Every woman has a story:

A phenomenological understanding of women's careers

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Abstract:

The author’s research for a Master’s project involved exploring the career of a high achieving New Zealand woman using narrative and constructivist techniques, the findings of which were presented at CDANZ research symposium in 2011. This small-scale study was the catalyst for this doctoral study, which uses hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. In layman’s language this means investigating women’s careers from an insider’s perspective, attempting to excavate and construct meaning from women’s described experiences.

Conversational interviews have been undertaken with women aged between 30 and 60 years, working in the education industry, in primary, secondary or tertiary education. Believing that people make sense of their world from within, the aim of Heideggerian phenomenological research is to enable participants to re-establish contact with their original experiences. The minimum of direct questions is used to encourage participants to describe their career experiences in detail, in a discussion co-led by the participant and researcher.

Phenomenological anecdotes, or stories of the ‘lived experience’ of women’s careers have been crafted from the interviews. In this session preliminary findings will be introduced in an interactive session where participants will be encouraged to become fledgling phenomenologists; involved in first hearing anecdotes read, then writing and discussing a personal response.

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Introduction

While women’s careers have been investigated from various theoretical perspectives, there is still no integrative framework for understanding. This study uses a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology (Heidegger, 1927/1962) to excavate/construct meaning from the ‘inside’, the lifeworld (translation of German lebenswelt) of women’s experiences. It explores the phenomenological nature of women’s careers in the context of women’s wider lives. The extant research on women’s careers has proposed the central role of relationships in women’s careers; but the multi-faceted nature of the lived career dynamic, is more than this single construct. This research attempts to contribute to the quest to reveal a more multifaceted picture of this career dynamic. It uses a holistic approach to explore the relationship between women’s personal and professional lives and to uncover the nature of the complex relationship between subjective and objective career.

Design of the Study

From the epistemological perspective of constructionism, the view that meaning is not discovered but constructed (Laverty, 2003) this research involves the investigator and the investigated becoming interactively linked in the creation of findings, with the investigator as passionate participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Grant & Giddings, 2002). Using the theoretical perspective of interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology (Heidegger, 1927/1962), taken for granted details within experience are illuminated, with the goal of creating meaning and a sense of understanding (Laverty, 2003). To address the question, “What is the essence, the nature of women’s careers?” the only reliable source is the person (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology concentrates on people's experiences in regard to a specified phenomenon and how they interpret this phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). The participant becomes involved in the interpretive research process and must interpret the action or experience for the researcher, with the researcher interpreting the explanation provided by the participant in an ongoing manner so that the experience is reconstructed for the participant. The hermeneutic process of co-creation between researcher and participant in the construction of meaning consists of a circle of reading, reflective writing and interpretation (Gadamer, 1960/1998). This becomes what is known as the “Hermeneutic circle of understanding” (Laverty, 2003).
To this end, conversational interviews are conducted to gather experiential narrative material and provide a resource for developing a deeper understanding of women’s careers. The interviews also provide a vehicle for the participant to develop a conversational relationship with the interviewer about the meaning of an experience (van Manen, 1990). Conversational interviewing differs from other qualitative interviews for the interviewer works with the participant clarifying the question and helping the participant to interpret the question. There isn’t a structured list of questions, asked one after the other, but each interview is unique and dependent on context (Polkinghorne, 1983). The researcher must establish rapport, be non-judgmental and empathic and keep the questions open ended and descriptive, to allow people to talk and to let the conversation flow, and above all be sensitive and non-patronizing (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

**Participant recruitment**

In selecting participants the aim was to have women who have experienced a career and were willing to talk about these experiences. The methodological approach requires that the participant be reflective about her career, and able to express her thoughts articulately. The education industry was chosen as context, with women involved in education being likely to have good communication skills and the ability to relate well (careersnz, 2012). The aim was to have diversity amongst participants to increase the possibilities of “rich and unique stories of the particular experience” (Laverty, 2003, p. 18).

An advertisement placed in NEXT magazine stated:

Participants must be:

- Currently involved in teaching within the wider education industry either at primary, secondary or tertiary level;
- Aged between 30 and 59 years;
- Currently involved in some form of paid employment: part-time, full-time or contract;
- Interested in telling their story of how pursuing a career provides meaning in their life.
In response to the NEXT advertisement, women were recruited from across the country, responding by email, and then receiving further information about the research. Further participants were selected by snowballing within the criterion of trying to maximise diversity.

**Participants**

Fourteen women were involved in the research, of whom four worked in the primary sector, four in the secondary sector and six in the tertiary sector. Nine women were full time, two were permanent part time and two were on fixed term contracts; one woman had recently been made redundant and was studying.

**Data collection**

The interviews took place in either the participant’s homes or at their workplace. The interviews ranged in length from one hour to one hour twenty-five minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and the tapes transcribed by a confidential secretarial service.

**Data analysis**

Once a transcript was returned I listened to the interview tape and read the transcript making notes. As I worked with a transcript I tracked the interview, and noted where the probes and prompts came in order to determine whether it was the probes that encouraged the participant to go deeper and to make meaning. I noted that by using reflective listening skills and attending, responding and summarizing a participant would become more involved in the interview. Sometimes the participant would reflect and say “I never thought about it that way” or “now that you say that, I realise….”

** Crafting phenomenological anecdotes**

I worked on one transcript at a time identifying ideas for several stories from each using participants’ own words as much as possible. I worked with a story, crafting it until it contained a ‘notion’ rather than lot of narrative detail, into what van Manen (1990) calls a phenomenological anecdote. I gave each of these a title.
Van Manen (1990) commented that in contrast with historical narratives, phenomenological anecdotes have a poetic quality since they describe a universal truth. We may not be able to gain a sense of the essence looking from the outside but an anecdotal story may enable us to better understand. Van Manen (1990) describes the function of an anecdote as being like an implement, which is used to lay bare covered over meanings where phenomenology is seeking to penetrate layers of meaning like the tilling of soil. Anecdotes also have the ability to humanize, to present a relationship between living and thinking. They also have a pedagogical function and can demonstrate some wisdom or truth or provide examples of exemplary character.

It is important to recognise the difference between narrative accounts and phenomenological narratives. Anecdotes share epistemological or methodological features with phenomenological human science which operates in the tension between the specific and the universal, a “hybrid textural form is created, combining the power of philosophic or systematic discourse with the power of literary or poetic language” (van Manen, 1990, p. 121).

From some participants there was richness to the data; some stories had a more powerful tone to them. Van Manen (1990) comments on the veracity of this, that some descriptions are richer than others. We tend to learn more about life from some people than from others. Nevertheless there will always be something there for us to gather.

For each participant’s transcript I crafted between four and eight stories or phenomenological anecdotes of no more than one page.

**Three phenomenological anecdotes**

Heidegger (1962) says when we receive care from another person, we feel valued and that our lives have meaning. The three stories chosen represent aspects of the function of care in the participants’ lives: being cared for, a lack of care and caring for others.

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2 For ease, I will use the terms ‘story’ and ‘stories’ from this point on to represent the phenomenological narratives crafted from the transcripts
The first story tells of care from the beginning of a participant’s life, and the powerful influence of the care and support of mother.

**She’s proud as punch: Rachel’s story**

When I left high school I didn’t go to university. Mum was very disappointed and angry. Because I am the only one, she’s very much focussed on me. It took her a long time to get over that. She’d always wanted to go to university. She’s one of six. She always wanted to and none of them back then could afford to. I wonder if there was a sense of her trying to live her life through me.

When I first mentioned going teaching, I was twenty-eight, she was not 100% supportive. When she found I had a real passion for teaching, and when I started my degree, her attitude changed; then it was all: wonderful. We often laugh about it now and she appreciates it just took me a bit longer.

She’s very supportive and likes to tell everyone about it. She likes to suggest things all the time, to try and guide me and I’ll say, “No, I’m doing this.” She goes “Oh, I can’t convince you otherwise, can I?” And I say, “No. You need to leave that now, Mum.” And she knows, I am my own person and won’t be convinced otherwise. But she’s as proud as punch.

The second story tells of a situation, a participant, Sally was involved in where a colleague disappointed and undermined her. It’s about a lack of care.

**She knew the dagger that would pierce me: Sally’s story**

There was quite a bit of fall out. The woman who was doing my job that year I was overseas was also managing parts of my project and it went very sour. She hoped I wouldn’t come back. At one stage she accused me of being unethical. I had to come back from overseas and meet with the Board. It really knocked me for a six. She could have called me a whore and I would have flicked it off but tell me that I’m unethical, that really hit me at my core. It turned quite nasty. I went into a bit of depression for the first year I was back here, a bit of a slough. The boss gave us the opportunity to go and have mediation. I said to her how devastating that comment had been.

She never apologised, she never did. She wouldn’t accept that what she’d done was incorrect. We never managed to get it sorted. She left and I’ve never seen her again. It’s never been the same again and we were really good friends. I couldn’t believe it because she was a Guidance Counsellor so she would know how much something like that would really get me. She knew the dagger than would pierce me.
The third story is about caring for others, a significant part of the work of an educator. It tells how it takes its toll.

**It's the way that I cope: Sarah’s story**

I feel like a lot of the time I’m spread so thin. And because I’m me, I want to do everything 100%. I want to be the best mother, the best wife, the best daughter. I want to be the best. I keep saying to Dave, I’m 43 and I want to work till I’m 50, then I want to stop. That’s the ideal.

It’s not going to happen, because I’m going to have to carry on working. My children won’t have finished school or education. I don’t know, do I really want to do this for the rest of my career?

When I got home last night Dave said, are you all right? I said, I’ve just got quite a bit on my mind. He said - Okay, that’s fine. So he knows that it’s nothing else. It’s just that. It’s just the school stuff I need to process. Sometimes I dream about stuff. This morning, I woke up at half past five. So I just stay awake, I get up. It’s the way I cope.

Heidegger (1927/1962) says “In everyday terms we understand ourselves and our existence by way of the activities we pursue and the things we take care of” (p. 159). “To exist, then means, among other things, relating to oneself by being with beings” (p. 157).

For Heidegger (1927/1962) ‘care’ is the primordial state of being as we struggle towards authenticity. The whole of our being as human beings is referenced around care; the German word is ‘Sorge.’ Care makes our existence as human beings both significant and meaningful. To exist in an authentic way in the world is to be ‘care-full.’

Heidegger (1927/1962) says lack of care for another reveals Sorge in its imperfect or uninterested state. If care is the primordial state of being, being ‘un’ cared for makes us feel our very being is itself an issue. Our existence can become, insignificant and lacking in meaning.

**What does a phenomenological description do?**

Van Manen (1990) says the phenomenon is adequately described if description reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in fuller or
deeper manner. “A good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience – is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 27). Such a description resonates with our sense of lived life. In conducting this research I am seeking to provide a deep understanding of the phenomenon of women’s careers as experienced by several individuals, which will be of value for educators, career professionals and researchers.

References


