



INTERPRETIVE  
**PHENOMENOLOGY**  
IN HEALTH CARE RESEARCH

GARRETT CHAN, KAREN BRYKCZYNSKI,  
RUTH MALONE, PATRICIA BENNER

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“This collection takes us far along the path to wholeness in nursing science by articulating important and meaningful stories that are often overlooked in the quest for generalization and normalization. Anyone who thinks science is alienating and disconnected from human life will appreciate the recontextualized picture this book offers. And those who think rational empiricism has the whole story will have their eyes opened to what is missing.”

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CO-EDITOR, *BIOMEDICINE EXAMINED*

# INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGY

## IN HEALTH CARE RESEARCH

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## DEDICATIONS

To Patricia Benner for her pioneering work and body of scholarship that created a new way to understand nursing and caring practices.

To all past, present, and future interpretive phenomenologists who open up possibilities by articulating lifeworlds.

And, to my partner, Russ McLaren, for being a tremendous support during my journeys.

**-GARRETT K. CHAN**

To Herbert L. Dreyfus a phenomenal teacher and philosopher par excellence.

To my teacher, Patricia Benner, whose work has inspired me and guided my research trajectory.

To my father, Casimir H. Brykczynski, whose steadfastness I have admired and tried to emulate.

To my dear mother, Emma, whose smile and consistent positive outlook have enabled me to persevere during many challenging times.

**-KAREN A. BRYKCYNSKI**

To all my teachers in nursing, beginning with my mother and including my students from whom I learn so much.

**-RUTH E. MALONE**

This book is dedicated to the outstanding doctoral and post-doctoral students with whom I have had the privilege of working over the past 30 years. You remain a source of inspiration and truly colleagues in a wonderful scholarly community!

**-PATRICIA BENNER**

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Benner is a noted nursing educator and has just completed the first national nursing education study in 30 years under the auspices of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. She is involved in a large collaborative research study with The Tri-Service Military Nursing Research, with Captain Maggie Richards, on the new knowledge developed and experiential learning in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Her work has had wide influence on nursing, both in the United States and internationally. She is a Fellow of the American Academy of Nursing, and she was elected an honorary fellow of the Royal College of Nursing. Her work has influence beyond nursing in the areas of clinical practice, clergy education, and clinical ethics. She has received two honorary doctorates. She is the author of *From Novice to Expert* and 12 other notable books. Her latest book, *Educating Nurses: A Call for Radical Transformation*, co-authored with Molly Sutphen, Victoria Leonard, and Lisa Day, was published by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning and Jossey-Bass Publishing Company.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Authors . . . . .	IV
Foreword . . . . .	XV
Introduction . . . . .	XVII
<b>Part 1 Interpretive Phenomenology: Theory and Practice</b>	<b>1</b>
1 Why Study Caring Practices? . . . . .	3
2 A Fusion of Horizons: Meaning and Understanding in Becoming a Nurse . . . . .	23
3 Distal Nursing . . . . .	41
4 Research and Ontology: Neurology and Parkinson's Disease Sufferers' Lived Experiences of Embodiment and Dwelling in Lifeworlds . . . . .	59
5 Health, Disorder, and the Psychiatric Enterprise: Reclaiming Lost Connections . . . . .	75
6 Understanding End-of-Life Caring Practices in the Emergency Department . . . . .	91
7 The Living Tradition of Interpretive Phenomenology . . . . .	113
<b>Part 2 Interpretive Phenomenological Studies</b>	<b>143</b>
8 Articulating, Preserving, and Promoting Holistic Aspects of Nurse Practitioner Practice . . . . .	145

9	Sustaining Purpose and Motivation: Weaving Caring and Self-Care Together in Nursing Practice . . . . .	169
10	Sustaining Family Life and Health Through Rituals, Routines, and Practices in Well Families with School-Age Children . . . . .	195
11	Listening with Care to Teen Mothers and Their Families . . . . .	217
12	Life-Course Considerations for Adolescents Born with Spina Bifida: Toward Authentic Care and Transparency of the Other . . . . .	243
13	Our Patients: Heretics, Believers, Agnostics, and Ecumenists. . . . .	259
14	Dwelling in the World: Realms of Meaningful Involvement in Late Life . . . . .	287
15	Patients' and Family Members' Experiences of Hospital End-of-Life Care . . . . .	313
16	End of Living: Maintaining a Lifeworld During Terminal Illness . . . . .	337
	Index . . . . .	359

## FOREWORD

Any volume with Patricia Benner as an author or editor is noteworthy. She has expanded the thinking of the nursing profession for decades, beginning with her 1984 book, *From Novice to Expert*. This book describes how nurses, because they belong to a practice profession, grow from novice to expert with experience. Before that work, the simplistic perception within and around the profession was that new graduates should be able to begin their careers fully formed. Publication of *From Novice to Expert* brought about a renewed appreciation for the complexity of becoming a nursing professional. Only by fully understanding the intricacies of career development could the profession begin to envision new ways of facilitating that advancement.

In opening nurses' minds to the generative powers of understanding those intricacies, Benner helped lead a worldwide movement that questioned decontextualization—a focus on main effects, even if the basics do not hold for every population or situation—in favor of a view that values interaction effects and looks at individuals embedded in their family, social, cultural, ethnic, and work environments. This focus on the similarities and differences that constitute the “lived experience” has led to all sorts of new insights, not the least of which is an appreciation for the complexities shaping women's health (McBride & McBride, 1981). When one gives up expecting to find only one pattern and stops trying to fit every patient into that mold, creativity is more likely to be unleashed, and the likelihood of finding an appropriate intervention is increased.

In 1994, Benner edited the first volume of readings in interpretive phenomenology, which provided an assortment of examples of how rich clinical understandings become when one takes people's lived experiences seriously. And now, thankfully, *Interpretive Phenomenology in Health Care Research* embraces the complexities of caring—balancing the tensions all nurses feel between task and relationship, between continuity and change, between efficiency and effectiveness, and between standardization and customization. Benner's work, as a whole, criticizes the commoditization of caring by reminding us to examine the meaning that patients make of their experiences for new insights into how to achieve quality care. The various narratives that constitute this volume prove the richness of this strategy and bear witness to the therapeutic value that patients and professionals alike find in that meaning.

*Interpretive Phenomenology in Health Care Research* is also important because it was first developed as a *Festschrift* to celebrate Benner's work upon her retirement from the University of California, San Francisco. In other fields, a *Festschrift* has long been the highest honor that one's students and colleagues can pay a pioneering thinker, because it is a book-length tribute

to the person's work. Typically, such a book reflects on the person's contributions, discusses work undertaken in the spirit of the contributions, extends the ideas to discuss new situations, and often includes comments by the honoree. *Festschriften* have been rare in the nursing profession. Only one comes to mind—a book published by Sigma Theta Tau International that celebrates the work of Virginia Henderson (Herman, 1998). *Interpretive Phenomenology in Health Care Research*, then, is a hopeful sign of how much progress the profession has made in recent decades to have nurses with a body of scholarship substantial enough to merit such reflection and extension.

This book comes at a good time, because the nursing world is catching up to Benner and her colleagues in appreciating the value of complexity (Lindberg, Nash, & Lindberg, 2008). There is renewed appreciation for the idea that mechanical thinking is not effective in meeting today's challenges. The world of nursing—hospitals and other clinical and community agencies, universities, and businesses—is complex, interconnected, interdependent, and diverse. Thus, the approach taken by Benner and colleagues—with its emphasis on respect, connection, sense-making, information exchange, and empowerment—is more important in the 21st century than it was when Benner began her nursing career in the 20th century.

**—ANGELA BARRON MCBRIDE, PHD, RN, FAAN  
DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR AND UNIVERSITY DEAN EMERITA  
INDIANA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF NURSING  
PAST PRESIDENT, SIGMA THETA TAU INTERNATIONAL (1987-89)**

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## INTRODUCTION

PATRICIA BENNER AND GARRETT K. CHAN

Taken collectively, this book of interpretive phenomenology (IP) studies reveals in intimate, descriptive, and interpretive accounts what it means to be human and what is common to human lives. Human beings are curious about ourselves and the world we live in. These curiosities about the phenomena that constitute and are constituted by our being in the world have led scientists to ask questions to understand our world. Scientists in the qualitative research community have developed many methodologies, or, “how do we know the world or gain knowledge of it” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19) to understand and interpret the world. The type of research questions and lines of inquiry drive qualitative research methodology. In many forms of rational-technical research, the goal is to make generalizations through decontextualizing particular events and phenomena, take a historical view of their occurrence, break them down to their most elemental or atomistic level, and then create a theoretical system to tie them back together again. This is a powerful and useful strategy, but it necessarily overlooks the person *in* the situation, the context, the intents, particular content and meanings, and relational intertwining of events and persons.

While qualitative research methodologies have roots in both the positivist and interpretive traditions (e.g., History, Dilthey, Law, and Hermeneutic studies of sacred texts), phenomenologists have turned away from an epistemological approach to personhood because of their built-in Cartesian interpretation of what it is to be a human being. Descartes believed that answering the epistemological question of how a person knew things, the ontological question of how a person was or existed, could be answered or rendered irrelevant (Benner & Wrubel, 1989). Phenomenologists have turned toward ontological questions of understanding the human embodied, lived experience and the background concerns, habits, practices, relational qualities, and skills in actual situations that make up human being and human worlds (Benner, 1994; Dreyfus, 1991; Heidegger, 1927/1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2001).

Heidegger’s (1927/1962) phenomenological view on the nature of being a person proposes that humans are self-interpreting beings. When we are born into this world, we come into a pre-existing world that has meaningful contexts and practices. Social identity and membership constitutes the person prior to any individual identity and private subjective existence. Over the course of living a life in a world with meaningful contexts and practices, humans are constituted as they come into an already formed lifeworld (i.e., culture, language, family, community, society, and so on) (Benner & Wrubel, 1989). These pervasive taken-for-granted skills, practices, and meanings go largely unnoticed by human beings because they both con-

stitute the person and make the world intelligible to persons creating possibilities and conditions for actions (Leonard, 1994). Heidegger asserts that a person has an effortless, nonreflective understanding of self in the world because the person is always situated in a meaningful context and because the person “grasp[s] meaning directly” through being born into and formed by a pre-existing world (Benner & Wrubel, 1989, p. 41). In contrast, in the goal of abstract or conceptual thinking, the person purposefully stands outside of the situation. This is an epistemological stance highly valued in Western society. Human beings, however, are always situated (in a culture, a historical time, and lodged in particular social relationships), and most of a person’s being occurs in this engaged activity. Interpretive phenomenology (IP) is interested in illuminating the kind of knowing that occurs when one is involved in a particular world and social situation rather than standing outside of it as an onlooker (Benner & Wrubel, 1989).

Traditional rationalist inquiry attempts to uncover a world that is constituted by formal abstractions with an underlying structure governed by rules, axioms, and principles to guide action in everyday life (Packer & Addison, 1989). The model of the person, both the researcher and the one being researched, is that of a disengaged knower standing over against an objective world. The researcher is detached and abstracts a theory from the phenomenon and shared understandings, practices, and meanings. The context is stripped away from the phenomenon as it is considered irrelevant and possibly obscuring the important underlying structures. This clearing of the context distorts the phenomenon (Taylor, 1985) and, in particular, denies access to praxis. “The practical activity is intrinsically linked to its context and has a complex temporal organization” (Packer & Addison, 1989, p. 19).

Classical empiricism holds that the world is constituted by independent entities that possess absolute, measurable, and context-free properties independent of human concerns and practices (Packer & Addison, 1989). Empiricist inquiry attempts to measure the entity’s properties and discover the laws that cause interaction between entities. A de-contextualized, rational, and atomistic view of the world does not allow for a full understanding of lifeworlds where humans are members and participants in a historical, cultural, and familial world and engaged in particular relationships and activities guided by meanings and concerns of the actors (Benner & Wrubel, 1989; Leonard, 1994). Rational-empirical methods remove human emotions, senses, and nuances from the research as they are deemed irrelevant and possibly over-shadowing important underlying objective structures or the outside, context-free reality (Packer & Addison, 1989).

Because of human concerns, actions, and the complexity of a human life, qualitative distinctions and the lived experience of the phenomenon cannot be fully captured or described