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**Article Title:**

**Crafting stories in hermeneutic phenomenology research: a methodological device**

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# Crafting stories in hermeneutic phenomenology research: A methodological device

## Abstract

Hermeneutic phenomenology, as a methodology, is not fixed. Inherent in its enactment are contested areas of practice such as how interview data is used and reported. Using philosophical notions drawn from hermeneutic phenomenological literature we argue that working with crafted stories is congruent with the philosophical underpinnings of this methodology. We consider how the practical ontic undertaking of story crafting from verbatim transcripts is integral with the interpretive process. We show how verbatim transcripts can be crafted into stories through examples taken from interview data. Our aim is to open dialogue with other hermeneutic phenomenological researchers and offer alternate possibilities to conventional ways of work with qualitative data. We argue that crafted stories can provide glimpses of phenomena that other forms of data analysis and presentation may leave hidden. We contend that crafted stories are an acceptable and trustworthy methodological device.

## Key words:

Interpretive methods, phenomenology, hermeneutics, stories, interview data, lived-experiences

“Once upon a time...” is a familiar way of engaging an audience. We wait for the story that will follow. What happened? To whom? How did events unfold? We are drawn into someone else’s life, an experience not our own yet one that we may somehow already know. Malala Yousafzai begins her story:

I come from a country which was created at midnight. When I almost died it was just after midday. One year ago I left my home for school and never returned. I was shot by a Taliban bullet and was flown out of Pakistan unconscious. Some people say I will never return home but I believe firmly in my heart that I will. To be torn from the country that you love is not something you wish on anyone. (Yousafzai and Lamb, 2013, p. 1)

Many of us listened to this unfolding story on TV news and watched in horror. The story evoked many emotions. Now, several years later, we recognise this story for the courage and leadership Malala has demonstrated in the global arena. Her story reveals humanity at its worst and its best. It speaks loudly and stays with us. It becomes the impetus for ongoing political action. The story is dynamic and alive with so many layers of meaning. Malala’s life is a story. So too are our own lives, and those of our research participants.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, as a methodology, provides glimpses of the meanings that reside within human experience. Malala’s story, woven in context, brings alive the phenomenon of being displaced from one’s beloved home. Her story, crafted from conversations with her co-author (Lamb), speaks to us directly. Gadamer

(1960/1975) suggests that “understanding begins when something addresses us” (p.299); Malala’s story addresses us and brings awareness to something previously unknown. Similarly, the experiences of research participants address us, and can be captured through interpreting contextualized stories (Patton, 2014). In this paper ‘crafting’ describes the process of “deriving narratives from transcripts” (Caelli, 2001, p. 276). Examples of how crafting is accomplished and how stories are used are provided as illustration.

### **Theoretical background**

The practice of hermeneutic phenomenology we are referring to is underpinned by the philosophies of Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur and Derrida. Concerned with phenomena related to being human (Dreyfus, 1991; Gadamer, 1960/1975; Heidegger, 1927/1962) hermeneutic phenomenology is an ongoing, creative, intuitive, dialectical approach that challenges pre-determined rules and research procedures thus freeing us from dichotomous ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways of doing things. Hermeneutic researchers seek to reveal aspects of phenomena that are rarely noticed, described or accounted for. The intention of hermeneutic researchers is to illuminate essential, yet often forgotten, dimensions of human experience in ways that compel attention and provoke further thinking.

Hermeneutic phenomenology grants researchers access to rich contextual data and surfaces meaning from human experiences of health care as lived-in and lived-through. It is a methodological approach not bound by structured stages of a method; it is how one attunes, questions and thinks in and through evolving methods. For this to

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3 occur hermeneutic researchers adopt an attitude or stance that ponders unfolding and  
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5 evolving questions allowing them to be surprised by how their thinking on phenomenon  
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7 transforms over time (Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 2014). Researchers using this approach  
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9 attune in a way that opens and invites them to work with data in emergent ways  
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11 (AUTHORS, 2015; Diekelmann & Diekelmann, 2009; AUTHOR, 2005; AUTHOR,  
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13 2011). A phenomenological stance thus seeks ways of working with and reporting data  
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15 that keeps an open questioning stance. In other words, attuning to a phenomenological  
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17 stance allows one to become receptive to nuances and changes in the phenomenon of  
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19 interest as these arise rather than being drawn into prescribed methods and anticipated  
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21 meanings.  
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28 There is always the tension between the practical methods of gathering and  
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30 reporting data and the ontological orientation in hermeneutic phenomenology. This  
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32 tension is seen in conflicting views on the notion of ‘story’ in relation to the analysis of  
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34 verbatim data derived from this ontological, rather than epistemological or  
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36 ethnographical orientation. This paper therefore addresses some of these tensions and  
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38 challenges the orthodoxy of the verbatim story.  
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43 **Stories in hermeneutic research**  
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47 Shared stories give testimony to past events and experiences, whether they are  
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49 told for research, teaching or entertainment. In this paper, we are referring to stories as  
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51 speech events gathered in interviews, although we acknowledge there are of other forms  
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53 of data. In hermeneutic phenomenological research, stories are commonly excerpts taken  
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55 from verbatim data provided by participants during interviews. Hermeneutic analysis  
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requires that the researcher dwells within the data, awaiting glimpses of the phenomenon. The attuned researcher apprehends more than the words in the transcriptions. He or she is able to craft rich and meaningful stories that may become allegorical exemplars, using a mantic quality of language that resonates with the reader vividly describing and revealing the nuances of contextualised experience (van Manen, 1990; 1997).

The well-crafted phenomenological story is able to reveal ways of being, thinking and acting in the world that shed light on what is known but covered over, or forgotten. Stories crafted in hermeneutic phenomenology are thus a provocative and powerful means of evoking shared pathic responses (van Manen, 2014). They can communicate the way we humans make sense of events and relationships, both with ourselves and with others. In a story we encounter ourselves in dialogue and experience ourselves in different ways. As Gadamer (1976) explains we are at once interpreting and making the story our own; understanding a story is to always and already to understand and recognise ourselves within it.

Inherent in hermeneutic phenomenology is the place of the researcher's understandings in the interpretive process. The hermeneutic project requires an intimate understanding of the participants' experiences and those of researcher so that a fusion of horizons and "bridging of personal or historical distance between minds occurs" (Gadamer, 1976, p. 95). This movement is acknowledged and made explicit in hermeneutic phenomenological accounts so that readers see how investigators' horizons of understanding are entwined in the project and how these understandings evolve

through the interpretive process. Stories thus act as a medium for researchers to invite readers into acquiring deeper insight and awareness about shared phenomena. As researchers, the way we pose questions and read/hear stories is integral to who we are as humans and how we come to understand the world in a dialectic movement.

Given the possibility of endless contextual variations how can one ever judge (and on what basis) that a story shared at a particular time and place as “true”, complete, or accurate? We ask “true for whom?” Malala’s understanding of her story will always be so much deeper and more complex than we who listen can comprehend; yet we take from it insights that matter to us. Although we commonly assume that we witness events in specific, unique and individual ways, a story always brings a sense of multi-perspectival wholeness and possibility that exceeds, yet includes, individualized or specific details. In other words, ‘a story’ is always a paradoxical play of the many and the individual (Nancy, 1996/2000). Those who came with the guns to shoot Malala would have a different story.

Derrida (2004/1972) uses the term ‘dissemination’ to describe how a story is always larger than the sum of its differing vantage points. A story is living and changing with an abundance of interpretation that requires openness to possibility. The story has interchangeable meanings that speak (and remain silent), that ebb and flow over time, and in different contexts with different listeners. A shared story, like Malala’s, is neither the teller’s, nor is it the reader’s; the story is communal and shared through and through. Malala’s story in a sense “does its work” not merely in the telling but how in the sharing, be it reading or listening, reveals more of our shared understanding of being human.

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3 Stories in hermeneutic inquiry acknowledge that human beings are always in  
4 relationship to others, that every story involves two or more others (Ricouer, 1984, 2005;  
5 Gadamer, 1960/1975). Stories not only involve others, but also places and times  
6 providing a sense of continuity and unity in shared human experience (Eberhardt, 1996).  
7 We thus become enmeshed within the plot of a story in our listening and reading. No one  
8 telling or listening of a story by any one person will ever reveal all there is to know  
9 about a phenomenon and claim to provide the whole 'Truth'.  
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## 20 Truth and stories

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22 Drawing on the Greek word *alétheia* (ἀλήθεια), Heidegger describes truth as un-  
23 concealment. Truth is not concerned with agreement, correspondence or/and correctness  
24 but an unconcealment of that which is hidden and covered up (Heidegger, 1927).  
25 According to Taylor (1989) how we live our lives unfolds in moral space. In a certain  
26 sense there is an ethical responsibility to both participants' telling their story and to the  
27 researcher (and others) who listens. Story tellers anticipate that their story is valued, and  
28 in sharing their story (in a way that makes sense to them) give it to the researcher to shed  
29 light on their experience and reveal the phenomenon of interest.  
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45 Derrida (2005) argues that to give an account or to share a story is to testify and  
46 testimony is predicated on the telling of truth - or in the phenomenological sense a  
47 degree of unconcealment. Thus testimony can never be neutral, correct or complete.  
48 What is unconcealed by the teller today, may not be important for the teller to unconceal  
49 tomorrow. What the teller speaks of today may be told in quite a different manner  
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tomorrow. Mood, context and how we are listened to all influence the ‘how’ and ‘what’ of telling (Fiumara, 1990).

As hermeneutic researchers we enter the interview space assuming that the story shared by a participant is an account of their understanding of their experience yet acknowledging that the whole story will never be told or heard; truth is never fully revealed. Cases of exaggerating or minimising therefore speak to what is felt as important and understood by the teller to emphasise in any given moment; how they choose to ‘appear’ is integral to the story. The researcher can thus never know the thinking of the participant and capture the past exactly as it happened (Koch, 1998). Nor, for that matter, can the person themselves.

Hermeneutic phenomenology accepts that phenomena are never fully concealed or unconcealed, to anyone. The orientation in hermeneutics is not on determining a hierarchy of truths; one version of the truth is not understood as more significant than another. Gadamer (1997) speaks of a thematic plurivocity/polygema or multiplicity of meanings in a story, text and poem. Each story is thus understood as holding multiple meanings and further uncovering of phenomena.

So, does this undermine the credibility of data in hermeneutic phenomenology? A story’s truthfulness (or unconcealedness) becomes known to us by how it resonates in felt, shared plausible meaning and this resonance cannot be reified into proof. When one bears witness to an experience of joy, for example, one can connect with the shared

human experience of joyfulness but never measure the joy, categorise its nature, or bring any other sense of 'reliable' transfer of facts.

We contend that the use of crafted stories is supported by the philosophical underpinnings of this methodology and its purpose. We have found that crafting stories is comprised of two overlapping yet distinct undertakings. First is the method or "how to" craft in the practical or ontical sense and the second is the ontological sense of "attunement to" the crafting. Crafting stories from verbatim data is part of the interpretive analysis (Zambas, 2016); they are not separate undertakings.

### **Different ways of using data**

Different research paradigms bring different assumptions and traditions regarding the use of data. Debating what constitutes "good or bad" data worthy of analysis is challenging due to these myriad presuppositions. For instance many qualitative research methods are synonymous with coding verbatim data. The protagonists of coding would be critical of crafted stories. They would see this 'crafting' as 'altering' verbatim transcripts and be unacceptable. For instance, in grounded theory a verbatim transcript is required for the coding of particular processes used by participants (Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Walker & Myrick, 2006). Grounded theory's objective is to show ways of behaviour and speech in the construction of social processes. It seeks to reduce and organise, label and categorise the verbatim data, highlight similarities and differences and develop themes leading to models and substantive theories. In contrast hermeneutic phenomenology uses data to draw attention to the multiple meanings within phenomena and draw the reader/listener into new understandings.

Importantly, researchers using hermeneutic phenomenology do not claim that there is only one way of working with data or one possible (or best) meaning of the data. They would claim that there is this way *and* this way; that there is always more meaning to be surfaced. Gadamer (1960/1975) warns that from a hermeneutical perspective, over reliance on method leaves what is meaningful hidden and is antithetical to the pursuit of truth (as unconcealedness) (Gadamer, 1960/1975, 1976). We concur with Sandelowski (2011) that over adherence and excessive focus on method alone can be unhelpful. Indeed, drawing lines between methodological approaches is often unhelpful because they may be more yielding than believed. As Sandelowski (2011) warns “... forgetting lines are permeable risks reifying them” (p.349). Hermeneutic phenomenology recognises that there are myriad ways of working with data. It calls for openness to flexible methods and the possibilities of how meaning and understanding evolves as stories are heard, read and re-read, shared and explored.

The issue of authority and power in research is a concern to many scholars. For example, some scholars would argue that all researchers exert power over participants’ data regardless of methodology. Thought in this way, the act of crafting stories from verbatim transcripts for our projects reinforces our authority over participants’ words. Crafting stories and subsequent interpretations could be construed as an abuse of that power because researchers’ perspectives are privileged. We acknowledge these concerns. Yet no one escapes the effects of power. According to Foucault (1982) power is a phenomenon that is everywhere embedded in our everyday activities. Consequently all qualitative researchers examine data from their understandings of methodology and method and are in a position of authority over the analysis (Morse, 2015). The

hermeneutic researcher is charged with articulating the pre-understandings and power relations they bring to the listening and interpretation of stories, always being open to the impact of their already-there prejudices (Gadamer 1960/1975).

Transparency about the researcher's pre-understandings is essential; we always already bring our backgrounds with us into all our activities. Our backgrounds help inform how the project unfolds (Gadamer, 1960/1975). Indeed, it is these pre-understandings that underpin and initiate our inquiry. One doesn't have a method and go in search of a question, but rather we have questions and we use a methodology that helps us investigate that question.

The epistemologies and viewpoints of many qualitative methods demand that the verbatim data/text be employed for analysis with minimal alteration. These concerns should continue to be discussed in the methodological literature. Yet, such concerns assume that the words the participant shares encompass their experience, that their experience is fully revealed in the telling such that the transcribed account (story) is a complete and comprehensive representation of their experience. This position is incongruent with the philosophical underpinnings of hermeneutic phenomenology (Gadamer, 1960/1975, 1976) wherein ontological issues, such as temporality, come to the fore. A presupposition of this approach is that there is always already an excess of meaning, more than can ever be captured in a single account (Diekelmann & Diekelmann, 2009). Experiences narrated through stories are not the phenomenon.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, data use is concerned with surfacing meaning and sharing human experiences in ways that resonate with listeners/readers. The purpose is to reveal that which lies in, between and beyond the words whilst staying close to the phenomenon of interest. As researchers, attuning our thinking to this purpose is essential as we begin our interpretive work with verbatim data.

**Collecting and crafting stories**

In this section of the paper we examine, with the use of examples, the collecting of data and how and why verbatim data is crafted into stories. This shows the reader the dialectic movement of method and methodology. It reveals how the ontological and ontic nature of data analysis, including the crafting of stories, unfolds within the project. The analysis is not working *on* the data but working *with* data. To begin, the data needs to be gathered from participants. Let us show you an example. Figure one is a portion of a transcript. Figure two is the crafted story that emerged from this transcript. (For the purpose of this paper we have focused on our own experience of learning to craft stories). The process of moving from transcript to story is as follows:

- Remove extraneous detail that does not add to the story, for example where the conference was, that the weather was cold, the comments about the conference as a whole,
- keep the data as ‘story’ – this is what happened, this was the experience and
- keep the sentences that seem to hold the meaning; remove the sentences that repeat or expand in a manner that is not needed.

Ensure the story flows. This may mean:

- Adding words in where there sentences have been removed to make the link from one section to the next,
- given details of context,
- polishing grammar,
- reordering sentences to keep the flow,
- going back to the original transcript to add in bits that now seem to matter as the polished story comes to life and
- reading it aloud to 'hear' how it sounds.

This interpretive process involves asking questions:

- Does this story 'show' the experience?
- Does it engage?
- Are we still holding the meaning as gifted by the participant?
- Have we seen 'more' in the process of crafting up this story?
- Does it work?
- Does it still need more pruning?

This may require returning to the story some days later to polish/prune some more and looking for what was left behind; there may be another story that needs to be crafted.

Here is another example of verbatim transcript from AUTHOR’s study on the experience and meaning of joy at birth:

AUTHOR: Tell me what was it was like when your grandchild was born?

Tui: It was the most incredible experience, cos I caught her - the midwife said to me you know you can catch baby as she comes out. So I caught Mary and I had this face in front of me that wasn’t a face, that just kind of morphed through some faces that I recognize so rapidly that it was this kind of, like a jelly almost forming into face that I knew – of my grandparents and my father and heaps of faces that I didn’t know until it came to her face. And it eventually settled with her face.

But I was sitting there watching, thinking, Oh! What is this? What’s going on? It’s never ever happened to me again to that extent, but it was the most....

AUTHOR: What, that was immediately after?

Tui: Amazing. Yeah, it was at the moment that I looked at her, that started happening. I’ve got no idea how long it took before she settled into who she is, but the faces of all the, all her ancestors on both sides were there. And just for fractions of a second, it was, it was an amazing experience until it settled into her face.

As previously stated, stories may be crafted from different parts of the verbatim transcribed interviews. In this instance the remaining part of the story emerged several pages later in the transcript:

AUTHOR: How long did the amazing feeling last?

Tui: I was high for maybe a week after that. You know, I was just kind of walking around in a cloud, smiling to everyone!

AUTHOR: Tell me about what lasts?

Tui: Loving the world, just, and I think with all the births I've been at it is like that. That there's..., you know, it lasts for a long time afterwards. That joy, and that feeling of love.

Within the verbatim transcripts, hints call from the data that evolve into crafted stories used for interpretive analysis. Koch (1998) reminds us hermeneutic phenomenology is not about "what to do" in the research process but about asking constantly "what is going on" in the account that we want to capture in the research process. AUTHOR continually asked questions of the data, taking care to remain close to the phenomenon that was being explored. For example, "how else is joy revealed (or not) in Tui's transcript?" Through a process of reading, thinking, writing, re-reading re-thinking and re-writing Tui's stories revealed qualities of joy at birth. Copious notes, mind maps, reconsidering the highlighting of sections in the transcript were used in a seemingly 'messy' process until the felt meaning of story was crystallised.



Developing crafted stories from transcripts is an art that takes practice and can be challenging for the nascent phenomenological researcher. The crafting process takes time and openness. It is a way of being in relation to data that honours participant’s experiences, is congruent with philosophical underpinnings and acknowledges the researcher’s pre-understandings. In this way the ontological understandings as well as the ontic practical aspects work together.

In AUTHOR’s research, the actual words of participants were used but the grammar and syntax were corrected, ‘ahs’ and ‘ums’ etc. were removed. As a participant’s story becomes polished from the verbatim transcripts, a clearer and more focused story emerges that is able to illuminate for readers or hearers the shared phenomenon being investigated.

**Questioning member checking**

In AUTHOR’s research crafted stories were returned to participants, although this is not essential. Member checking, which is often used in other research approaches, is questionable in hermeneutic phenomenology because human understanding is understood as evolving and thus open to ongoing revision and interpretation. Sandelowski (1993) challenged the notion of member checking as a method to ensure rigor. She argued that stories are temporal in nature and are constantly changing from initial telling due to the ongoing flux of personal and social agendas. This position was further reiterated by Morse (2015) in relation to qualitative data overall “It is not clear why one should provide the participant with such an opportunity to change his or her mind; it is not required in other types of research” (p.1216). A story once spoken is open

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3 to multiple interpretations as in Derrida's notion of dissemination discussed previously.  
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5 Stories, phrases, words, manners of speech and meanings are not static they all continue  
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7 on their own trajectory. What is shared in a conversational interview style may be  
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9 forgotten or reinterpreted when read later in typed transcripts. Thus member checking to  
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11 ensure rigour is not congruent with hermeneutic phenomenology.  
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16 Yet, this is not to say that returning crafted stories to participants is without  
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18 benefit. Support for the finally crafted stories is helpful when there is agreement about  
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20 felt meanings that disclose the phenomenon being studied (Zambas, 2016). Several of  
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22 the participants in AUTHOR's study responded appreciatively to the way the crafting  
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24 process had crystallised their meanings. Tui responded to the following crafted story  
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26 saying: "Yes that is it! – that is the special and lovely feeling I get at birth".  
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32 Here is the crafted story from Tui's verbatim transcript:  
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36 It was the most incredible experience. The midwife said I could catch my  
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38 grandchild as she came out. So I caught her and I had this face in front of  
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40 me that wasn't a face, that morphed through some faces that I recognize so  
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42 rapidly that it was like jelly almost forming into a face that I knew. The  
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44 faces of all her ancestors on both sides were there, known and unknown to  
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46 me. It was just for fractions of a second that it started happening. I've no  
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48 idea how long it took before she settled into her own face. I was sitting  
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50 there watching, thinking, 'What is this? What's going on?' It was the most  
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52 amazing experience leaving me high walking on a cloud. The feeling of  
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joy, loving the world and wanting to smile at everyone went on for a long time afterwards.

Tui’s story now becomes a compelling vivid paradigmatic story that in many ways “says it all”. Care is required not to turn the story into an allegorical or symbolic exemplar because this would cover up the revelatory and mantic nature of Tui’s story that attunes to our (human) shared knowing of birth as joyous. Many qualities of joy at birth are woven succinctly in Tui’s story intensifying and invoking an intuitive grasping of the phenomenon while remaining close to the nuanced detail that brings the story alive. The tension of phenomenological writing is to keep projects really close to lived-experience while working with data in a way that vividly brings forth or provides glimpses into the qualities of the phenomenon.

The crafting process brings the phenomenon into sharper relief in a more concise and readable format reducing the need for lengthy verbatim data. The art of crafting is not concerned with summarising and cleaning up verbatim transcripts to emphasise a point important to the researcher. Crafting stories from transcript data is about bringing the story together in a way that ‘shows’ what the researcher is noticing and interpreting whilst working with the data. Crafting, as it progresses, is thus not focussed on the story but on compelling and salient qualities that illuminate the phenomenon. In Tui’s story it is about how Tui understands her experience and how her story helped AUTHOR to illuminate anew the phenomenon of ‘Joy at birth’.

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3 Stories may be re-crafted, re-edited in the writing and re-writing processes as  
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5 analysis deepens. Hermeneutic analysis requires reflexive movement between parts and  
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7 the whole (Gadamer, 1960/1975). Tui retold the same stories in different ways as the  
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9 interview progressed revealing more about the phenomenon of joy at birth. Here Tui re-  
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11 tells the story of being at the birth of her grandchild.  
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16 There's this whole kind of feeling of love in the room, where everybody  
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18 has that joy. Everybody has that excitement. I already love the baby before  
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20 it's born. It's almost like this joy is there to support the mother, but at the  
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22 same time it's not about the other.  
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25 In this rendition she speaks about the temporo-spatial feeling of love permeating  
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27 the room. Her story exemplifies Gadamer's, Derrida's and Nancy's philosophical  
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29 notions discussed earlier.  
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### 32 33 34 **Revealing the sense of phenomena** 35 36

37 A story calls for us to consider and ponder what the experience of the  
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39 phenomenon "is". Each participant in AUTHOR's study had their own vantage point:  
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41 midwife, mother, obstetrician, and father, yet each gestured beyond these differing  
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43 points of view. The variety of perspectives and experiences of childbirth lead to the  
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45 phenomenon becoming progressively more visible as a richness of previously concealed  
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47 meaning surfaced. Each crafted story provided glimpses of what is unconcealed beyond  
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49 the semantic assemblage of words, enabling insights into the sense of phenomena to  
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51 emerge. van Manen (2014) refers to this as, "inspiring our understanding" (p. 282).  
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55 Tui's stories reveal how joy at birth is deeply relational with seen and unseen others. As  
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understanding deepened so did the realisation that joy is a phenomenon that is shared at birth. Like poetry, the crafting brought forth ‘felt’ meanings as each story contributed to revelation of the phenomenon.

Crafted stories do not pretend to provide empirical, factually accurate accounts. They gift a powerful ‘felt’ knowing that is difficult to encapsulate. van Manen (2014) claims that “well-written and well-edited anecdotes may create for the writer and reader the experience of presence, closeness, propinquity, or proximity in place or time” (p. 242). The crafted story is a device that can be taken “in a fictional or real sense” (p.250). An equally legitimate story can be crafted from the multitude of experiences that comprise life. The following story derives from the AUTHOR’s years of experience in midwifery practice:

As I entered the birthing room the mother was already pushing, it was tense in the room. I just knew the baby was about to be born. Then all of a sudden the waters popped and within what seemed seconds I could see the head; no time to get my gloves I knelt down and caught the baby as the mother attempted to climb back onto the bed. It was all so sudden, baby was out! As the hair stood up on my neck I found I couldn’t stop smiling. Then I noticed everyone else in the room beaming smiles, such a sacred moment.

We argue that this story, crafted from several lived experiences, reveals the experience of birth as equally significant and joyous as in Tui’s story. This story

challenges us to think more broadly about what is a story. In this example “elements from different narrators [or in this case AUTHORS experiences] create a blended [crafted] story” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1377) providing further shared sense of the phenomenon. It also highlights AUTHOR’s pre-understandings bringing more transparency to the project. There are many ways of working with stories and it is not the intention of this paper to provide a formulaic process to be followed dogmatically, but rather to provoke thinking about how data can be used to illuminate phenomenon. In Diekelmann and Deikelman’s (2009) work, for example, crafted conversations taken from 15 years of data brought together multiple perspectives/stories that revealed the assumptions, oversights, understandings and insights through converging conversations.

Morse (2015) states that data may come from researchers’ own experiences because all data (personal and otherwise) always exceeds what can be known. This is certainly congruent with hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenologists thus find themselves amidst the murky middle of existential experience where the best they can do is faithfully use data in a way that shows readers/listeners what has caught their attention and provoked further thinking. The intention in hermeneutic phenomenology is not to provide the definitive description of experience or the final interpretation of being at birth, or being challenged about an approach to research, or being taken from one’s home. It points to the meaningful possibilities that surface from stories of those experiences.

The purpose of this methodology is thus not to ‘hammer home’ a point or create overly sentimental accounts based on biased perspectives; it is to let texts speak,

revealing meanings beyond those which are taken-for-granted. What beckons us in this research approach is an attuned space of wonder and a phenomenological stance. Whether or not a story is verbatim or crafted, or whether a story from a participant is “what they meant to say or how they meant to say it” the story’s role is to gift insights into human experience from which we can all learn. Malala concludes her book by reminding us of the way a story becomes something more than (but includes) one’s own personal experience:

A ‘talib’ fires three shots at point-blank range at three girls in a van and doesn’t kill any of them. That seems an unlikely story, and people say I have made a miraculous recovery...I know God stopped me going to the grave. It feels like this life is a second life. People prayed to God to spare me, and I was spared for a reason – to use my life for helping people. When people talk about the way I was shot and what happened I think it’s the story of Malala, ‘a girl shot by the Taliban’: I don’t feel it’s a story about me at all (pp.254-5)

**Conclusion**

There is no doubt that focusing on transcribed verbatim interview data is a common and accepted tradition in qualitative research. In this paper we urge further thinking about achieving rigor in this contested area of research practice. Solely focusing on transcribed verbatim data can leave hermeneutic phenomenologists lost in semantic meanings that impoverish the sense of the phenomenon they are seeking to illuminate. Yes, there are tensions inherent in hermeneutic phenomenological analysis. Yes, there is a need for sustained and rigorous adherence to the philosophical underpinnings of the research. But

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3 stories and their meanings must be recognisable as being within a web of interlocution  
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5 that brings forth a sense that speaks the experiences of being human.  
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10 Although crafted stories may initially seem to threaten the authenticity of an  
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12 individual's experiences, such stories can provide purchase even when not universally  
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14 experienced. The stories do not belong to an individual; once spoken they are shared.  
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16 Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the shared common understandings of  
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18 experiences that are illuminated through crafted stories that resonate with us all. The  
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20 interplay between parts and whole is as eternal as phenomena. Hermeneutic  
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22 phenomenology gathers glimpses through the use of stories that coalesce into revealing  
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24 new possibilities and provoking further thinking and action.  
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29 The notion that hermeneutic phenomenology must be rigorous (valid and  
30  
31 reliable) in the conventional sense is neither possible nor desirable from a philosophical  
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33 perspective. Learning the practical skills of crafting stories, whilst essential, needs to  
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35 remain integral with an ontological orientation. Focusing solely on the veracity and  
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37 accuracy of words and phrases can miss the phenomenon being sought. The contribution  
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39 of hermeneutic phenomenology lies in creating study reports that compel thinking and  
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41 invite reinterpretations of life experiences. Let us not constrain the creativity and  
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43 openness that hermeneutic phenomenology solicits. This approach emphasises  
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45 attunement, listening, feeling and pondering deeply the commonalities of our human  
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47 experiences.  
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For Peer Review

Figure One: Example of a transcript

AUTHOR 1: So how did you learn about crafting stories?

AUTHOR 2: Well AUTHOR 3 and I were at a workshop in Melbourne, led by Max Van Manen – our hero! We were spellbound most of the time. It was the first time we have been exposed to such teaching. He would read stories, poetry, bring in philosophy, just make it all come alive. We loved it! Except it was much colder there than we imagined. I had to lend AUTHOR 3 extra clothes from my suitcase. It has become a bit of a standing joke with us; she never takes enough ‘warmth’ and I always take ‘layer upon layer’. Anyway, this one day Max was talking about crafting stories. We had never heard of such a thing before; it almost felt scandalous! How could you fiddle with the data! I even felt naughty taking the mmm’s out.

AUTHOR 1: Yes, I know what you mean. You re-listen to the tape over and over to try to get the transcript ‘perfect’.

AUTHOR 2: We had been asked to take a transcript along with us. I had taken my latest one which had been a disaster. The sound quality was hopeless. There were big gaps in sentences where you simply could not hear what she had said. I was thinking I would need to either re-interview her, or just use that parts that were intact. Max sent us back to our rooms to work with our transcript and craft a story. I remember AUTHOR 3 and I grumbling as we set off to do that task. It just didn’t feel ‘right’. Our prejudices were well established!

AUTHOR 1: So how did it go?

AUTHOR 2: I had an amazing experience. As I lay on my bed turning the pages, reading what I could, a beautiful story emerged. The woman had been talking about taking her new-born baby home. On one page she talked about trying to get him dressed, how fiddly all the buttons and ribbons were. Somewhere else was the challenge of getting him into the car seat. And then on another page was the account of arriving home, of walking in the door. She burst into tears, suddenly overwhelmed by the enormity of the responsibility of mothering this new baby. I remember the anguish in her voice as she said “*what have we done, what on earth have we done and how on earth are we going to be able to do this*”.

I suddenly saw the story as it unfolded over about three pages. There was a gradual build-up of tension, of taking on the responsibility of mothering. The missing sentences were no longer of great importance. The guts of the story was shouting at me. I would have missed that altogether if I had tried to stay with the data in its discreet paragraphs. I needed to stand back and see the bigger picture, and then zoom in to pluck out the bits that revealed the unfolding of this experience.

AUTHOR 1: What was it like when you pulled those bits into a story?

AUTHOR 2: It was such a ‘wow’ moment. I felt like I had glimpsed the vulnerability of becoming a mother in a whole new way. Later, when I read that story to others I could see its impact; that was the story of so many women, yet few had ever told it with such succinctness. I could so easily have missed seeing what was there; I was so distracted by the ‘missing’ words that I wasn’t attuned to the story that was already there.

AUTHOR 1: What happened after that?

AUTHOR 2: AUTHOR 3 and I were hooked. We rushed back home and started crafting all our transcripts into stories. It brought new life to our work. The stories revealed in such an evocative manner. There was nothing to distract, to confuse, to plod through. It was as though with each story we were gifting our readers with an up close view of ‘experience’ in a manner that spoke to their emotions as much as their minds. I am of the opinion that phenomenology is soul food, stories speak to the soul. When you polish a story to reveal its inner glow it is received and absorbed in sacred silence. I really good test of a story is to read it out loud, listening for the flow, the mood, the rhythm. I often tell students to do that. But how we hate pruning! You need courage to push the delete button. It is only when you see how much more powerful the shorter version is that you realise what this is all about.

AUTHOR 1: What about your participants, what did they think of you fiddling with the data?

AUTHOR 2: We discovered they loved being gifted with a beautifully worded account of their experience. It was like packaging their treasured memories in a way that they can keep them safe forever. In contrast, when you send back a transcript, so often they get embarrassed about how messy it all looks. I suspect they throw those away!

AUTHOR 1: So how did your fellow researchers respond?

AUTHOR 2: We were very fortunate that someone else who had been at the same workshop, Kate Caelli, published an article that talked about crafting data so we had someone to reference. When we joined our American colleagues at the Hermeneutic Institute they were a bit bemused. You yourself had that experience of AUTHOR 4 suggesting the need for this paper, to help others understand what we are doing, and how we are doing it.

AUTHOR 1: Yes, I got quite a bit of flak at the Institute about crafting data. Some people were horrified. AUTHOR 4 was great; she helped open a very useful conversation.

**Figure two: Crafted story**

We are at a conference where Max van Manen was talking about crafting stories. We had never heard of such a thing before; it almost felt scandalous! As requested, I had taken my latest transcript with me which had been a disaster. There were big gaps in sentences where you simply could not hear what she had said. Max had sent us away to craft a story; AUTHOR 3 and I grumbled as we set off to do that task. It just didn't feel 'right'. Our prejudices were well established! Yet, as I turned the pages, reading over the gaps, a beautiful story emerged. The woman had been talking about taking her new-born baby home. On one page she talked about trying to get him dressed, how fiddly all the buttons and ribbons were. Somewhere else was the challenge of getting him into the car seat. And then on another page was the account of arriving home, of walking in the door. She burst into tears, suddenly overwhelmed by the enormity of the responsibility of mothering this new baby. I remember the anguish in her voice as she said *"what have we done, what on earth have we done and how on earth are we going to be able to do this"*.

I suddenly saw the story as it unfolded over about three pages. There was a gradual build-up of tension, of taking on the responsibility of mothering. The missing sentences were no longer of great importance. The guts of the story was shouting at me. I would have missed the story altogether if I had tried to stay with the data in its discreet paragraphs. I needed to stand back and see the bigger picture, and then zoom in to pluck out the bits that revealed the unfolding of this woman's experience. Later, when I read that story to others I could see its impact; this was the story of so many women, yet few had ever told it with such succinctness.

We rushed back home and started crafting all our transcripts into stories. It brought new life to our work. The stories revealed in such an evocative manner. There was nothing to distract, to confuse, to plod through. It was as though with each story we were gifting our readers with an up-close view of 'experience' in a manner that spoke to their emotions as much as their minds. We discovered participants loved being gifted with a beautifully worded account of their experience. It was like packaging their treasured memories in a way that they could keep them safe forever. Our experience is when you polish a story to reveal its inner glow it is received and absorbed in sacred silence. It speaks to the soul.