

Embracing the Dance of Hermeneutic Phenomenological Inquiry: The Story of an Evolving Dialogue between Research and Therapy

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Introduction

In this autobiographical account, I seek to share what it was like to learn how to carry out hermeneutic phenomenological research with a sense of integrity. This is not a polished account of mastering a method. Rather, it is a lived story of grappling, circling back, and slowly finding my way, a process where understanding arrived not all at once, but in fragments, through dialogue, and in the body. The writing moves with the rhythm of that journey, following the shifts, doubts, and small awakenings that shaped my way of being with the work.

Along the way, I have included reflexive boxes. I call them Therapeutic or Reflexive Insights where I share moments that stayed with me when something in the research resonated within my therapeutic practice. I chose to place these within the flow of the text, rather than at the end, because that is how they came to me—intertwined, embodied, part of the same unfolding.

My hope is for this article to become like a companion to early-career researchers and doctoral students who may feel similarly disoriented in developing their methodological orientation. In reading this article, they may feel less alone in the uncertainties of doing good phenomenological research—where clarity does not come from certainty, but from staying close to what is lived and emerging.

Beginnings

It took me five years to complete my research. Looking back, I would say it was only in the last three years that I truly began learning what it means to be both a qualitative and phenomenological researcher. During that time, I also began to find my own footing as an existential psychotherapist. This was especially impactful because my research focused on how Singaporean millennials navigate their voices within a collective society (Cheng, 2022)—a phenomenon that I have personally struggled with for much of my life. I often asked myself: What does it mean to be authentic as a Singaporean if I cannot express myself freely?

This question led me to deeper reflections: Is authenticity even a value that holds in the East? What does authenticity mean, anyway?

During the five years of my doctoral research, I often felt caught between two worlds—one of revealing the lived experiences of Singaporean Millennials seeking their voices within a collective society, and the other of finding my footing in the complex terrain of Hermeneutic Phenomenology. Both were new and overwhelming in their own ways, but the urgency of understanding what it means to have a voice as an Asian in a long-standing climate of restraint felt deeply personal. Singaporean activist Kirsten Han's (2019) description of Singapore as a "country of people as privileged as they are disempowered"—a paradox I lived within — was something I was keenly motivated to unpack.

Phenomenology, in contrast, stood before me like a daunting mountain: something I yearned to scale but was not yet prepared for. I was not sure if I had the tools or the stamina, and the sense of inertia was almost comforting in its familiarity.

I still vividly remember the first time I held Mitchell's (2021) account of her phenomenological pilgrimage as a novice researcher. The hard copy, with its highlights and scribbled notes, quickly became a companion on my own journey. It was not just a source for citations—her words had a pulse, inviting me into a dialogue that deepened with each phrase. Mitchell's writing stayed steadfast beside me as I waded through moments of uncertainty and the murky waters of this complex process, offering a steadying presence in a journey that often felt overwhelming

Now, as I look back on my journey, I find Mitchell's (2021) account taking on additional depth. Her experience of being told that her work was not truly phenomenological—perhaps existential, but not phenomenological—resonates differently now. I see her grappling with that critique not as a setback, but as a necessary step in understanding the essence of phenomenology. Her words feel like a call, inviting me to join her in this work of inspiring and walking alongside others.

Like Mitchell (2021), I feel a pull to humanize this often solitary pilgrimage for novice researchers, to expand the spaces where they can find companionship and inspiration. In considering my contribution, I recognize our shared starting point: both of us have experienced awakenings through feedback that challenged our understanding of phenomenology. However, while our explorations may overlap in the journey of revealing the essence of lived experiences, this autobiographical piece of mine has slightly different aims. It is intended as a reflection on my quest, as a phenomenological researcher, for methodological integrity in my own work. Its emphasis is on the relational core of research, one which allows phenomena to emerge through genuine dialogue with others (an insight that has profoundly shaped my therapeutic practice). This is not only reflected in my formative nature of my dialogue with Mitchell through her article, it is also reflective in my relationship with my mentor, Linda Finlay. This revealed to me the importance of recognizing the co-creative nature of producing a phenomenological piece of research that maintains methodological integrity.

Confidence, Unease, and a Visceral Shock

In the period leading up to my mock oral examination during the first phase of my research journey, I found myself holding a quiet confidence. It was a familiar assurance—presentations had always been steady ground for me, and the topic I had chosen resonated deeply. I had a solid literature review to lean on, anchored in citations that lent my work a sense of legitimacy. And yet...

But beneath this confidence lurked a subtle unease, an almost embodied awareness of what I did not yet know. This experience was also strangely layered. My grasp of van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic phenomenology felt tenuous—more theoretical than lived, more rehearsed than fully embodied. It was as though I was trying to dwell in a space that I had only just entered, trusting I could return later to inhabit it.

I hoped to convey enough certainty to pass my mock oral examination, even as I quietly doubted the depth of my understanding. I told myself there would be time—time to refine my grasp of the method after clearing ethics, after I began the deeper work of engaging with the phenomenon itself. This confidence of mine, then, was laced with a touch of performance, a quiet hope that I might carry just enough to convince. Yet even in its incompleteness, it carried me forward—a tentative step into the unknown, trusting that clarity would come with time and experience.

Once the examination began, it did not take me long to ease into it. As it proceeded, I felt increasingly assured; after all, I'd thought about all the questions posed to me. The examiners' comments were generally positive. *See, it is not that hard. It is just another hurdle I had to cross and I did it.*

But then a single remark from the examination feedback sent a tremor through my confidence. I was told I was “not fully up to date with van Manen's work”, and that my study veered too close to thematic analysis rather than staying true to his lifeworld existentials. I was also advised to familiarize myself more deeply with his ideas, as set out in his *Phenomenology of Practice* (2016).

This comment struck me viscerally, and the impact was immediate. It was not just a piece of feedback—the shock of it landed in my body. My limbs turned cold as if the blood had retreated, leaving me numb and tingling with pins and needles. Time seemed to slow as my mind scrambled to make sense of the gap between what I thought I knew and what I was being told. I felt exposed, like a child caught in a lie, trying to lie but obviously not skilled enough to bluff my way through. I had known that the issue of methodological depth might challenge me at some point, but I had hoped it would not surface so soon, or in such a direct way.

In that moment, a feeling of shame washed over me. I had been seen, but not in the way I wanted. The confidence I had carried into the examination already seemed distant; it had been replaced by a sense of foreboding, a realization that I could no longer hide from the fact that I had so much more to learn.

There followed a surge of urgency. Before this I had seen myself as the embodiment of the Singaporean meritocratic story: “work hard, and you will succeed.” This belief had been etched into my identity. It was something I prided myself on, something that lingers, even now. It was this drive that enabled me to write a research paper and eventually complete my doctorate while carrying my daughter through pregnancy and her first year of life. But in that moment, the hit to my sense of self as a hardworking Asian felt visceral – a wound to my core. It was as if everything I believed about working hard was not enough. I had not pushed hard enough, learned enough.

By then, I was already two years into my research. Was I being pushed back to square one? It felt like being mid-ultramarathon and suddenly told to loop back to the starting line. Panic gripped me; time was running out. I needed to catch up with everything I did not yet know.

It was in this space of apprehension and urgency that I reconnected with van Manen’s (2016) classic tome *Phenomenology of Practice*. It was not the first time I had opened it. Yet this was the first time I was really trying to listen, attempting to engage with it as one would with a friend whom one really wishes to understand, and be with.

By this time, I’d already conducted two interviews and was experimenting with different methods of analysis—poetic transcriptions, anecdotes—to draw out lived experience. My notebooks were full, but something just felt “off.” The pieces read well, but how did they fit into the research? This was not quantitative work; there was no clear template. I felt unanchored, like a headless chicken with endless freedom but no boundaries. I appreciated the freedom, but it also made me dizzy.

All this culminated in a profound sense of angst. I knew more, but I also realized that did not really “know” what I should know. I was missing something. And could this be my “last chance”? Perhaps the doctoral research was beyond me. Perhaps I should just give up the doctorate and exit with a Masters?

It was at this point that I reached out to Linda, who agreed to act as my academic consultant research mentor.

The Importance of Finding a Good Supervisory Fit

In my relationships with my research supervisors up to that point, I had felt stuck in the tension between support and isolation. My primary supervisor was deeply attuned to my topic of authenticity, offering insights that resonated with my work. Yet, I quickly realized that hermeneutic phenomenology was not his area of expertise. There was a dissonance—a sense that while we could explore the content deeply, the method itself remained elusive.

Communication with my secondary supervisor was sparse, and just as my questions about the method began to crystallize, she stepped down to take on a full-time university position. This shift left me feeling adrift, needing guidance on the hermeneutic phenomenological method but unsure of where to seek it.

At one point, I considered reaching out to a professional ‘somebody’ — just a few sessions to get me back on track with hermeneutic phenomenology. But even that felt daunting. As an international student, I was already paying out of pocket for external clinical supervision and therapy. Adding a further layer of payment for research guidance, something I should have been receiving from my supervisors, felt a step too far. How much more was this doctorate going to cost me? I did not dare speculate.

With hindsight, I realize how much I would have benefitted from picking supervisors who were more aligned with my methodology rather than my topic area. I wish someone had shared this insight earlier in my research—it would have spared me much of the frustration I experienced.

Reaching out to someone for help felt like a leap of faith. At the time, there was not enough clarity in my mind between hermeneutic phenomenology in general and Van Manen’s specific approach. Although I had read his book many times, I had not yet embodied the distinction.

Linda was that ‘somebody’. I had read several of her papers, and one day it just clicked—I should reach out to her. What harm could it do? At worst, I would just be rejected. Fortunately, not. What started as a plan to have a couple of sessions became a two-year mentorship.

Committing to the Qualitative Methodology Through Dialogue

Returning to the foundations of qualitative research after my mock oral examination felt like turning back to a trail, I thought I had already covered—only to find that I had been walking in circles. It was not a simple matter of revisiting old ground; it was a deeper reckoning with what I thought I knew.

My early dialogues with Linda were marked by an almost uncomfortable vulnerability. I had to confront how much I had absorbed from other traditions and how much I needed to let go. The process was not linear or clean.

I was accustomed to research that moved neatly from point to point, with rules to follow and outcomes to measure. This pace felt so much like the capitalistic Singaporean way of being—efficient, productive, and effective. I tended to believe that if I did it once and it was not “good enough,” then it was a failure. It did not occur to me that it is in the unfolding, in the act of writing over and over again, that knowledge is produced. If there were moments of clarity, they felt fleeting. In many cases they were overtaken by new questions that seemed to emerge from the depths of the work itself. This process of recommitting to qualitative research was not just about understanding the methodology; it was about inhabiting it, over and over again, through the lived experience of it.

Therapeutic Insight

Just as I was once accustomed to the efficiency-driven world of research—moving from point to point with measurable outcomes—many of my clients also seek quick solutions in therapy. For them, the repeated therapeutic exploration of their struggles is a source of frustration. They want to move on, find resolution, and leave behind the things they keep having to talk about. I, too, often feel the pull of that impatience. I find myself wondering if we're getting anywhere, or just going in circles. Yet, there's something in the act of returning to their words, over and over, that might hold the key to something deeper—something that isn't always obvious or immediate.

As a therapist, I struggle with this uncertainty, too. It's not always clear where the work is leading, and I sometimes question if revisiting the same issues is actually helpful. But in those moments, I try to remind myself that growth doesn't always look like a straight line. It feels uncomfortable at times—like we're stuck—but I wonder if it's in that very discomfort, in sitting with what doesn't seem to change, that something new might quietly emerge. It's not about having the answers right away but trusting the process, however unclear it may be. As I do with research, I sometimes have to lean into the unfolding, even when it doesn't make sense.

Beyond Methodological Idolatry: Moving Past the Backward Regretful Glance of Positivism

For example, in my initial approach to participant selection, I had clung to the idea of representativeness. Picking my eight participants in accordance with Singapore's diverse ethnic make-up—Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others (CMIO)—seemed logical, even responsible. It never occurred to me to question it.

Then Linda asked, “Where does this need for representativeness come from?” Was this a challenge or a genuine question? I could not tell. Was she questioning my logic? My ethics? I was unsettled. My mind returned to the ethics committee, who had emphasized the importance of homogeneity in my group. “How will you ensure your participants are similar enough to examine what you are examining?” one of them had asked, framing this as an issue of rigor. Representativeness, to me, felt tied to reliability—a measure of trustworthiness that I had taken as a given.

It took a long time for me to see that my approach was not neutral—it was rooted in what I now call “methodological idolatry,” a reverence for practices that I mistook for rigor. I was unknowingly carrying the certainty of positivist methods into qualitative research, craving the structure and validation they provided. Linda's observation—that I was taking a “backward regretful glance” (2024) toward positivism—stung but lingered. Each reiteration forced me to confront my attachment to the familiar. Her words revealed how my yearning for security had shaped my decisions, pulling me away from the openness that qualitative research required. It was not an easy realization, but it opened space for me to question and, eventually, let go.

This regretful backward glance to scientifically and positivistic propelled evaluative criteria within quantitative research (Finlay, 2024) extended to my early thoughts on member-checking. I saw it initially as a safeguard, a way to bolster the credibility of my work. But the more I engaged with qualitative research, the more I felt an underlying dissonance. Van Manen (2017) makes it clear that phenomenology is not about gathering consensus from participants but about revealing the essence of lived experience. The essence is not something that can be “confirmed” in the traditional sense. My insistence on member-checking began to feel less like a commitment to methodological rigor and more like a reflex—a way to anchor myself in familiar practices because I feared stepping too far into the unknown.

Linda’s guidance through these moments was a strange mixture—sometimes gentle, sometimes more assertive. Often, it felt like a hand on my shoulder, but not in a way that reassured me. More like a nudge that reminded me, again and again, to revisit my epistemological stance—not as something to tick off but as something I had to live. I thought I was moving forward, but in reality, I kept circling back. It was not a neat return, either—it was messy. At times, it felt like I was starting over, but I had no choice. I could not ignore it. This repetition, however uncomfortable, was part of the process.

Reflexive Insight

As I begin teaching qualitative research to doctoral students, I notice how often they repeat the same methodological mistakes I once made. My own sharpness in spotting some of these errors now always recalls my mentorship with Linda.

When I describe my experience with her here, I worry it could sound as if she were overly harsh. In truth, she was both incisive and gentle—her critiques cut with clarity, yet were held in a spirit of care.

Since then, I have seen this balance also reflected in the dialogue of other seasoned phenomenologists—van Manen (2017a, 2017b, 2019), Jonathan Smith (2018), and Dan Zahavi (2018). At times their critiques are sharp; at other times, they show recognition of one another’s contributions. What strikes me is their confidence in holding phenomenology as practice, psychology, or a philosophy respectively. Their firmness in taking a stand is, to me, deeply admirable. Which position I align with warrants a separate discussion beyond the scope of this paper.

The Chinese phrase *剛中有柔* (*gāng zhōng yǒu róu*)—“within hardness, there is softness”—captures this spirit. True mentorship holds both: the firmness to guide with clarity, and the gentleness that makes such firmness an act of care.

Each decision I made—about participant selection, data adequacy, or trustworthiness—was a small act of recommitment to qualitative research. These were not grand gestures but quiet moments of returning to the work, of questioning and clarifying. Linda’s

observation that even a single participant could yield a trustworthy study stayed with me. It was both liberating and unsettling, forcing me to confront my lingering biases about what constituted “adequate” data.

Even now, I catch myself slipping into the positivistic mindset when I least expect it. It creeps in at times when I feel uncertain or exposed, offering a tempting sense of control and structure. These moments remind me that the process of recommittting to qualitative research is never complete. It requires vigilance, humility, and an ongoing willingness to confront my assumptions. The work of qualitative research is a constant process of unfolding and becoming.

Therapeutic Insight

I notice that when I feel uncertain or anxious in therapy, I often slip into a positivistic mindset. Tempted to offer quick solutions, I tell myself that what I suggest is what’s “good” for my client: that I have the answer. This urge to impose structure or certainty feels rooted in my need for control, much like the rules of research I was once so accustomed to. But I’m learning to pause in these moments, to bracket those assumptions, and to resist the temptation to provide ready-made solutions.

The phenomenological attitude I’ve developed through my research is helping me in these moments. It teaches me to focus on the lived experience of my clients, to remain open and present without jumping to conclusions or imposing my own ideas of what’s best. By bracketing my assumptions, I allow space for my clients to discover their own insights. It’s a reminder that therapy, like qualitative research, is about the unfolding process. It’s about trusting that meaning emerges over time, not from a fixed solution.

Committing to the Hermeneutic Phenomenological Method through Dialogue

It was not only the qualitative research method that I had to learn iteratively, but also the aim of the phenomenological method: to bring out the specific lived experience in all its complexity, ambivalence and richness.

Lived Existentials

One moment stands out as pivotal. I had begun to notice a “lived narrative” running through my participants’ interviews, and I felt inspired to bring that into my writing. It felt good: my creative energy was flowing, and my growing familiarity with the hermeneutic phenomenological approach encouraged a newfound confidence.

I shared this with Linda, expecting her to offer ideas to help me refine my thoughts. But her response caught me off-guard: “What is your understanding of van Manen’s lived world?” I stumbled, unable to answer. I had grasped fragments of it—lived space, lived

time, lived body, lived relations—but in that moment, I realized how much I still did not fully understand. Lived narrative was not a part of it.

During our sessions, I often found myself experiencing both a new sense of clarity and further bewilderment. It was uncomfortable to expose myself and show that I did not know. But I was still learning and learning meant making mistakes and not understanding. That paradox—of feeling embarrassed yet also remaining open to the process—was hard to live through.

Seeing with Fresh Pairs of Eyes

One day, while reading *The Conversation in the Classic Writings for a Phenomenology of Practice* (van Manen & Van Manen, 2020), I was struck by the poet Alfred Tennyson’s account of an evening spent silently by the fireplace with his friend Carlyle. No words were spoken, yet Carlyle concluded, “We had a grand evening, please come back soon.” I recall asking myself excitedly what had made this evening of silent companionship so special. What ‘conversation’ had taken place? I felt myself bodily drawn into the text unable to put the book down until I finished the chapter. I wasn’t just learning about van den Berg’s method of revealing the lived experience of a conversation; I was searching for what made a conversation meaningful *for me*. The passage spoke to me not simply in intellectual terms; it invoked my own experience of friendship.

That moment left an indelible mark on me. I now looked at everything I had previously read with a fresh pair of eyes. It was no longer just about reading; it was about resonating with the text.

Therapeutic Insight

I find myself drawn to the idea of seeing things with fresh eyes, especially in my therapy work. As I have said, many clients want things to move on quickly and become frustrated when we return to familiar old ground. But it’s in those moments of seeing something new—such as a shift in their body, a knowing, or even tears—that I find the deepest satisfaction in my work. It’s not about telling them what to do but witnessing them arrive at their own conclusions. That’s what keeps me engaged as a therapist: the process of seeing them uncover insights that were always there, but hidden from view until the right moment. The work becomes not about fixing, but about holding space for their own discovery.

Certain writers’ words have the same ability to speak directly to my being. Two years on from completing my doctorate, I remain intrigued by the ways different writers reveal lived experience—whether kinship with piglets (Tucker, 2023), finding ourselves in predicaments (Thompson, 2007), or motherhood (Yahalom, 2013) as captured in photographs. These works continue to resonate, reflecting my own life as a mother, a pet parent, and a woman balancing multiple roles. I have come to appreciate that revealing the phenomenon is not an immediate process, but one that unfolds iteratively. Each layer of understanding deepens the work and makes it more trustworthy (Levitt et al., 2017).

This process has required me to renew my commitment to the hermeneutic phenomenological method at every stage of my research. Each phase has reaffirmed that my task is not simply to understand but to bring out lived experience in all its richness and complexity.

Data Collection: When The Right Words Stir

In the data collection stage, I started off with an interview schedule comprising open-ended questions and prompts. The opening question was: *“describe a time when you had, attempted or struggled to have a voice.”* I conducted the first three interviews on this basis.

To ensure that my data was focused on lived experience of navigation, I had intentionally prepared my participants before the interview began by explaining what I needed from them: a description of a particular experience, as far as possible in the present tense and using the first-person singular. In their description, they should try to avoid analyzing or interpreting their experience. The rationale behind this preparation was to help my participants access as far as possible the pre-reflective zone of their concrete lived experience while staying away from introspective reflection.

At the start I was confident about this justification. However, during the first three interviews I found that following the list of questions distracted me from entering into, and engaging with, the lifeworld of my participants. I was too focused on finishing the list of questions before the hour ended. It was facts, rather than a story, that I was unconsciously collecting. This led me to do away with the prompts, so that only the main interview question remained.

One facet of the role of a phenomenological researcher is to help participants enter a space where they can get past the elusiveness of their memories and recollect them in all their vividness. My decision to remove the bulk of my interview questions enabled a deeper process of attunement with my participants’ particular lived experience. It was a good methodological decision, one that resulted in better quality interviews.

During the remaining five interviews, I was able to move beyond collecting facts or memories of times past. Now able to immerse myself in all the richness of participants’ lived experience, I grew closer to their lived existentials – corporeality, temporality, spatiality and lived relations (van Manen, 2023). I found myself experiencing moments where I was “being-phenomenological.”

Then came my oral examination. In her feedback, my examiner asked me to consider rephrasing my interview question from “describe a time” to “describe a moment.”

At first, I was not sure what to make of this. It was not as if she had asked me to make any substantive change: just a subtle shift of vocabulary. I had nothing I needed to change. The interviews were done and the research written up. It seemed so subtle as to be almost inconsequential. I could feel there was something to her suggestion, but I could not grasp it, let alone articulate it. Still, it stayed with me, nagging at the edges of my

thoughts. As I worked on my revisions, I started to sense what she was signaling: how a single shift of word could transform how I approached lived experience.

“Describe a moment”. I began turning the phrase over in my mind, imagining how it might change things. “Describe a time” now felt as if it belonged to a timeline, a series of events with a beginning and an end. But “describe a moment” invited something else entirely. It was not about recollection as much as it was about something more immediate, something almost tangible.

I brought this up with Linda a couple of times and I recalled words she had asked of me: “Put yourself back in that moment. As you remember it now, how are you experiencing it in your body?” What both the oral examiner and Linda had asked were another one of those moments when I appreciate more deeply the essence of phenomenology which was to go back to the prereflective lived experience. It helped me become more adept at asking what might happen if my participants were able to return to their bodies and re-live their experiences as fully and vividly as possible. What would it mean to hold space for that level of intimacy, where the texture and rhythm of lived experience could come alive again?

With each dwelling, the distinction became sharper. “Describe a time” might have invited a story, but “describe a moment” asked for something fuller, something embodied. It was not about isolating thoughts or feelings but about inviting my participant to re-member—not just recall, but return to their being-in-the-world, to how that moment unfolded within the broader fabric of their lives. The feedback became one of those “aha” moments Van Manen (2017) speaks of: something indelibly etched into my thinking. It has left its mark not just on how I approach interviewing, but on how I think, feel, and dwell with lived experience itself.

Therapeutic Insight

These days, I ask similar questions in therapy when I want my clients to re-enter the moment. I draw on what I’ve learned in interviewing and invite them to speak in first person, present tense—almost as if they’re the author of a fiction story. This approach tends to help them step back into the present moment, reliving their experiences rather than simply recalling them. I find that when they speak this way, they can feel the moment in their bodies, not just in their thoughts. It’s something I’ve come to value in both my research and therapy practice—the power of engaging the body in the experience, not just the mind, and allowing space for the embodied, unfolding process of understanding.

Data Analysis: Evoking The Lived Experience

Key decisions pertaining to data analysis, in particular my decision to focus on just three or four themes, did not come easily. But then came one particular session with Linda. One where the work itself seemed to unfold in front of me. I had been circling around the

writing—poetic transcriptions, rephrasing in my participants' own words—but nothing felt quite right. The urge to write was there, but the direction was not.

In that session, Linda asked me what had stood out in the interviews. Perhaps more specifically, she had asked me to speak without thinking or packaging them nicely. Often, we speak only when we have a packaged idea. However, speaking is a kind of thinking too. Both Heidegger (1968) and Merleau Ponty (1962) had addressed them separately where it was said language is our 'house of being' where speech does not presuppose thought but accomplishes it. Without the weight of expectation pressing on me, my thoughts began to flow.

Even so, when the time came to capture those thoughts on paper, I froze.

Perhaps I was asking the wrong question. I was not asking 'how could I honor what had been lived, without losing the richness of those moments?' With hindsight, such a question would have better reflected my appreciation and understanding of the method. Instead, I was asking how could I capture all that had been shared, without drowning in its immensity.

In that space between my uncertainty and the weight of the task, Linda held me. At one moment, she gave me room, creating a quiet space for me to articulate what had been stirring inside. And in the next, she stepped in, gently but firmly, to steer me forward. She asked me to focus on just a few themes. "We are not here to capture everything," she reminded me. "It is about honoring the lived experience in its richness." Her words were not a resolution but a lifeline—a thread to follow, rather than a solution in the tidy sense. They invited me to weave something meaningful. Although uncertainty still lingered, there was a subtle shift. I was not expected to capture everything. I could breathe into these few themes, holding them carefully, as one might cradle something precious. This would make space for the texture of lived experience to emerge, still unfinished, still unfolding.

Phenomenological work is by its very nature an iterative process, an ongoing experience of being caught in the tension between knowing and not knowing. It is neither a search for neatly packaged themes nor a mechanical process of coding or categorizing. The 'themes' are not findings in the conventional sense; they are threads, fasteners, a way to stitch together the lived experience. They are not meant to be definitive, but evocative. They are intended to stir a sense of connection to the reader's own experience, or the possibility of it. As Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 157) puts it, phenomenological description "must stick close to experience, and yet not limit itself to the empirical but restore to each experience the ontological cipher which marks it internally."

Over time, I came to understand that my task was not to impose clarity, but rather to create space for the experience to emerge. Phenomenological writing is not about imposing order where there is none. It is not about uncovering 'meaning' in the sense of something awaiting discovery like a pearl mollusk on the seabed. It is about creating room for the ambiguity, the richness, the contradictions that make up lived experience. It is a process of dwelling, of searching, of creating, of allowing things to surface.

Henriksson and Saevi (2009) once noted that "phenomenological texts are never complete symphonies—alternative interpretations always exist" (p.39). There is no single "right" interpretation, only possibilities, only invitations to explore. My work, like the work of others, will never be a completed symphony. It is a fragment, an offering, a space in which meanings may resonate, shift, and evolve. Were I to write this research again today, the themes might shift, or the same themes might be woven into a different fabric.

I remember Linda's words often. They remind me that phenomenological analysis involves much more than the production of themes. It is an act of engagement, of pulling together intuitions, of shaping and polishing meaning over time. For the researcher, it is a dance between being and becoming, a fluid dance with specific rhythms that resonate, permitting meanings to emerge organically. It is a process that is never finished, always open to further dwelling, further exploration. As Finlay (2011) beautifully puts it, this dance invites us to seek "richness in complexity, depth in ambivalence, and poignancy in paradox" (p. 244).

Therapeutic Insight

I notice how my own research process has made me less anxious about not reaching a neat conclusion in my work with clients. Sitting with the ambiguity of a phenomenon—resisting the urge to pin it down too quickly—has helped me trust that something meaningful can emerge, even when things feel unresolved. In therapy, this means I do not need to rush my clients toward clarity or certainty. Instead, I can hold space for the ambivalence and complexity of their world, knowing that these tensions often carry something important.

A kind of faith is involved here. I have faith that my clients have the resources to navigate their own dilemmas, even when they do not yet know the way forward. By making space for contradictions and uncertainty, I am also making space for their own knowing to surface in a way that is truer to them. It is a different way of supporting: not by giving answers or tidying up loose ends, but by allowing the richness of their experience to unfold in its own time.

This iterative process, this constant ebb and flow between clarity and ambiguity, between knowing and not knowing, became my anchor. Each session with Linda, each moment of uncertainty, each breakthrough, brought me closer to an understanding that was never fully resolved, but always moving. I learned to sit with the discomfort of not having all the answers, to let the work itself unfold in its own time. This, I now understand, is the essence of phenomenological research—to lean into the ambiguity, to allow it to shape the work as much as the moments of clarity.

Writing Up: Holding Fidelity and Utility in Balance

Writing up my findings presented its own challenges. Where to start? My provisional themes gave me some clues.

When choosing the material to include in the idiographic anecdotes, I sought to ensure that my participants' own words were to the fore. I wanted their voices to come through unimpeded and unmediated. It seemed to me that that adopting a third person perspective in a piece of research all about voices and silences might position me, the author, as someone associated with objectivity, authority, and value neutrality. I had no wish to mute my participants' real voices. After all, I was just like the many other people in my participants' lives; people who themselves decide what their experience will be.

In my quest for methodological integrity, I was trying to maintain fidelity to my subject of authenticity. Why was it, then, that this particular section was the one I had most mixed feelings about, right from the start?

It was only later, after further reflection and feedback from the examiners, that I came to understand that by maintaining fidelity, I had unintendedly diminished the utility of the research.

My anecdotes, I eventually understood, were really about participants' pre-reflective experience, rather than the experiences itself. Despite the fact that I had used the words of my participants to string together an anecdote, the way it was processed involved an interpretation of the experience, rather than actually revealing the pre-reflective experience.

I can see now that, even if my aim was to bring out the phenomenon in all its ambiguity and complexity, I could have done this in a more stringent way.

For van Manen (2017), "Phenomenology, if practiced well, entralls us with insights into the enigma of life as we experience it." (p. 779). Done effectively, a reader feels directly addressed by it: "Textual emotion, textual understanding can bring an otherwise sober-minded person (the reader but also the author) to tears and to a more deeply understood worldly engagement" (van Manen 1990, p. 129).

Literature Review: Understanding Its Place in Phenomenological Research

For a researcher learning about the hermeneutic phenomenological method, the literature review posed just as much a challenge as other stages of the research process. I imagine some of you may be wondering why I have left it so late to raise the literature review issue. The fact is that I am drawing a parallel here. The finalization of my literature review was done at a very late stage of the research. While I had drafted a version much earlier in the process, I left it alone for a long time. It was only after conducting the interviews and writing up the findings that I returned to it, shaping the final version just before submission.

To maintain fidelity to the aim of the research method and minimize the contaminating impact of previous research on my experience of my participants' lived experiences (Dunne, 2011; Rees, 1997), I had to consider the *what, how, when and how to* in respect of literature reviews.

The *what* and *how* consists of the type of literature review I would employ and how structured should it be. Should I pick a standardised technical and rational process or a more open and flexible method? For me, a good literature review involves more than simply setting out the existing arguments and identifying gaps. While a systematic review can help achieve these goals, by convention it involves a technical process that aims at neutrality and objectivity -- and by that token is well suited to quantitative research. A qualitative approach requires a literature review less restricted by boundaries and structure (Jesson et al., 2011).

The fundamentally relational nature of phenomenological research adds further complication. As Wertz (2011) notes, relational research “inevitably includes and expresses the orientation, methods, values, traditions and personal qualities of the researcher” (p.84). I wanted to honour the relationality of the method by picking the form of literature review that would most closely align with it. This led me to eventually settle on a conceptual review. A conceptual review is a type of literature review that explores the current state of knowledge on a phenomenon while clarifying how key concepts and terms are understood and used within existing literature.

The question of when to engage with existing research was a significant consideration in my process. I did not want my prior research knowledge to condition and limit my perspective during data collection, analysis, and writing (Dunne, 2011; Kumar, 2014). However, with my background in quantitative research, I naturally gravitated toward reviewing existing studies even before the interviews began. I was also conscious of university expectations.

Therapeutic Insight

I notice a parallel between my research process and my work with new clients. In research, I was mindful of how prior knowledge could shape my perspective—sometimes in ways that limited openness to what was emerging. Similarly, when meeting a new client, not knowing exactly what they are coming in for allows me to stay present with their experience rather than relying on assumed knowledge. There is value in this uncertainty; it keeps me attuned to what is unfolding in the room rather than imposing a preconceived narrative.

At the same time, I wonder about the moments when more preparation might be necessary. If a client’s situation is particularly complex or serious, would having more background information beforehand allow me to support them better? Or would it risk narrowing my perspective before I have even met them?

The literature review included in my viva submission was the fifth iteration in seven years. When writing it, I sought to strike a balance between providing an ethical, rigorous rationale for the study and maintaining a phenomenological attitude. The challenge of attempting this was compounded by the absence of guidelines on conducting phenomenological literature reviews, although a paper by Fry et al. (2017) proved useful.

Were I to do it all over again, I would opt for a less in-depth critical examination of the literature in the early stages of my research. I wonder how this might have shaped the way I ultimately wrote up my findings. At the same time, I recognize that this will always be a dilemma for researchers—a constant balancing act. I concur with Wertz (2011) that complete neutrality is nearly impossible and that some degree of 'contamination' is unavoidable. What matters more is our ability to uphold the phenomenological attitude and engage in hermeneutic inquiry with integrity.

Upholding Methodological Integrity

The initial challenge of working with hermeneutic phenomenology involves coming to terms with its fluidity. It is neither a fixed method nor a predetermined set of procedures, techniques, or concepts (Van Manen, 1990). Uncertainty and unknowingness are inherent to this approach, and are central to its practice. But without secure footholds, I felt unsettled. I read thesis after thesis from other students and pored over established researchers' work, regardless of their topics, hoping to discern patterns in how they wrote. The more I read, the more confused I became. I even tried mimicking their styles, but it felt inauthentic, as though I was wearing someone else's clothes. I felt like an imposter in my own research: one who had no idea how to conduct qualitative research, let alone phenomenological research.

Towards the end of my research, when I was evaluating my research, Linda suggested using Levitt et al's article on promoting Methodological Integrity (2017). I remember vaguely that it felt as if she mentioned it in passing, amongst all the other things we discussed. Yet, it also felt like a lightbulb moment for me.

The concept of methodological integrity, as introduced by Levitt et al. (2017), was a response to concerns that there was not an established way to review qualitative research. It describes the degree to which a researcher and reader are confidently convinced that the methodology they have employed captures a significant experience or process related to the study's topic. Methodological integrity is achieved when the research design supports the research goals (i.e., the research problems/questions), aligns with the researcher's paradigms or philosophical assumptions, and is tailored to the subject matter. Levitt et al. (2017) outline two key processes for evaluating methodological integrity:

Fidelity to the subject matter—an intimate connection with the phenomenon under study; and

Utility in achieving goals—the effectiveness of the research design and methods, and their synergistic relationship in achieving the study's goals.

Therapeutic Insight

Reading about methodological integrity, I cannot help but think about my own journey as a therapist—the ongoing process of clarifying not just what I do, but why I do it. Why existential therapy? Why not CBT, psychodynamic or other modalities? But none of these fully spoke to me. I have always felt drawn to a relational way of being—one that does not seek to *fix* but to *be with*, one that does not assume change happens through restructuring or insight alone, but through deep engagement with existence itself. Existential therapy does not impose a singular view of what it means to live well; instead, it invites us to sit with uncertainty, to explore the givens of existence—freedom, responsibility, isolation, meaning. This, to me, feels most aligned with how I understand the human experience. It is not a technique I apply, but a way of being I inhabit.

As I began teaching qualitative research, I noticed a parallel: I kept returning to the importance of alignment between methodology and epistemology. Just as different therapeutic modalities rest on different philosophies, research approaches must be grounded in a coherent worldview. A researcher's methodological choices must be in service of their ontological and epistemological commitments—just as a therapist's modality must align with their fundamental beliefs about what it means to help.

Perhaps this is what methodological integrity means to me: not just a technical correctness, but a deeper coherence between what I believe, how I see the world, and how I practice—both as a therapist and as a researcher.

All the same, why had the issue of methodological integrity come up at this late stage of my research?! I wished Linda had told me about Levitt's work earlier. Yet perhaps I was not ready to hear it before because I was not ready for it.

Whatever the reasons, I felt a renewed sense of independence and freedom. I do not know how to play a game with no boundaries. But give me even the loosest of boundaries, and I can begin to move, to figure things out. Fidelity and Utility constituted the boundaries that helped me recommit to qualitative methodology and the phenomenological method.

This raises yet another important question: is hermeneutic phenomenology a qualitative research method, or is it a human science? In my own work, I have drawn on van Manen's methodological framing of hermeneutic phenomenology as a qualitative approach, yet I am also aware of arguments that regard it as belonging to the human sciences tradition rather than as a qualitative method.

Norm Friesen (2020) argues that hermeneutic phenomenology is not simply a rigid method to be applied, but a disposition or attitude—a stance of openness, receptivity, and interpretive sensitivity. His view leans toward treating hermeneutic phenomenology more like a human science than a qualitative method. It is relational, iterative, responsive—less a linear procedure, more a conversation with experience. However, whether it is a qualitative method or a human science, this does not deny methodological rigor. Rather,

it reframes rigor as fidelity to phenomenon, and respect for the evolving researcher-phenomena relation.

Therapy-Research Dialogue

At the heart of this paper lies an evolving dialogue between research and therapy, a reciprocal influence that continually shapes my practice in both domains. As I reflect on the reflexive moments woven throughout, it becomes clear that the work of existential therapy and phenomenological research is not merely about acquiring knowledge or applying technique, but about cultivating a way of being—one that embraces uncertainty, resists quick resolutions, and honours the unfolding nature of experience.

Stepping into academia felt like a deepening of the questions I had been living with all along, questions I didn't always have the words for in my clinical work. As I navigated my research, I could feel the constant interplay between what I was discovering on the page and what I was learning in the room with clients. It was as if my research was a mirror, reflecting back the subtleties of my practice that had once been too quiet to notice. Each question I asked in my study shifted the way I heard myself with clients, and every answer I uncovered made me more aware of the words I chose to speak. The process of research didn't just clarify what I already knew—it opened up what had been hidden. It made the unspoken explicit, bringing a kind of language to my practice that I hadn't yet found.

In therapy, as in research, I have come to recognize the importance of methodological integrity—not as a rigid adherence to rules, but as a deep alignment between belief and practice. Just as my methodological choices in research must be grounded in my epistemological and ontological commitments, my therapeutic approach must remain congruent with my fundamental understanding of what it means to support change. This integrity is not static but continually shaped by my experiences, questions, and the dialogues I engage in with clients, students, and colleagues.

A central theme that emerges from my reflections is the tension between the desire for resolution and the need to dwell in uncertainty. Both my clients and I have wrestled with the frustration of returning to familiar struggles, of revisiting the same questions without immediate clarity. Yet, through my research process, I have learned to trust that meaning does not always arise in linear or predictable ways. Therapy, like research, requires a willingness to stay with the discomfort of the unknown, to resist the urge to impose structure too soon, and to allow insights to emerge in their own time. This has changed how I relate to my clients' struggles—not as problems to be solved, but as spaces to be explored with care and curiosity.

The phenomenological attitude I have cultivated through my research has also deepened my capacity to listen in therapy—not just to words, but to embodied expressions, to silences, and to the subtle shifts in presence that signal something unspoken. My engagement with phenomenology has taught me the value of bracketing assumptions, of approaching each client's experience with fresh eyes, resisting the pull to categorize or pre-emptively interpret. This openness has made space for my clients to discover their own insights rather than conform to an external framework of understanding.

At the same time, I have become more aware of the ways my own ways of knowing influence my practice. My preference for speaking as a mode of thinking has led me to trust the unfolding nature of dialogue, both in therapy and in research interviews. Yet, this reflection has also invited me to consider whether my natural tendencies shape the therapeutic space in ways that might not always serve my clients. How do I remain open to the different ways meaning-making occurs for them? How can I ensure that my presence facilitates, rather than subtly directs, their process?

Through this process of inquiry, I have also deepened my appreciation for the fluidity of selfhood in therapy. If the self is always in motion, always adapting in response to relational contexts, then therapy becomes a space not for fixing or solidifying identity, but for exploring the ways in which we stretch, contract, and negotiate our being in the world. This aligns closely with the existential stance that has always drawn me—the view that therapy is not about providing answers but about holding space for the complex, often contradictory, movements of becoming.

Ultimately, this paper reflects my ongoing attempt to integrate the lessons of research into my therapeutic practice, not as a separate endeavour, but as a deeply intertwined process. Each informs and transforms the other. Research sharpens my awareness; therapy grounds my understanding in lived experience. Both demand presence, patience, and an openness to what emerges. In learning to trust this process, I return to what first brought me to this work: a commitment to being with others in their unfolding, in their search for meaning, and in the shared experience of what it means to be human.

Concluding Thoughts

For me, writing this paper has not been simply about recounting the stages of my research. It has also been about re-entering a way of being. This was a process that required time, patience, and a willingness to sit with uncertainty.

When I submitted my thesis, I had just given birth. At that time, I was straddling two worlds—dwelling in ideas while also being pulled into the immediacy of caring for a newborn. After graduating, I moved further into a space of doing, where life became about tending to immediate needs, responding to what was right in front of me. It was a necessary shift, but somewhere in the background, I felt the absence of something else. I missed the space where thoughts could deepen, where ideas would surface and I could sit with them, follow their movement, write them down. It was not just about having time to write. It was about the way writing itself created a different kind of time. It was one that allowed for dwelling rather than just doing.

At first, I thought I would write something more conventional—something directly from my research. But when I prepared a summarized version for a journal, it was rejected for not being original. That rejection forced me to rethink my approach, and, inspired by Mitchell (2021), I found myself drawn toward a more autobiographical style. Even then, it took several attempts to find the right angle. It was not enough to simply echo what Mitchell had already said. I needed to find my own way in.

The voice of the paper was another challenge. I experimented with writing it as a dialogue with Linda. I even considered a version where I would write my part, to which she would later respond.

What you see today are the fruits of that experimentation. In this autobiographical account, I have sought to capture not only my own voice but also the presence of other voices that have shaped this journey. There were moments when I doubted whether I had done justice to the novice researchers reading this. I wondered whether my writing would resonate with them. Even something as simple as including these reflexive boxes was a point of tension: how much do I leave raw, and how much do I refine? I did my best to resist the urge to clean up the writing or steer it towards a neat conclusion.

As I reach the end of this paper, it occurs to me that it mirrors the very process it describes. The writing itself has been iterative, filled with moments of frustration and discovery. There was a time when I resented how much effort it took to get it *not quite right*, but I see now that this is exactly what qualitative research is about—returning, revising, allowing the work to reveal itself. Writing this has brought me full circle, showing me once again that phenomenology is not just a method but a way of being. And in writing this, I was living while reflecting this truth.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Dr. Linda Finlay, whose mentorship first drew me into the world of hermeneutic phenomenology. Her generosity in sharing her reflections and wisdom has guided both my thinking and the spirit in which this article was written.

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