



## The use of Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutic-phenomenology philosophy as a methodological framework to guide an educational nursing research\*

*Fenomenologia-hermenêutica de Paul Ricoeur como referencial metodológico numa pesquisa de ensino em enfermagem*

*Fenomenología-hermenéutica de Paul Ricoeur como referencial metodológico en una investigación de enseñanza en enfermería*

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### ABSTRACT

To describe the use of Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutic-Phenomenology Philosophy arguments to guide the thesis, entitled "Meanings of Awareness for Being a Nursing Faculty in Regards to the Teaching, Learning, and Practicing Nursing in light of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology." A phenomenological approach was used to guide this qualitative study. This approach is appropriate to unveil subjective aspects of interest through interviews. The openness, flexibility, and subjectivity of the responses of the study's participants allowed the identification of categories that suggest meanings of awareness of being a nursing faculty. The findings of this educational nursing research suggest that this referential of awareness of being a nursing faculty is important because it was based on creative and challenging ontological approach of the researcher.

**Keywords:** Philosophy; Qualitative research; Education; Nursing/education

### RESUMO

Este artigo descreve as principais idéias compreensivo-hermenêuticas de Paul Ricoeur utilizadas como referencial teórico-metodológico na tese "Significados da sensibilidade para o ser-docente-enfermeiro/a no ensinar e aprender a ser e fazer enfermagem à luz da fenomenologia de Maurice Merleau-Ponty". A Pesquisa qualitativa com abordagem fenomenológica mostrou-se adequada, por desvelar os aspectos subjetivos, por meio das entrevistas. O olhar aberto, flexível e particular na intersubjetividade com os entrevistados criou as condições para formulação de categorias de análise possibilitando revelar os significados da sensibilidade. O texto mostra a importância desse referencial, numa pesquisa de ensino em enfermagem, por estar fundamentado na construção de uma ontologia sempre desafiante e criativa do pesquisador.

**Descritores:** Filosofia; Pesquisa qualitativa; Educação; Enfermagem/educação

### RESUMEN

Describir las principales ideas comprensivo-hermenéuticas de Paul Ricoeur utilizadas como referencial teórico-metodológico en la tesis "Significados de la sensibilidad para el ser-docente-enfermero/a en el enseñar y aprender a ser y hacer enfermería a la luz de la fenomenología de Maurice Merleau-Ponty". Se trata de una investigación cualitativa con abordaje fenomenológico que se mostró adecuada, por develar los aspectos subjetivos, por medio de las entrevistas. El mirar abierto, flexible y particular en la intersubjetividad con los entrevistados creó las condiciones para la formulación de categorías de análisis possibilitando revelar los significados de la sensibilidad. El texto muestra la importancia de ese referencial, en una investigación de enseñanza en enfermería, por estar fundamentado en la construcción de una ontología siempre desafiante y creativa del investigador.

**Descriptores:** Filosofía; Investigación cualitativa; Educación; Enfermería/educación

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## INTRODUCTION

In this article, Paul Ricoeur's main hermeneutic-comprehensive ideas are sought to be described. These ideas were the methodological basis for the doctoral thesis entitled "Meanings of sensibility for the nurse-professor-being in teaching and learning to be and practice nursing from the perspective of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology"<sup>(1)</sup>.

Following the doctoral thesis defense, the authors felt the need to share their experience as researchers who study and adopt this methodological framework. This need arose from reading several nursing journals, where qualitative research was found to have been used by researchers in countless approaches in their studies. However, few of them show epistemological and methodological discussions about comprehensive-interpretative approaches.

The hermeneutic-phenomenological framework was used to investigate the phenomenon, based on the belief that this framework would enable researchers to understand it. Such investigation was based on experiences of the professor-nurse-being in teaching and learning to be and practice nursing, taking into consideration their routine situations. This path established a link between phenomenology and contemporary analysis of language by means of the metaphor theory. This leads to new possibilities of creating reality as a network of meanings<sup>(2)</sup>.

Ricoeur studied and wrote about the way an individual's reality is created by their perception of world events. One of his major contributions to Philosophy was the concept of action. Initially, this occurs in thought, then externalizing through body gestures that change something when a human being interacts with others in the world of life.

Research based on this methodology is believed to involve other models, in addition to traditional ones, both in seeking to learn and to teach, as it reveals other possible paths towards nursing education<sup>(3)</sup>.

## HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY: PAUL RICOEUR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Based on Paul Ricoeur's works, more specifically "The Conflict of Interpretations"<sup>(4)</sup>, "Interpretation and Ideologies"<sup>(5)</sup> and "Interpretation Theory"<sup>(2)</sup>, the contributions of his thoughts are shown, from the understanding of some of the features of his written discourse.

This author makes five considerations about hermeneutics. The first one refers to hermeneutics as graft, as it appeared before Husserl's phenomenology. Hermeneutics was initially limited to exegesis, i.e. a

discipline that aimed to understand religious texts<sup>(4)</sup>.

In the second consideration, hermeneutics is defined as a science of all linguistic understanding that works as basis for the conception of all types of text interpretation. This understanding marks the beginning of non-disciplinary hermeneutics, when it defines itself as the study of its own understanding. The word hermeneutics comes from the Greek verb *hermeneuin*, meaning to interpret, and also from the noun *hermeneia*, denoting interpretation. The word is associated with the winged messenger god Hermes, from Greek mythology, who is connected to the function of making something understandable, especially when it involves language, i.e. all that may go beyond human understanding in a way that can be grasped by intelligence. However, there is another sense to the word "hermeneutics", associated with explaining. In this sense, it emphasizes the discourse on understanding, as the words go beyond speaking. They explain, rationalize and clarify something. The meaning, however, is related to someone and to the context. It is this connection that establishes meaning<sup>(4)</sup>.

In the third consideration, hermeneutics is also considered as methodological basis for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, referring to Wilhelm Dilthey's project. This philosopher realized that hermeneutics could be the foundation for all disciplines that focused on the understanding of art, behavior, and human writing. He defended the interpretation of human life's essential expressions (laws, the literature, Holy Scriptures), as they are probably understood historically, though differently from the natural world's quantification and scientific quality. Dilthey found a humanistic methodology in hermeneutics<sup>(4)</sup>.

The fourth consideration refers to the phenomenology of *Dasein* (existence) and understanding of existence. Martin Heidegger, when carrying out his study on human being's routine presence in the world, emphasized the analysis of a hermeneutics of *Dasein*, in his work "Being and Time". In this sense, hermeneutics is considered as a phenomenological explanation of human existence, not as a science or text interpretation rules, much less a methodology of *Geisteswissenschaften*. The philosopher finds, in hermeneutics, a relationship with the ontological dimensions of understanding and, consequently, with its phenomenology. After Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer painstakingly outlines the development of hermeneutics, since the first studies to awaken philosophical awareness of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. For him, understanding is associated with the aesthetical experience and historical knowledge in hermeneutics. This means that understanding must be within a context of constant fusion of past and present; thus, it must not be viewed as an individual's action of subjectivity, because it is in finding the being through language that

hermeneutics takes place<sup>(4)</sup>.

Finally, in the fifth consideration, as an interpretation system, hermeneutics is understood as a process that interprets an explicit or hidden content and meaning. The object of interpretation, then, is the text, which may be comprised by dream or social symbols. In this sense, the author<sup>(4)</sup> makes a significant contribution, when mentioning that hermeneutics is the process by which meaning is revealed beyond the manifested content<sup>(4)</sup>. However, Freud, while searching for an hidden meaning in dreams and in lapses of language, suspects the surface or manifested reality. He sought to cause one to distrust conscious knowledge itself, even though illusions and religious beliefs would end. As a result, Ricoeur points to Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as demystifiers of hermeneutics, stating that, individually, they interpreted the surface of reality as false. They condemned religion; considered true thinking as doubtful; suspected the pious trust human beings had in their reality, beliefs and motivations; and promoted a new hermeneutics. With this understanding, Ricoeur shows that he opposes the universal rules of exegesis as separate opposing theories exclusively, concerning rules of interpretation. He recovers and interprets Freud's meaning for the present moment in an innovative way, considering both the rationality of doubt and faith in an interpretation conveyed by a philosophy that embraces the hermeneutic challenge of the symbol. Now, it could be affirmed that hermeneutics is regulated by language. However, the challenge is to put it into practice creatively<sup>(4)</sup>.

Ricoeur<sup>(4)</sup> brings forth a new type of thinking, which is only possible to be grasped from the context of his life history and also from the reflections on countless philosophical currents, both for and against this. By reading Ricoeur's works, the dialogue kept with different philosophical currents is observed. He sought to follow his own philosophical path: provocative, open, seeking to dialogue with other philosophical views, whose mediation enabled one to understand his posture. This philosopher made a significant contribution with an interpretation theory founded on the dialectics between explanation and understanding, regulated by interpretation; he follows a reflective method that creates a connection with that which is experienced. He considers grasping existence as important and, for this reason, seeks to "rediscover the authenticity of meaning" using the truth<sup>(5)</sup>.

In this perspective, this philosopher's trajectory is manifested as a continuous effort aiming to understand the dimension of the human being in his totality. To do this, it was necessary to arouse one's will, which is the basis of every action and factuality, revealing the dialectics between them, without, however, distancing oneself from the concrete as a being in the world of life, imbued

with historical and cultural conditions. For this reason, Ricoeur proposes a hermeneutic phenomenology with original thinking and innovative method, because it marks the world of life and seeks the polysemic truth of the phenomenon on the levels where understanding occurs<sup>(4)</sup>. This is founded on three levels: the level of daily life or that which is experienced (person or situation in itself – Phenomenology), the level of scientific life (data, positions, theories, concepts – Science) and the reflective level itself (the speaking of the doing in terms of an ethics of the actions – Philosophy of Language).

It invites us to clarify human existence by understanding the human being's symbolic behavior: "the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning", using the written record of his speech, gestures and feelings. He proposes the dialectics of complementarity to be able to resolve the question of dualism between explanation and understanding<sup>(5)</sup>, seeking a way to join the objectivity of the scientific discourse and the phenomenological one and emphasizing the subjectivity of reflection.

Thus, hermeneutics deals with a current that proposes reflections on the aesthetical experience and human language. It is the interpretation of the meaning of what is not said or shown when doing something. It is an attempt to specify the meaning, which is essential to describe the experience. The aim is to achieve an interpretation theory of the being. For this reason, Paul Ricoeur seeks a "reflective method" that clarifies existence and elucidates "its meaning"<sup>(5)</sup>.

It should be pointed out that there is no revealing the phenomenon without discourse. Thus, the task of phenomenology is to emphasize the meaning of the phenomenon-discourse. This is understood as meaning, because meaning is what the person wishes to make explicit. People talk to each other and something happens. Discourse appears as a way to individually overcome human being's loneliness<sup>(5)</sup>. There is a shift from code linguistics to that of meaning, i.e. there is a difference between language and speaking. The basic unit of a language is the sign, in the same manner that the basic unit of the written discourse or text is the sentence<sup>(5)</sup>. In this way, hermeneutics analyzes the meaning of discourse and makes it explicit. This meaning has a primitive trace of distancing oneself, known as event and meaning dialectics. Hermeneutics is understood as the theory of the workings of understanding in relation to text interpretation, because to interpret is to try to reveal description itself, that is, to realize the meaning in human existence<sup>(5)</sup>.

The discourse is an event because it is carried out by the human being in a temporal situation (in the present). Language, on the other hand, is non-temporal and impersonal, whose signs only refer to other signs inside the same system, which ends in itself. The discourse

employs signs to establish language and, through it, the human being opens himself to dialogue with the other. Thus, in the discourse, there is an intentionality and meaning, revealed by language<sup>(5)</sup>.

In this sense, Ricoeur seeks, with his hermeneutics, to understand human existence from the discovery of the meaning of discourse. He searches for meaning behind the words, so that what is real is perceived in its totality. Then, for the philosopher, to comprehend is to understand and to be based on an intention present in the text to be interpreted.

Moreover, Ricoeur reveals that the analysis and interpretation of the hermeneutic discourse can be described in stages: initial text reading, critical reading and appropriation<sup>(4)</sup>.

The initial text reading aims to understand it in a superficial way, by perceiving the first meanings. The reading must be carried out many times and without judgment, so that the researcher can grasp the meanings and organize them. Critical reading occurs when the text is re-read in-depth, with the purpose of interpreting and understanding the possible meanings imbued in the text. Appropriation is when the apex is reached with the grasping and assimilation of the revealed message.

With this understanding, at the moment the reader analyzes a text from a certain work, their interpretation may be completely different from the author's intention. For this reason, it is possible to perceive the experience in an individual way, though it goes from one "sphere of life to another. This something is not the experience as experienced, but its meaning"<sup>(2)</sup>. That is why the "experienced experience", as it is experienced, remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public<sup>(5)</sup>. According to Ricoeur, as we are in the world, we are influenced by situations, from which we acquire understanding and feel the need to share this with others, i.e. we have the experience to bring forth language.

The notion of the text uplifts the word, revives the discourse and enables it to speak. The discourse becomes complete when the reader reads it. It is important to emphasize that, in the spoken discourse, i.e. the direct language, the author can show himself and be exposed. However, the author is not present in the written discourse, because there are no actions and expressions of gestures and looks. The meaning of a text becomes open to several readers and, as a result, to many interpretations.

Thus, writing, in relation to speaking, always shows a measure of distance and reveals something that, in speaking, is initial. As Ricoeur states, writing "replaces speaking", because it seeks to fix the discourse. In this way, it is the discourse that must emerge in a visual manner, not only as grammar<sup>(2)</sup>. The relationship between the event and the meaning that it brings forth

is sought to be established. From the philosopher's point of view, in order to observe the phenomenon as it is revealed, the paradigm of distancing oneself from communication is crucial, i.e. the "human experience's own historical quality"<sup>(5)</sup>.

Given this view, to understand does not mean to simply repeat the discourse through the other, but rather to create a new event that begins with the text. The interpretation, in contrast, is a special episode of understanding, applied to life's written expressions. Thus, interpretation involves explanation and understanding<sup>(5)</sup>.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF A RESEARCH STUDY ON NURSING EDUCATION FOUNDED ON PAUL RICOEUR'S HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY AS METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

This research study, using Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology as methodological framework, was performed in a Public University of the state of Santa Catarina. To obtain the study's descriptions of experience, recorded interviews were the choice, where the reality experienced and expressed in words by 19 professor-nurses was sought to be recorded. These professor-nurses are members of the Department of Nursing permanent staff, of both sexes, involved with students in theoretical-practical disciplines in all course semesters, and who were willing to participate in the study. As this research involves human beings, the professor-nurses signed an Informed Consent Form, in accordance with ethical aspects established by the *Conselho Nacional de Saúde's* (National Health Council), Resolution n.º 196/96<sup>(6)</sup>. The research protocol was approved and recorded by the UFSC Human Research Ethics Committee with the Official Opinion n.º 241/2006.

It is important to emphasize that, in this methodology, the interview must be followed by the observation of the professor-nurses' actions, because, by doing this, it is possible to listen beyond their speech as a way to understand meanings. Language is inherent in the body and, in this sense, surpasses the subject-object dichotomy. Here, to observe implies to be present and with the other. In this sense, the researcher can apprehend his subjectivity and establish a relationship of closeness with the other, because, by observing someone's movement, this is not seen as a mechanic movement, but rather as an expressive gesture which is never simply physical. The gesture speaks something and immediately refers to the subject's inner nature<sup>(7)</sup>. The interview enables better interaction with the other and also personal approaches to observe one of the ways to recover what is real in the human being's experiences, because the researcher

borrowed the interviewee's descriptions of experiences and reflects upon them. In the interview, one guiding question was presented: What does the sensibility to teach and learn to be and practice nursing mean to you? Interviews became an exercise of sensibly listening to interviewees' speech.

Interviewees spoke freely about this issue, but, throughout the interview, other questions were asked to clarify understanding if necessary. This approach enabled researchers to have a closer relationship and interaction with them and also a more open view of and closeness to the phenomenon researched, where the teaching of nursing occurs. Researchers managed to delve into the world experienced, permeated by meanings of actions, expressions of relationships and human interactions. An individual is understood in himself by the experience of seeing him, touching him, listening to him and perceiving him<sup>(4)</sup>.

To guarantee anonymity, interviewees were identified by the river metaphor. A river is formed by water, which represents the words, the discourse, the text.

The number of professor-nurses who comprised the significant individuals in this study was decided during data collection, according to the criterion of repetition of information, given the fact that this type of criterion is not based on quantity to guarantee its representativeness. Thus, it is difficult to decide beforehand how many individuals will participate in the research. While the researcher is conducting the study, other individuals may be included<sup>(8)</sup>.

While carrying out the study, researchers tried to remain faithful to the methodology this study was founded upon, as they observed they could organize the description of experiences. To do this, it was necessary to review all empirical data, according to the experience acquired in the observations of the world lived by the study interviewer. However, the challenge was to carry out this methodology creatively.

Initially, two moments were considered: the oral text construction and the written text construction.

As regards the oral text construction, the professor-nurse-being is the awareness of a being-in-the-world who is routinely learning. They observe, think, feel, learn and intentionally share with the other their experience in relation to the world they live in, as well as their way of existing. In this study, the dialogue was made possible by the interview, which enabled researchers to approach the other to find out about their experience in teaching and learning to be and practice nursing and the meanings of sensibility. In addition to listening to the authentic speech of the professor-nurse-being, it is known that the phenomenon can be observed by their manifested actions in their gestures and expressions. It is important to point out that for the interview to flow, it was

necessary to seek an environment that the other became familiar with, and where he felt welcome and comfortable. The use of a recorder during the interview was indispensable, because this enabled the interviewer to feel free to observe, listen to, and, when necessary, make notes of observations. It is understood that the phenomenon is perceived in perspective and, for this reason, it is not possible to perceive it as a whole.

The shift from oral to written text makes the context disappear. To prevent this shift from becoming impoverished, it was necessary to transcribe the interviews, one by one. In addition, at the end of the interviews and of each transcription, the observations made with the personal reflections were noted down. The text had to be subsequently read, while listening to the professor-nurse's speech, because gestures and expressions can always be remembered this way.

In the authors' conception, what happens is that the researcher becomes very close to the text, enabling them to reflect upon existential situations that emerged from the other's experience and, for this reason, to seek to understand and interpret what is hidden in their experience.

After turning the oral text into written text, the reading procedures, the identification of possible meanings and, finally, the manifested sensibility were carried out.

### Reading procedures

After the construction of the written text, it is necessary to associate understanding with meanings. The first impressions can be assessed, changed and delved into, based on the text's objective structure. Thus, the text's possible meanings were interpreted by the researchers. However, it is important to remember that phenomenology is geared to the description of the interviewee's experiences, without the concern for finding an explanation for them. This is the moment to organize the text, read it attentively and as many times as it is needed to grasp the discourses. Thus, it is necessary to stay close to the text so that, as researchers, it is possible to make reflections upon existential situations and to seek meanings, i.e. the essence of the other's experience.

Hermeneutics considers the sentence as a unit of analysis<sup>(5)</sup>. For this reason, reading began with the sentence, followed by the paragraph and, finally, the text as a whole. The meaning is comprised by sentence units. The ideas highlighted are somehow associated with a theoretical foundation. Text reading is the existential moment, where the researcher seeks to revive, develop themes on and understand the meanings that live in this text. During reading, the researcher has their experiences and, in these, they observe the body lived in inter-subjectivity. This becomes apparent in the relationships

and interactions with the other, as the action of each interviewee causes the other to have a reaction in a certain situation, which each one experiences according to the other's perspective and vice-versa.

### Identification of possible meanings

The search for meanings occurs by understanding the text with the purpose of guiding the researcher. However, it is necessary to perceive its visibility to find the paths, so that one may understand and interpret the text. Hermeneutic interpretation is a dialogued discourse among the text in progress, the meaning and the research study's contextual framework. For this reason, it is only viable after delving into semantics<sup>(5)</sup>. In research, it is necessary to choose a philosophical-theoretical framework to understand the meanings of speech. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential framework was the choice for this study<sup>(7)</sup>.

### The manifested sensibility

This moment was considered as the last stage of hermeneutics. It is the instant when the researcher needs to have the ability to understand the meaning and the images projected on the text or, as Ricoeur affirms, the metaphor. This metaphor shows "something new about reality", reaching its essence and leading to new possibilities of interaction with a network of meanings<sup>(2)</sup>. Then, the manifested sensibility means to make yours what was previously unknown. Description occurs by understanding situations from reality that are grasped with the other's experience.

By describing the network of meanings founded on hermeneutic phenomenology, three major categories emerged. First, the professor-nurse-being's understanding about the human being's sensibility, with the following sub-categories: perception of oneself as a professor-nurse-being; and sensible perception of the other. Second, the professor-nurse-being's understanding about the sensibility in situations experienced, with the following sub-categories: professor-student relationship, professor-being/student-being relationship; professor-family relationship; student-family relationship; professor-nurse/care relationship. Third, the professor-nurse-being's understanding about the sensibility expressed in Feelings, with the following sub-categories: proxemics, distancing oneself, ambiguity.

Research founded on these three categories and their sub-categories did not show a main category or priority order, because all were equally considered as important moments to understand the phenomenon studied.

Research based on Paul Ricoeur's theoretical-philosophical-methodological framework adds investigative knowledge to the several fields of work available for nursing professionals: teaching, research,

community extension services and health care.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research reported here, by seeking to understand the sensibility of the professor-nurse-being in teaching and learning to be and practice nursing, develops a hermeneutics based on phenomenology, perceiving human action as one of the main foundations of its reflection. Hermeneutic phenomenology has enabled the understanding of meanings that human beings attribute to their existence in the world of life, thus achieving in discourses, by means of their language, the understanding of their actions.

The human being, when speaking, brings forth a form of action, because he is always referring to the other and the things in the world and, to do this, uses the context. When the human being speaks to the other, he creates discourses. These discourses always have a purpose and a social orientation.

The interviewees' discourse, when changing from oral to written, produced a text which brought forth a world and a possible way for a human being to find his own place and guide himself, revealing reality. The researcher, by means of discourse interpretation, reaches significant aspects, essential to understand the being. Thus, discourse may be a mediating element that enables this understanding/interpretation of both personal cognitive processes and social and cultural aspects.

The phenomenon of the professor-nurse-being's sensibility in teaching and learning to be and practice nursing can be observed as a research study regulated by Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology. In this perspective, the methodology involves possible paths of application in other circumstances, as it can elucidate the world of nursing and make it explicit. It should be pointed out that this methodology does not come from theoretical assumptions and a strict path to seek the polysemy of truth. To adopt it in nursing research with an interpretative nature represents the possibility for researcher-nurses to analyze phenomena in the teaching and health care routine, from the point of view of those who experience it. Research is only relevant when it contributes to other ways of teaching, learning, researching and caring in Nursing, as well as to lay the foundations for the researcher's social responsibility.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out the authors' admiration for Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology, while delving into the world of research. The researcher, by following the path from their experience, and using this methodological framework, reflects upon their own knowledge and that of the object. Thus, a relationship between them is established, because the experience is unique and

determined in the dialogue with the other in the relationships and interactions. For this reason, the

philosopher emphasizes that the researcher must be creative.

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