

# Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approaches in Environmental Education Research with Children

Marilyn Cole

Deakin University

mjcole@deakin.edu.au

*This paper discusses hermeneutic phenomenological approaches to understanding children's "being-in", and "being-with-others" in their local environment in light of the author's doctoral research project. Following a brief overview of hermeneutic phenomenological research traditions, the author identifies historical currents that position children in research as active meaning makers of their experiential lifeworlds. Drawing on the philosophies of Gadamer and Heidegger, research approaches coherent with the ontology of "being" are elaborated in the context of their use in the project. These approaches comprised visual methodologies that located the children's local environment photos at the centre of conversational dialogues.*

## *Hermeneutic phenomenology: an introductory overview*

Over recent times, multiple disciplines have shown increased interest in hermeneutic phenomenological research including education, nursing, information management systems, law, and psychology. A common interest across these disciplines lies in the notion that we can best understand others from their experiential lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) realities (see van Manen, 2006).

In broad terms, hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with interpreting concealed meanings in lifeworld phenomena: "These concealed meanings are embedded in cultures that incorporate shared language, practices and important practical knowledge about common day-to-day experiences" (Dinkins, 2005, p.113). Within this research tradition, hermeneutics takes on the interpretive task to understand participants' lifeworld experiences of the phenomena of interest that can illuminate ways of "being-in-the-world" through phenomenological processes. It is this move to interpretive practice that marks a key distinction between purely phenomenological research seeking rich lifeworld descriptions of the lifeworld, and hermeneutic phenomenological research that seeks to understand these worlds from participants' perspectives.

In my own research project, my interest in understanding children's everyday environmental lifeworlds found home ground in Hans-George Gadamer's practical hermeneutic philosophy of conversational dialogue, and inspiration in Martin Heidegger's existential school of phenomenology with its ontological focus on

“being-in-the-world”, and “being-in-the-world-with-others”. Shared ground between these twentieth century German philosophers, in relation to their understanding of method as a proceeding, being at home in language, the facticity of our inescapable “thrownness” into historical traditions (see Gadamer, 1989; Bruns, 1992; Risser, 1997), and their concern with the ability of art to disclose our “being” (Davey, 1999), suggested hermeneutics and phenomenology could be brought into fruitful methodological relationship.

### *Researching children’s environmental lifeworlds: ontological starting points*

Several currents of change over the past two decades have helped shape the notion of research *with*, rather than *on* children, as a participative project interested in understanding children’s experiential lifeworlds from interpretive research approaches. These currents include the 1989 endorsement of children’s rights to participate in matters affecting their lives through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2010), in concert with an emerging sociological view of children as active meaning makers and experts of their own experiences, in their own right.

On “matters” environmental, children’s inherent intergenerational interests in sustainable development, and their rights to have a say about these, mandate children’s involvement in the emerging environmental conversation. Environmental education researcher Philip Payne argues the suitability of phenomenological enquiry to research the “*lived nature*” of “*embodied relations* experienced by an individual” interacting in their environment (Payne, 2003, p.170; original italics), and notes that few studies in environmental education research elect the “ontological entry point”, where enquiries focus on what the historical subjects actually *do* or *be* in the environment, particularly the everyday one” (2003, p.187; original italics).

My research question, “How do children’s everyday experiences of their local environment shape their perceptions and future environmental visions?” gestured towards Payne’s (2003) ontological quest to understand children’s “being” in their local environmental lifeworlds, and Heidegger’s existential notion that “being-in-the-world” means projecting possibilities for “being-in” future worlds (see Delancey, 2009). The following outlines hermeneutic phenomenological approaches taken in my research to gain entry to the children’s environmental lifeworlds.

### *Hermeneutic phenomenological approaches*

When it comes to methods in hermeneutic phenomenological research, both Gadamer and Heidegger hold that there are no methods or procedures, in the traditional scientific sense, that can empirically verify, or seize and hold fast phenomena in lifeworld research. Rather, methods should be considered as pathways that proceed towards clearings of understanding (Heidegger, 1977, in Diekelmann, 2005). Gadamer sees these pathways as grounded in the “ideal of sharing in something, of participation ... in the expression of human experiences” developed in our historical traditions (Gadamer & Dutt, 2001, p.40), and looks to the notion of a

participative conversational dialogue to reveal the richness of human experience and understanding.

*A hermeneutics of language: the conversational dialogue*

Traditionally, in phenomenological research, unstructured in-depth interviews are used as the basis for constructing rich evocative descriptions of human experiences (Dinkins, 2005; van Manen, 2006; Roulston, 2010). However, in hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry with understanding at the centre, the notion of a “hermeneutic interview” comes into play (Dinkins, 2005, p.113; Roulston, 2010, p.17). Following Gadamer, the hermeneutic interview takes the form of a conversational dialogue, constituted by the way we are “in-the-world” in language (Gallagher, 1992; Diekelmann, 2005; Holroyd, 2007). In dialogue, the dialectic process of question and answer opens up possibilities for understanding our world, others, and ourselves, from new perspectives (Gadamer, 1989; Gallagher, 1992). Gadamer’s hermeneutic intent that conversational dialogue be participative, and ethical in its focus on openness and respectful listening, speaks to the participative current in research with children, premised on listening to children’s voices and understanding their lifeworld perspectives.

*A hermeneutics of seeing: visual methodologies*

Where visual art, in the form of drawings, paintings, and photos, is introduced to the conversational dialogue, a “hermeneutic of seeing” opens another pathway to human experience within this conversation. Heidegger and Gadamer’s philosophies share a concern with the ability of visual art to “disclose an understanding of both ourselves and of our being in the world in an immediate, unique and revelatory manner” (Davey, 1999, p.5). Further, these art forms have ability to re-interpret and re-present “subject-matters”, and to “extend and alter their being” (Davey, 1999, p.4). In everyday life, images are ubiquitous: “they permeate our everyday lives, our conversations (see Pink, 1997a, p.3), our imagination and our dreams” (Edgar, 2004, in Pink, 2007, p.21). These visually constituted ways of “being-in-the-world” in multiple contexts offer insights into our narratives that may, in some instances, resist linguistic expression.

In phenomenologically oriented research with children, the use of arts-based approaches, such as drawing and photography, within unstructured interview contexts enable children to articulate their lifeworld experiences in meaningful and creative ways on their own terms (Veale, 2005; see Finley, 2008). A growing literature reflects increased interest in the use of visual methodologies in research with children generally (Veale, 2005), and in environmental education in particular (see Carlsson, 2001; Kolb, 2008). However few, if any, reported studies find ground in a philosophy of interpretation. How I used visual methodologies within hermeneutically inspired conversational dialogue is the substance of what follows.

*Visual methodologies: “in-conversation”*

In my research project, the children, as both photographers and narrators, made their local environmental lifeworlds phenomenologically visible to each other and myself through their creative photos, shared as conversational provocations in one-to-one and small group conversations. In these conversational contexts, hermeneutics’

concern with language “does not subordinate image to word but applies the sensitivities we acquire from linguistic exchange to reveal how our experience of art is no isolated monologue on personal pleasure but a complex dialogical achievement involving the fusion of the horizons surrounding artist, subject-matter and viewer” (Davey, 1999, p.3).

In one-to-one participatory photo conversations, each child shared their selection of up to eight photos with me within a conversation guided by the photos and the research question. In our small group conversations, the children constructed collaborative photographic texts along the lines of Mitchell Thomashow’s (1996) notion of collaborative written texts. In our small groups, the children used index cards to write comments about the photos each child had brought to the conversation. The photos, and their corresponding “comments” cards, were displayed on a whiteboard. These collaborative photographic texts photos invigorated conversation around the ways the children had “read” each other’s photos.

The children’s narratives around their photos expressed diverse environmental understandings, personal significances, and particular environmental sensitivities and concerns. For some children, taking photos enabled them to express their creative interest in representing and interpreting aesthetic dimensions of “being-in” their local environment. From my perspective, existing presuppositions about children’s ways of “being”, “doing”, and environmental “knowing”, came under challenge in the fusion of horizons between the children’s photos, what they had to say about these, and interpretive understandings I arrived at.

## Conclusion

This paper described the use of hermeneutic phenomenological approaches in my PhD research project. In this, my use of visual methodologies positioned the children’s local environment photos at the centre of a conversational dialogue, and brought a hermeneutic of “seeing” and a hermeneutic of “language” into the same interpretive frame. In concert, these visual and conversational phenomenological approaches, or pathways, enabled the children to express the significance of the local environment to their “being” and “doing” in their lifeworlds, and share these significances with others. From my standpoint, these approaches enabled me to see and understand the children’s environmental lifeworlds from open multifaceted perspectives (see Berndtsson, Claesson, Friberg, & Öhlén, 2007). In environmental education research, the potential for transformed understandings through a play between a “hermeneutic of seeing” and a “hermeneutic of language” may open up possibilities for thinking about and acting towards the environment in ways beyond the instrumental reasoning of sustainable development’s educational discourse.

## References

- Berndtsson, I., Claesson, S., Friberg, F. & Öhlén, J. (2007). Issues about thinking phenomenologically while doing phenomenology. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 38, 256-277.
- Bruno, G. (1992). *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- Carlsson, B. (2001). Depicting experiences. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 45(1), 125-143.
- Davey, N. (1999). The hermeneutics of seeing. In I. Heywood & B. Sandywell. (Eds.), *Interpreting Visual Culture* (pp.3-29). London: Routledge.
- Delancey, C. (2009). Action, the scientific worldview, and being-in-the-world. In H. L. Dreyfus & M. A. Wrathall (Eds.), *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism* (pp.356-376). West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Diekelmann, J. (2005). The retrieval of method. In P. M. Ironside. (Ed.), *Beyond Method: Philosophical Conversations in Healthcare Research and Scholarship* (pp.2-57). Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Dinkins, C. (2005). Shared Inquiry. In P. M. Ironside. (Ed.), *Beyond Method: Philosophical Conversations in Healthcare Research and Scholarship* (pp.111-147). Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Finley, S. (2008). Arts-based inquiry: Performing revolutionary pedagogy. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (pp.95-113). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gadamer, H-G. (1989). *Truth and Method* (2<sup>nd</sup> rev ed.; J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall (Eds.; Transl). New York: Continuum Press.
- Gadamer, H-G. & Dutt, C. (2001). Hermeneutics. In R. Palmer (Ed.; Transl), *Gadamer in Conversation* (pp.36-60). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Gallagher, S. (1992), *Hermeneutics in Education*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Holroyd, A. (2007). Interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology: Clarifying understanding. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 7(2), 1-12.
- Kolb, B. (2008). Involving, sharing, analysing – potential of the participatory photo interview [37 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 9(3). Available at: <http://nbn-resolving.de/nbn:de:0114-fqr0803127> Accessed 17 September 2008.
- Payne. P. (2003). Post-phenomenological enquiry and living the environmental condition. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 8, 169-190.
- Pink, S. (2007). *Doing Visual Ethnography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Risser, J. (1997). *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Roulston, K. (2010). *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Thomashow, M. (1996). *Ecological Identity: Becoming a Reflective Environmentalist*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2010). Available at: <http://www.unicef.org/crc/> Accessed 15 October 2010.
- van Manen, M. (2006). *Researching Lived Experience*. Ontario: The Althouse Press.
- Veale, A. (2005). Creative methodologies in participatory research with children. In S. Greene & D. Hogan. (Eds.), *Researching Children's Experience: Methods and Approaches* (pp.253-272). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.