomenology where investigator, participants, and confirmants co-create a synopsis of the experienced phenomenon that appears balanced, open, genuine, and resonates with the reader (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006). This process of interpreting the essence of a personal experience recognizes the inseparability of emotion, thought, and language in the reconstitution of meaning (Crotty, 1996; Johnson, 2000; van Manen, 1990).

### **Conclusion: Turning Inward and Outward**

The guidelines described above illuminate some although not the entirety of the reflexive process. However, when aligned with Heideggerian philosophical underpinnings, a systematic approach to self-reflection can improve reflexivity and overall trustworthiness for the frequent

reflections performed throughout the duration of the study as the hermeneutic circle turns. Completion of the first turn of the hermeneutic circle through initial self-reflection contributes to understanding the phenomenon as a whole through appraisal of the many parts and is consistent with the philosophical foundations of the methodology (Reiners, 2012). While self-reflection never fully ceases in interpretive phenomenology, it retreats temporarily to the background during participant data collection only to remerge later when all forms of data are reconstituted to create essential meaning (Parse et al, 1985).

Self-reflection holds an essential position in qualitative nursing research, particularly in phenomenological studies where interpretation of highly abstract experiences and their associated meaning are sought (Jootun et al, 2009; Lavery, 2003). Ongoing self-reflection is a systematic yet creative means of turning inward to reveal and inform the researcher's continually evolving positioning and bias within the phenomenon of interest (Clancy, 2013; Gearing, 2004). Successful self-reflection then strengthens our turning outward, to apply knowledge developed through interpretive phenomenological inquiry in our nursing care.

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