

The extension of Colaizzi's method of phenomenological enquiry

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ABSTRACT

Aim: *Originating from unfunded research undertaken in 2007, this paper offers an overview of Colaizzi's method of phenomenological analysis and proposes an extension to the original seven step approach enhancing rigour and, expanding information sources to enhance in-depth descriptions of phenomena for study.* **Background:** *The focus on human experience emanates from the human sciences in which the everyday lived world of humans constitutes the ontological and epistemological focus of enquiry – understanding of human experiences. Since the emergence of phenomenology as a method of enquiry, advances in phenomenological thought and research methods have emerged.* **Method:** *Colaizzi's phenomenological method of enquiry was used as the basis of enquiry in this study.* **Findings:** *The extension to Colaizzi's method of analysis emanated from recent research conducted by the authors to allow participants to express their experiences through everyday language. These 'expressions of life' included – art, music, poetry, metaphor as symbolic representations – as a vehicle for participants' to explicate their experiences.* **Conclusion:** *The additional step proposed as an extension to Colaizzi's seven step analysis offers researchers using Colaizzi's method greater access to implicit and explicit meanings embedded in participant descriptions by utilising 'expressions of life' – art, music, poetry, metaphor as symbolic representations – as articulated by the participants in explicating their experience of the phenomenon.*

KEYWORDS: nursing; phenomenology; research

INTRODUCTION

Phenomenology is a twentieth century philosophical movement dedicated to explicating the construction of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness – the way in which objects appear to human awareness in the natural attitude (Sokolowski, 2000). The aim of this article is to present a description of the processes involved in enhancing the meaning(s) of resilience in adult patients who have experienced

mental disorders by extending Colaizzi's (1978a) method of phenomenological analysis by including symbolic representations as an additional information source. The authors propose the benefit of extending Colaizzi's method of descriptive enquiry through the inclusion of symbolic representations offers an opportunity for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the individuals intended meaning that is not accessible through linguistic text alone.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of phenomenology as a method of enquiry is to discover patterns or structures of phenomena as lived within the fabric of everyday life (Giorgi, 1985; Husserl, 1965; Merleau-Ponty, 1956; Parse, 2001). Phenomenology suggests Sokolowski (2000) is concerned with the world of human beings where truth abides, a science directed toward manifestation and disclosure, 'a rigorous, explicit, self-conscious enterprise' (p. 53).

It is advocated by qualitative researchers that the phenomenological method of enquiry is congruent with the ideals of the health sciences, where humanistic understanding is valued and knowledge of a person's unique experience is accessible through dialogue (Husserl, 1965; Kim & Kollak, 2005; Merleau-Ponty, 1956; Solomon, 2001). The focus on human experience emanates from the human sciences (Dilthey, 1976; Foucault, 1994; Giorgi, 1992; Parse & Rizzo-Parse, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1988) in which the everyday lived world of humans constitutes the ontological and epistemological focus of enquiry – understanding of human experiences.

Since the emergence of phenomenology as a philosophical method of enquiry initially articulated in the works of Franz Brentano (Spiegelberg, 1970, 1972) advances in phenomenological thought and methods of enquiry have emerged (Parse, 2001). Beginning with Husserl's modification and refinement of Brentano's approach to phenomenological enquiry, there have been a raft of philosophers and researchers who have contributed to the expansion of the phenomenological movement birthing a rich matrix of philosophical positions and associated procedural steps of enquiry (Parse, 2001). By way of example, it was not until Heidegger developed his philosophical ideas that Kierkegaard's existentialism and Husserl's phenomenology 'were combined into a single project – that of describing everyday human existence in uniquely human ways' (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 5). Such a confluence of philosophical thought gave rise to what is now termed existential phenomenology.

The phenomenological movement was not confined to German philosophers. The movement also flourished in France where individual contributions to the advancement of phenomenological thought were made by such notable philosophers as Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), and Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) enhancing the specificity and diversity of thought and research methods (Parse, 2001). The emergence of the phenomenological movement in the United States of America took place in the early part of the twentieth century with the works of William Hocking, Dorion Cairns and Marvin Farber culminating in the 1950s and 1960s as one of the major schools of philosophical thought (Sokolowski, 2000). Since that time contributions to advancing phenomenology as a research method has resulted in further specificity, diversity of thought, and approaches to enquiry. Such notable North American phenomenologists as Van Kaam (1966), Giorgi (1970, 1985, 1992), and Colaizzi (1978) informed by the works of Spiegelberg (1970, 1972) which stipulated the essential processes for phenomenological enquiry continued to make modifications – refinement and expansion – to the way in which phenomenological research is undertaken.

METHOD

The study described here used Colaizzi's phenomenological approach to enquiry. Ethical clearance from the university Human Research and Ethics Committee was obtained prior to the commencement of the study.

Colaizzi (1978a) developed his method under the supervision of Giorgi (1970), who produced a body of literature devoted to the ongoing articulation and demonstration of empirically based phenomenological research in psychology – empirical existential phenomenology. Colaizzi's (1978a) procedural modification of Giorgi's (1970) approach to enquiry involved a process of validating the findings – the structure of the

phenomenon – with participants. This process required the researcher returning the analysis of transcripts – the structure of the phenomenon – to the respective participants for review. Additional information arising from clarification and/or elaboration by participants would necessitate inclusion in the final explication of findings. This procedural modification by Colaizzi (1978a) of Giorgi's (1970) method expanded the process of phenomenological analysis contributing to advancing a rigorous approach to phenomenological enquiry. As a means of locating the extension to Colaizzi's method a brief outline of the stages of the analysis process are presented.

COLAIZZI'S SEVEN STEP METHOD WITH THE INCLUSION OF AN ADDITIONAL STEP

1. Transcribing all the subjects' descriptions.
In this section of the analysis process, participant narratives are transcribed from the audio-taped interviews held with each individual. According to [Colaizzi's \(1978a\)](#) process, the narratives do not need to be transcribed verbatim, as long as the essence of what the participant was communicating is caught in the transcription. Individual transcriptions of interview are then validated by the respective participant.
2. Extracting significant statements [statements that directly relate to the phenomenon under investigation].
Any statements in the participants' narratives that relate directly to the phenomenon under investigation are considered significant. Significant statements are extracted from each of the narratives and numbered. The significant statements are numerically entered into a list (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4 ...) that is, an assemblage of all significant statements.
3. Creating formulated meanings.
In this stage of analysis, Colaizzi (1978a) recommends that the researcher attempts to formulate more general restatements or meanings for each significant statement extracted from the participant's narratives.

4. Aggregating formulated meanings into theme clusters.

Colaizzi (1978a) suggests that the researcher assign or organise formulated meanings into groups of similar type. In other words, the formulated meanings are grouped into theme clusters. That is, some statements may relate to, for example, faith while other statements relate to self-awareness and so on.

5. Developing an exhaustive description [that is, a comprehensive description of the experience as articulated by participants].
An exhaustive description is developed through a synthesis of all theme clusters and associated formulated meanings explicated by the researcher ([Colaizzi, 1978a](#)).

6. Additional Step – Researcher interpretative analysis of symbolic representations – from the articulation of the symbolic representation (which occurred during participant interview).
7. Identifying the fundamental structure of the phenomenon.

The fundamental structure refers to 'the essence of the experiential phenomenon as it is revealed by explication' through a rigorous analysis of the exhaustive description of the phenomenon.

8. Returning to participants for validation.
A follow-up appointment is made between the researcher and each participant for the purpose of validating the essence of the phenomenon with participants. Any alterations are made according to participant feedback to ensure their intended meaning is conveyed in the fundamental structure of the phenomenon. Integration of additional information provided by participants for inclusion into the final description of the phenomenon occurs at this point.

THE CONTEXT FOR THE INCLUSION OF THIS ADDITIONAL STEP TO COLAIZZI'S METHOD

The 2007 study ([Edward, Welch, & Chater, 2009](#)) where the additional step to Colaizzi's method

was introduced was undertaken in 2007 with the aim of exploring the phenomenon of resilience in the lives of adult patients who have experienced mental disorders. Eight participants were involved in this study – three were men and five were women. Their ages ranged between 18 and 57 years. Their mental disorders included depression, bipolar affective disorder, anxiety states with panic, postnatal depression, sexual identity crisis, personality disorder and co-morbid conditions.

Prior to the commencement of the study the researchers deliberated on the nature of the phenomenon to be explored, the ability of the participants to clearly articulate their experience of the phenomenon through language alone, and whether an additional complementary information source would be appropriate and desirable in enhancing understanding of the phenomenon. The decision was to invite participants to consider whether they wished to use symbolic representations of the phenomenon in the form of metaphor, painting, poetry, music and artifacts to assist them in articulating their experiences of being resilient. The decision to offer participants the opportunity to explore and explicate what was in their 'mind's eye' through symbolic representations was based on four considerations: the nature of the phenomenon of concern, the capacity of participants to describe their experience by word alone, the effective use of symbolic representations in therapy to enhance personal expression and articulation of experiences (depression, anxiety, trauma, healing, recovery), and use of symbolic representations of human experience throughout history.

Symbolic representations have been an inextricable part of human experience throughout recorded history. [Langer \(1957\)](#) described symbolization as the process of conversion of understanding expressed verbally and/or nonverbally. Langer discussed four modes of symbolization: 'language, ritual, myth, and music' (p. 102). Each of these modalities has been a conduit through which lived experience has been apprehended and expressed in personally significant ways and

through which understanding of lived experience can be gained ([Dilthey, 1976](#)).

Human experience captured in symbolic representations are powerful means of sharing one's lived world with others. It is the ability of symbolic representations to bring the past into present and ... 'to disclose, and thus render present a truth of being' ([Gadamer, 1997](#), p. 546). Symbolism provides a point of confluence of thought and emotion providing a coherent representation of what the person has experienced ([Edward, 2007](#); [Edward et al., 2009](#)) while providing an avenue for bringing to language that experience.

In light of the four considerations mentioned previously participants were invited to bring to interview symbolic representations that they believed would assist them in describing their experiences of the phenomenon. They were also informed that the choice to use their symbolic representation was a personal choice and not a requirement of being involved in the interview. All participants accepted the opportunity to share their experience of the phenomenon under study through the use of symbolic representations. For participants, symbolic representations included people, wildlife, nature and, objects.

What follows from [Edward et al.'s \(2009\)](#) study are examples of participants' original descriptions of the phenomenon taken from their interview transcripts (here, resilience) and the their symbolic representations to further expand on their intended meaning (Table 1). The following diagrammatic presentation provides a comparison between participants' descriptions as articulated in interview and descriptions of their experience of resilience through the use of symbolic representations. Participants' descriptions in italics represent additional information about the phenomenon not captured in the interview *per se*.

A comparative analysis of the central concepts explicated from participant interviews and symbolic representations revealed points of difference and commonality about the experience of resilience. Without exception each symbolic

TABLE 1: COMPARISON BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS' DESCRIPTIONS AS ARTICULATED IN INTERVIEW AND DESCRIPTIONS OF THEIR EXPERIENCE OF RESILIENCE THROUGH THE USE OF SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS

Central concepts of resilience from participant descriptions from interview	Central concepts of resilience from symbolic representations
Being active, objective, reflective, realization, optimistic, and hopeful.	A need for sure footing, a firm grip, being safe, never losing sight that falling is possible.
Being resilient starts with a catharsis, knowing then naming your condition, working towards healing in a reflective, thoughtful manner, and growing from the experience.	Growing and beginning to blossom. A house with a wonderful magic garden. It is always in bloom and growing. I felt like a better hybrid than I had been.
Acknowledging the situation, being self-sufficient, taking things day-by-day, adapting to life's situations and refusing to be the victim.	Accepting the situation, moving towards change (and not despair), being flexible, having a sense of humour.
Being responsible, talking to others, accepting the situation, hoping, self-discovery, self talk to comfort the self in moments of distress, discovering your own spirituality, positive thinking and finding alternatives.	Resilience is water ... Water is always flowing and moving and when momentarily trapped, in time it begins to explore its own path around the obstacle, not with force but by quietly testing possibilities. Water also has the potential to wear away the hardest of obstacles – rocks. It also has the capacity to change and be born anew – water, evaporation, rain, and back to water. Each cycle is in a different space and time.
Dealing with the situation and taking responsibility ... taking control again, hoping again, having courage, self knowledge and self-reliance, connecting with your own spirituality, having a role model, hope for the future and having an ability to share your story with, and gain support from another.	A rainbow which represents hope in dark moments. The promise that things will pass and new things are on the horizon. Its presence is quiet yet strong as it reinvents itself in different patterns of colour and light in response to the elements.
Having a crisis, seeing it all, and then choosing to endure it. It includes having hope for the future, adapting to life, talking to others, respecting yourself, accepting and yourself and others, being self-reliant and believing, belonging and knowing where you fit in the world.	Like a colony of ants. Ants make mounds in which to live and then someone comes along, steps on one and destroys it. So what do the ants do? They repair it, they don't move on to another place. They stick with it and build on it and make it better.
Knowing you do not want to die and choosing life. Realising you are like other people and accepting yourself and others for not being perfect. Resilience involves adapting to situations, using your skills and knowledge to cope and adjust to each circumstance, forgiving others and self, and knowing when to ask for help – helping others and being able to communicate with others. It is about balance.	Is Nelson Mandela. A man who knows when to speak and be silent, to bend but not to break, and to be open even in times of adversity. His life is one of balance and harmony in what seems to be a world of turmoil.
Resilience is looking forward yet still taking things day-by-day. Resilient qualities involve being responsible for yourself and perhaps others ... being needed. Remaining resilient includes having a safe place to reflect, accepting yourself and others for whom they are, giving and receiving unconditional love and having access to support when you need it.	It is a beach. The water is calm, sometimes very rough, but that's to be expected, because that's all about life. I've learned to take every day as it comes and reflect – the good and the bad, like when I am on the beach.

representation moved the participants' original descriptions of the phenomenon to a new level of understanding revealing dimensions of the

experience that had not been articulated by participants. Participant one talked about maintaining a sense of hopeful optimism coupled with

realistic objectivity where as his symbolic representation revealed a need for vigilance, maintaining sure footing and a firm grip on life. For participant two the initial description of spoke of growth from adversity where as the symbolic representation elucidated a sense of dynamic growth and becoming one's own person. Participant three spoke of being self-sufficient, adaptable, and refusing to be the victim. His symbolic representation introduced the need for a sense of humour. The initial description provided by participant four focused on responsibility, acceptance, and self-discovery in contradistinction to the notion of water symbolizing flow and movement, quiet testing of possibilities and ability to resist the most difficult of obstacles. For participant five, resilience was described in terms of assuming responsibility, having courage to deal with the situation, being self-reliant, and having hope. His symbolic representation however, portrayed a sense of quiet strength, and reinventing self. The sixth participant spoke of endurance, acceptance, self-reliance, believing, and belonging where as the symbolic representation introduced concepts such as repairing what has been damaged and improving on what was. Participant seven's description spoke of adaptation, forgiveness, knowing when to seek help, and achieving a balance, however, the ability to bend but not break, being able to remain open to possibilities in times of adversity, and maintaining a sense of harmony with self in a world of turmoil were conveyed in the participant's symbolic representation. For participant eight the ability to be resilient involved being able to accept and be responsible for self, having a safe place to reflect, and having access to support while the participant's symbolic representation conveyed a sense of living with the rough and smooth and meeting the challenges of everyday living.

Using the additional data collection approach with the inclusion of symbolic representations, two fundamental structures were yielded. The following two fundamental structures of the phenomenon of being resilient are presented below.

A FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURE OF RESILIENCE NOT INCLUDING SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS

The following fundamental structure was generated by adhering to Colaizzi's (1978) method of phenomenological analysis through participant interviews without reference to symbolic presentations.

Following a moment of enlightenment and discovering what is going on give you an opportunity to name/identify the mental illness. From there it is possible to expand your knowledge of the mental illness through education and work within your knowledge and limitations within the situation. Resilience is experienced through sharing the experience with others and realizing you are not alone. It includes the ability to express yourself, being self-aware, self-reliant and responsible in the world. Resilience comes from the acceptance of self, others and life. Resilience qualities involve having hope, faith, having a sense of spirit, courage and optimism ... at times, being the fool. Being resilient means caring for yourself by allowing time to heal, rest and manage your day. Resilience is about balance. Being resilient is supported by having meaning in your life-making a difference to another – and having meaningful relationships. This offers you the potential to feel like you belong, to feel unconditional love, to be cared about and care for another. Resilience is choosing life, being back in charge, moving forward and just 'doing it'. Being resilient is choosing to walk through the darkness all the while knowing the risks and dangers; Making a decision for life through hardships ([Edward et al. 2009](#)).

Fundamental structure of resilience including symbolic representations

The fundamental structure generated using symbolic representations as expressed by participants.

Resilience is upward movement ... progress. Progress is made in the context of one's own beliefs, values and standards. Resilience is growth through evolving change, being flexible, and accepting and seeing the funny side

of life. Being resilient is finding a way through and having the freedom to hope. Being resilient is knowing there is hard work ahead but still undertaking it and surviving it. Resilience is forgiveness. Resilience is taking things day-by-day. ([Edward et al., 2009](#))

An examination of the fundamental structures of the experience of resilience from two perspectives: the transcripts of interview (excluding symbolic representations) and the symbolic representations of participants revealed two different worlds of experience.

Of particular interest to these researchers was that the addition of symbolic representations generated a different conceptual lens from which to explicate the participants' experiences surfacing different yet complementary insights about the meaning of being resilient which were not conveyed in the participants' verbal accounts of their experiences.

HOW DOES THE ADDITION THE COLAIZZI METHOD ASSIST NURSES ENGAGING IN PHENOMENOLOGICAL ENQUIRY?

The philosophical underpinnings of phenomenological thought are consistent with the values of nursing which include 'the uniqueness of the person, the importance of personal discovery, acceptance of life situations, the need for exploration of the meaning of experience, interpersonal relating, and the potential for personal growth' ([Edward, 2006, p. 237](#)).

Phenomenology is based on the fact that the experience of individuals is somehow accessible to others and that we can enter into these experiences through an intimate dialogue alone. Such a belief is, in the main true. However, there are many situations in which such a belief can be contested. Accessing the life world of individuals through description alone is predicated on the assumption that participants are able to provide a clear, articulate, and in-depth description of their experience of the phenomenon being investigated. For a number of participants in a given study this may be beyond their capacity despite meeting the essential

criteria for involvement in the study. In such circumstances additional strategies may be required as part of the process of obtaining rich descriptions of the phenomenon in order to identify the essence of the experience or in this instance, the fundamental structure of the phenomenon under investigation.

As previously discussed, given the focus of the research and the participant cohort consideration was given to whether an additional means of information gathering would be required. Outcome of discussions with the research team was a decision to include metaphors as an additional means of information gathering. Such a decision is in keeping with the ideals of health sciences – nursing ([Husserl, 1965](#); [Kim & Kollak, 2005](#); [Merleau-Ponty, 1956](#); [Solomon, 2001](#)). Colaizzi's approach to phenomenology was empirical existential phenomenology. [Wertz \(1984\)](#) suggests the important points in empirical existential phenomenological research include: an empathetic presence to the descriptions, dwelling on details of narratives, magnification and amplification of details, turning from objects to immanent meanings, reflection on judgment of relevance, and grasping implicit meanings and relating elements. Finally, the process of empirical existential phenomenology culminates in a formulation of the structure of the phenomenon [that is, a presentation of the essential components of the phenomenon, articulating what the phenomenon is as a human meaning]. According to [Colaizzi \(1978a\)](#), the fundamental structure of the phenomenon under investigation is the articulation of the moment in the researcher's mental picture and understanding based on accepted presuppositions and situational circumstances ([Colaizzi, 1978a](#)). The addition of using symbolism in this paper proposed as an extension to Colaizzi's (1978a) method offers researchers using Colaizzi's (1978a) method greater access to implicit and explicit meanings embedded in narrative by utilising imagery – symbolic representations – as a vehicle for participants to articulate their experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

From the perspective of the discipline of nursing Colaizzi's (1978a, 1978b) approach to enquiry

provides an appropriate research method for exploring the everyday world of people across the health–illness spectrum. The expansion of Colaizzi’s method to include symbolic representations as expressions of life provide an additional resource for information gathering when study participants are unable or limited in their ability to articulate their experiences through verbal language alone. For nurses engaged in research with vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, especially those who experience linguistic or psychologic barriers, the use of symbolic representations has the potential to enhance their ability to share their experiences providing a depth of understanding which may not be accessible. Currently, there are plans to utilise this method in research involving people from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. In terms of future research, the opportunity to facilitate greater access to individuals’ intended meanings of their experiences using this extension to Colaizzi’s method of analysis is encouraging.

CONCLUSION

Accessing the lived world of the participants experiences is more often than not in qual research is more often than not undertaken through pa descriptions. However, there are occasions in qualitative research where verbal descriptions alone have proven to be inadequate in articulating a person lived experience of a phenomenon. Over time, the arts have proved to be a potent means by which lived experience can come to life, complimenting existing verbal descriptions of participants. The authors of this paper have utilised the arts, in particular symbolic representations, as a means of acquiring in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of resilience from participants who were mental ill or have experienced mental illness as they have had some difficulty in articulating their lived world. The inclusion of symbolic representation in this study has proven to be a valuable addition to Colaizzi’s method of enquiry and has the promise of transcending potential issues of expression for those who experience linguistic or psychologic barriers.

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