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Article

Hermeneutics of Self as a Research Approach

Kenneth Fleck, MPhil(Hons), PGDip Theol, BHSc (Nurs)
Regiobal HIV and AIDS progam manager, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Elizabeth Ann Smythe, PhD, RM, RGON
Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

John M. Hitchen, PhD, BD (Hons), BA
Laidlaw College, New Zealand

Abstract
Circumstances shaped the decision to engage in a hermeneutics of self. In contrast to a common research approach, the researcher became the participant. The purpose of the research was to reveal interpretive meaning of that experience toward the view of becoming a global coworker. Philosophical insights informing the methodological approach and the analysis were drawn from Heidegger, Gadamer, and theological authors. Twelve people drawn from a variety of backgrounds were invited to interview the researcher following a 3-week field visit to explore HIV/AIDs in Malawi. Interviews were transcribed and analysis achieved through THREADs: Thinking Hermeneutically and Reflecting through the Experience, Asking questions while Dwelling in the everyday. For the researcher the experience was at times painful but deeply rewarding. The insights that emerged provide a mirror through which intending global coworkers can consider their own assumptions, values, and motivations. Such an approach is worthy of adding to the research repertoire.

Keywords: HIV and AIDS, hermeneutics, self-reflection, autoethnography

Authors' note: Since submitting doing this research I (Kenneth) have been using the knowledge, experience and findings in many aspects of life from building relationships in a new country (Thailand) to the practical setting up of HIV project. This methodology continues to impact my daily life and therefore remains more that an academic exercise, but rather education for life.

Introduction

Kenneth came with a passion. He had a calling on his life to work in a community with a high prevalence of HIV and AIDS. There were two things he wanted to achieve in the year ahead. One was to make an exploratory visit to Malawi to consider the implications of taking his wife and two young daughters to work there, and the second was to write a master's thesis. Elizabeth, his supervisor and an experienced hermeneutic researcher, considered the tensions and possibilities. To interview people in Malawi would require complex ethical approvals, and time was running short. We faced the challenge of a small group of expatriate mission staff who would be readily identifiable. Interviewing Malawians would present the interpretive barriers of language and cross-cultural understanding. It was important that the research design uphold ethical integrity.

Thus Elizabeth suggested a project involving the hermeneutic of self. The data would be Kenneth's own story. The hermeneutic analysis would be an interpretation of his thoughts, questions, emotions, and initial insights. Layer by layer understanding would be deepened and sharpened. To ensure a rich pool of data, we made the decision that the data would be attained by interviews, except there would be one participant (Kenneth) and multiple interviewers. Ethics permission was gained to ensure the interviewers understood the process and were not put at risk in any way.

This paper begins with a philosophical explication of a hermeneutic approach, particularly in a study so self-focused; that is, a hermeneutic of self. Method is then discussed, with insights into the joy and vulnerability of embarking on such intensive self analysis. The aim of this paper is to show how a hermeneutics of self approach can be achieved. We note that others, such as Drew (1989) and Smith (1999), agree that it is appropriate to use the interviewers' own experience as data in phenomenological research, suggesting the use of a diary. There is an autoethnographic approach that reflects on personal experience (Walford, 2004). This paper, however, stays situated in the hermeneutic paradigm and has the unusual dimension of having others interview the researcher. It thus turns the normal research process upside down. Through the use of examples from Kenneth's research (written in first person language) we show how this type of approach can benefit others, both as a research method and through the research product itself. The background context of this paper is the experience of becoming a global coworker with specific reference to HIV and AIDS (Fleck, 2008).

The philosophy of hermeneutics

The quest

The quest under investigation was to gain insights from my (Kenneth's) experience of undertaking an exploratory 3-week field visit to HIV programs in Malawi. Hermeneutic philosophy, drawing particularly on Heidegger (1962/1995) and Gadamer (1982), was used as a guide to thinking. Understanding comes from the experience of being-there, which is then gathered together as events, feelings, and memories, into language. Making a visit to a different culture, going specifically to try to understand the impact of HIV on the lives of the poor, and considering the benefits and dangers of bringing my young children to live in Malawi meant I took with me a particular interpretive lens. I saw things through my New Zealand eyes of being a sheep-shearing nurse, husband, and father who by the grace of God wants to help the world to be better place. Yet as well as bringing who I already was, I was projecting ahead to who I might become, imagining how it would be for me and my family to immerse ourselves in this culture. On any one day I had a huge range of experiences. I saw things, had many conversations,

experienced a wide range of emotions, felt the impact of the environment on my body, and watched my wife having her own experience. I was open to some things and barely noticed others. I was shocked, grieved, delighted, and inspired. It was an overwhelming experience, too full to unpack in response to the question one gets on return: "How was it?" Such inquirers only wanted a 5-minute answer.

In a hermeneutic approach the researcher recognizes that truth lies hidden, revealing itself as appearances, or things that announce insights. Further, our interpretation of what seems to be might not be how it is at all (Heidegger, 1962/1995). The gaze is directed "towards the regions where meaning originates, wells up, percolates through the porous membranes of past sedimentations –and then infused us, permeates us, infects us, touches us, stirs us, exercises a formative effect" (van Manen, 2007, p. 11). There is no one "saying" that can capture all that is understood. Words themselves limit and distort complex meaning (Gadamer, 1982). The way to understanding is through a kind of thinking Heidegger describes as "meditative":

> Meditative thinking does not happen by itself any more than calculative thinking [a more logical, rational kind of thinking that computes]. At times it requires a greater effort. It demands more practice. It is in need of even more delicate care than any other genuine craft. But it must also be able to bide its time, to await as does the farmer, whether the seed will come up and ripen. (Heidegger, 1966, pp. 46–47)

The seeds that underpin this study were planted with my first thoughts of wanting to work in Malawi. The coming up and ripening emerged through the ongoing experience of going there and thinking about how that was. Questions were central to my thinking. Heidegger (1987) talks of questioning, which draws us into the open and casts "a new space over everything and into everything" (p. 30). Further, "questions do not just occur like stones and water. Questions are not found ready-made like shoes and clothes and books" (p. 19). I eagerly took on Elizabeth's suggestion that I bring the questions of others to provoke ongoing thinking of my experience in Malawi. I also wanted my questioners not to come with a list of readymade questions but, rather, join me in a conversation. Gadamer (1982) described how we "fall" into conversation and how each takes "its own turning" (p. 345) and reaches its own conclusion. The conversation itself lead the way, beyond any prethinking or expectations of either party. The idea that people from a variety of backgrounds would come and join with me in conversation, bringing both informed questions from their areas of expertise, and naïve questions from knowing little about certain aspects of my visit seemed to us to be a way to provoke meditative thinking.

More than self

Although a hermeneutic of self takes self as the giver of data, such a study will always also be about other. Thielicke (1982) brings the understanding that we find identity from the interactions of those around us. It is only when one interacts with difference and diversity (the "other") that one finds one's true self. This challenges any individualistic model of life. During the course of study I was constantly wrestling with the question of: "Is it all about me?" The study itself was an unfolding event, the more it was about me the more it was about others. For that is how relationship is held together. Ackermann (1998) illustrates the fluidity connecting the self and the other as follows:

> The practice of mutual relationship comes when I turn my gaze from myself and "look" into the face of the other. It is you and I, they and we, seeing and being seen. In the face of the other I see a true and authentic human being. We both reflect something of the image of God. The practice of relationship means that I

> acknowledge that I am not complete unto my self. I see myself in the face of the other. I am not fully my self until I can see "me" in your face. You are the mirror of myself. I am the mirror of yourself. Only when we can see ourselves and each other are we fully human (p. 24).

Here Ackermann is challenging a human's completeness without being in relationship with others, yet in the relationship-mirror both parties need to be seen equally. A hermeneutic of self provides a platform of critical discovery through the deep reflections drawn from looking out of oneself into this mirror. The view contains both a transparent view of self and the impact of being in relationship with others.

The question is: How can one be both the researcher and that which is being researched? Koch (1999) highlights that although we at times seek an objective position at other times we are called to a phenomenological approach where "both researcher and participant become subjectively aware of the essence . . . We are the same coin" (p. 24).

Authenticity

My challenge was how to be authentic to myself in the process of being a visitor in another culture, being self among others. Reflecting on Heidegger's work related to authenticity Crowe (2006) writes:

> For Heidegger . . . There are two possibilities: "inauthenticity" and "authenticity." One is characterized by complacency, distraction, and self-concealment, while the other is marked by commitment, struggle, and sober responsibility for oneself. One kind of life is, ultimately, a failure to "own-up" to oneself, while the other is a life of profound honesty. (p. 70)

I discovered a hermeneutics of self takes on the challenge of owning up to oneself with profound honesty. Van Manen (2007) reminds us such an approach is likely to make life more difficult rather than offer any easy answers. Placing oneself as the person on whom the transcripts of the research focus, analyzing "self" with one's own questions and thinking and then presenting this for public critique, is to expose one's behaviors, ideas, values, and moods that in the normal everyday would remain mainly hidden. It is to accept the critique of self upon self and from that be willing to change. It is in no way an easier approach but, nevertheless, personally enriching. I also believe that the profound honesty that emerged in the analysis speaks beyond self to the human experience of being a global coworker. Although my particular experience was unique, underlying that is a human experience likely to be known by others. They, too, will remember or encounter excitement, confusion, vulnerability, paradox, guilt, dread, hope, and love. Such is the nature of stepping out into unknown places, people, issues, and culture.

From methodology to method

The plan

The first stage data collection began prior to my 3-week trip to Malawi with a preunderstandings interview with Elizabeth, my supervisor. This helped me articulate assumptions that would color my interpretations. While I was away, I collected my own self-reflective data at the end of each day (second-stage data). On my return the third-stage data collection, where others interviewed me, was commenced. This included a further interview with my supervisor. Ethics approval was

gained (from the Auckland University Ethics Committee) for me to be interviewed by up to 10 people. Although it could be argued the data were mine, I was also mindful that the interviewers needed to be informed of the purpose of their involvement and to have the right to delete any comments that reflected back on them. They thus received information sheets and signed a consent form. The ethical considerations also addressed the possibility (which did not arise) that I, or any of my interviewers, could be prompted into serious emotional vulnerability by the conversations. Arrangements were made for counseling if this situation arose. The nature of these three stages of data collection is described below, followed by a description of the process of analysis.

Preunderstandings (first-stage data)

Van Manen (1990) explains the hermeneutic call for the researcher to be mindful of the prejudices (Gadamer, 1982) they bring to the research process. As supervisor Elizabeth interviewed me about the preunderstandings and expectations I already had in my thinking. I had traveled through Malawi with my wife several years earlier. I am a nurse and thus already had thoughts on the experience of HIV and AIDS. I had just completed a theology degree and was wrestling with big questions about why the church seemed to be doing so little around this issue. The dream of taking my wife and two young daughters to a country such as Malawi to be involved in some sort of development work excited me, yet I also appreciated the tensions of such a move. This strong horizon of understanding (merely pointed to in this paragraph) was already in my thinking. The interview was tape-recorded and transcribed, and later became part of the data pool. I referred to each transcript as a whole text (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Yet always I was aware of all that had stayed unspoken and unthought at that interview. One cannot capture the shaping of one's life in an hour. That quest was to continue throughout the following phases.

In the field (second-stage data)

My wife and I had already arranged this visit to Malawi prior to the research component being formalized. Now we needed to inform the people we were visiting that my insights were going to be part of a reflective research process. There were times when I was mindful that people were perhaps more hesitant with me than they might otherwise have been. Even though I did not include any information in my study that could have identified people, still my stories were about situations in which they were a part. But then most hermeneutic research data are about situations. The difference is that people do not know in advance that a story about a particular event might become part of a research study.

Koch (1998) described how the process of observing and listening feeds into the controlling question of "What is it like . . . ?"(p. 1888). The question of "What is it like?" was a key part of my daily experience as I informally engaged with the aspects of life of a westerner being in Malawi. This informal engagement consisted of exposure to rural and urban clinics, Hope for AIDS programs, missionary nurses, church-based programs, home-based care, family homes of missionaries working in Malawi, and local government health care strategies. The field exposure was facilitated through the field coordinator of a missionary organization in Malawi. This had an advantage of using the time available in Malawi to the fullest, as most of the formal interactions were planned and people were willing to give their time. However, this also had the influencing effect of people assuming my goals and giving me a particular kind of experience.

During this field time I was active in what Smythe, Ironside, Sims, Swenson, and Spence (2008) have called "the phenomenological conversation" when "each conversation is uniquely itself" (p. 4). I engaged with the local Malawians and then at the end of each day audio-recorded my reflections, later transcribing them into my laptop. These were the second-stage research data, which took the form of daily self-reflexive stories and reflections of the day. I faced (personal) challenges, the depth of which could be reached only by my being immersed in HIV programs and life in Malawi. The question of "What is it like?" was kept real as one purpose of this experience was to discover what my future could be. As I looked at the effects/changes made by westerners (positive and negative), I asked: Would I be any different? There was hope that I could become as impressive and fear that I, too, might disappoint. This visit left me with memories captured in photographs, my journal, stories that would come back to my mind, and emotions that lingered behind them.

On return (third-phase data)

The first interview on my return was again conducted by Elizabeth, my supervisor, allowing the conversation to follow on from our earlier discussion of my expectations. Some things were the same, others very different. The experience made explicit excitement, fear, tensions and recognition of the complex hugeness of taking on such a commitment. The challenge was to capture some of the understandings born of this experience in a manner that took me beyond my already-there thinking. That was the key reason to invite "others" to interview, hoping that they would ask questions I had never thought about, probe me in areas I might have preferred to avoid, encourage me to tell more when I thought I had told enough, and show me by their own response of listening a glimpse of myself.

The participants

In selecting a variety of people to interview I was aware that each would bring his or her own prejudices (Gadamer, 1982). I strove to achieve a wide representation, drawing on my networks and suggestions from Elizabeth. I looked for confident people who would not be hesitant in asking their questions. I was interested in the things that they thought of as important rather than supplying them with a ready-made list of questions. The interviewers chosen were a palliative care specialist with experience in the two thirds world; an emergency care nurse with a worldview that operates from within a Maori paradigm; an infectious diseases physician with 18 years in HIV medicine; a development specialist working between New Zealand and the two thirds world, focusing on capacity building; a nurse unit manager of an intensive care unit; a Christian minister; a psychotherapist; a businessman; an expatriate from Malawi and his New Zealand spouse; and a missiologist and theologian. This diverse range of people were intrigued with the method and once the conversation began had no shortage of questions. Ten participants afforded a large amount of data for the time available for analysis in a master's thesis, yet the experience of being interviewed was so rewarding that it was hard to call a halt to this part of the process. No one interview resembled another. Each was uniquely itself. The 10 interviewers each opened within me different dimensions in the social, spiritual, mental, and physical aspect of "me." Discerning the choice of interviewers is a key aspect of such a method.

The interviews

The interviews varied in duration from 45 to 90 minutes. In keeping within the style of phenomenological conversation, these interviewers were given the freedom to take their own path with gentle guidance of "What was it like?" The purpose of these interviews was to take me *to* the experience (not *back* as the experience continues on a continuum) to help ask new questions to

provoke more thinking. Here are some of the questions to show the varied directions of the interviews:

- What do you think you have to offer Malawi?
- What do you believe about what it is that you are doing? I think we often say, "God, I will go anywhere" but we've already predetermined where the anywhere is.
- Do people know whether they are HIV positive? Do woman have multiple partners?
- But is sex linked with intimacy?
- So you want to talk to them about what their sexuality is as opposed to your ideas?
- How does that contribute to the sustainability of the health system?
- Do you think that you have a certain amount of power over the Malawian people? I mean as a male?
- Did you get a sense of how power relationship/power structures in the church related to village organization and leadership?
- In those communities, what did you feel was the main obstacles for those girls?
- Did that make you feel anger?
- What are the priority and your ethos of their survival or their sovereignty?
- What is in it for you? What can you offer that they cannot offer themselves?
- Who pays for it? How does the thing stop being an exercise in self-indulgence?
- At this point of time what do you think about future roles?
- If you looked back from two years into Malawi, do you have any idea in a crude sense what would look like success?

These questions did not explicitly become part of the data; they, rather, provoked the thinking that brought forth the data. Nevertheless, many of them echoed again and again throughout the period of analysis. Some questions excited my thinking, some disturbed my comfort, some challenged, some affirmed. All moved my thinking forward in ways I could never have achieved by myself.

These interviews were audio recorded, and then I transcribed each one. By my being directly involved in the transcription process, there was no break between the interview and the creation of the transcribed whole texts. This process strengthens the hermeneutic of self by keeping the thinking/reflective process active and engaged. Interviewers had the opportunity to approve the transcript.

The thinking

From all of these interview experiences I accumulated 13 texts to work with in shaping my analysis which continued to grow throughout this talking-writing-reflecting-reading process. Although conceptually one talks of working with the data as if it is a step-by-step linear process, it is more like an event. Heidegger (1962/1995) used one of his more simple terms to describe this event. He calls it "thinking" (Heidegger, 1969). I was challenged by a quote from Gadamer (1994) where he described his student experience of learning from Heidegger what thinking means. He recalled how "the boldness and radicality of the questions . . . would take one's breath completely away" (pp. 62–65) and remembered the passion of the experience.

My thinking would be triggered as a new interview would pick up on the "passion" of the topic I was wrestling with (at-that-present-moment). In each conversation new questions opened my thinking, at times creating what Heidegger would call a "moment of vision" (Inwood, 1997, p. 82). This "glance" of understanding, the "I get it," is something Heidegger worked with by reflecting on the dramatic change in the lives of St. Augustine, St. Paul, and Martin Luther

(Inwood, 1997). This tells of "a point" where everything looks different. In contrast, the three-dimensional process of working with the transcripts, being interviewed afresh, and thinking was more a journey within which there were points of significance. As new understandings were revealed from these three angles, there was also the tension of what Harman (2007) called the "perpetual war between light and shadow" (p. 153), how in the uncovering there is always concealment, as *aletheia* (truth) is only ever partially revealed. Once all the interviews were complete and transcribed the thinking and passion continued. As I re-read the transcripts I spent time **T**hinking **H**ermeneutically and **R**eflecting through the **E**xperience, **A**sking questions while **D**welling in the everyday (THREAD) (Figure 1). The following is a diagrammatic description of my methodology. It shows the all important movement of life, which is never singular in direction. The hermeneutic of self discovery takes place within a movement (THREAD) and this movement (THREAD) breaks the false duality between work and self when one embarks on working cross-culturally.

Writing

Van Manen (2006) stated, "One does not write primarily for being understood; one writes for having understood being" (p. 721), and, further, that writing is "the method" (van Manen, 1990, p. 126). It is the writing process that "separates us from what we know and yet it unites us more closely with what we know" (p. 127). Writing is the forum for "re-thinking, re-flecting, re-cognizing" (p. 131). In this sense, "Interpretive thinking is a proceeding rather than a procedure" (Diekelmann, 2005, p. 5). Working with the THREADs was again rereading transcripts while making notes and drawing diagrams and mind maps expressing the gathering of ideas illuminated in the "unfolding" of the THREAD. The THREAD created, even demanded to work with others because as I dwell in the everyday, life itself joins the hermeneutic. I would write, leave the writing, let the thinking continue on, reread what I had written, see it afresh, and write again, and again.

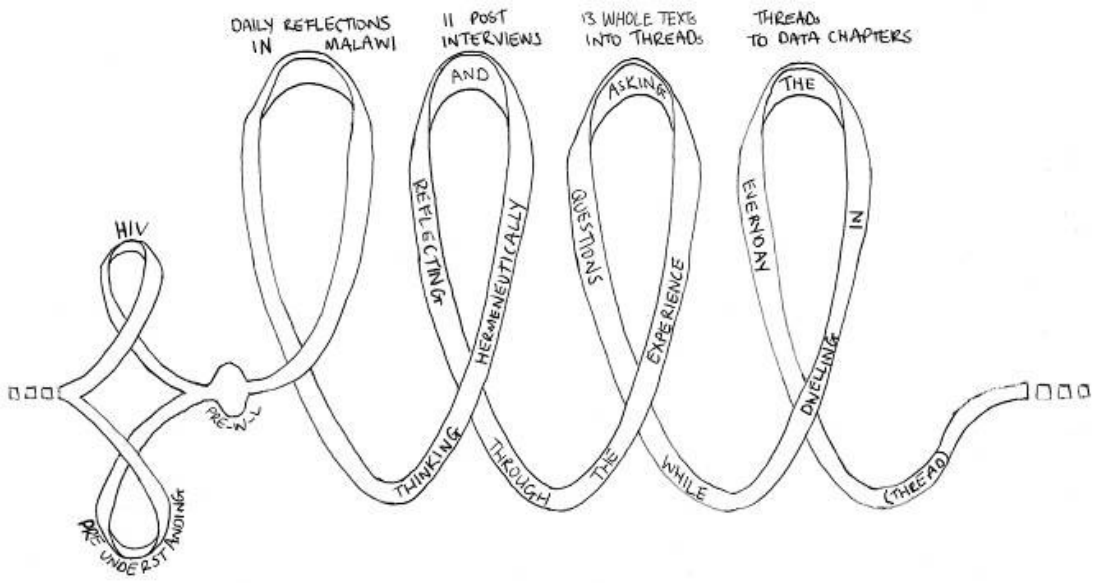

Figure 1. Capturing the process

The word thread was coined to capture the complex nature of drawing forth understanding and then to follow it along.

How it felt

Through this process I started to understand van Manen's (1990) comment that "phenomenological . . . research . . . is extraordinarily demanding of its practitioners" (p. 33). At this point being both the researched and the researcher was the hardest, and the best. As I looked at the text I was seeing myself. On every page there was an aspect of what Heidegger would call "fallenness," but, as I was to discover in the revealing of this, I came closer to the authentic aspect of understanding self. In these THREADs I saw the reality of how the experience of crossing-culture is personally revealing. Two fascinating stories come to mind from Mandela's (1994) autobiography, where he pauses for a moment and shows his own environmental conditioning as he questions if the "black pilot" can really fly the plane (see pp. 347-348) and why, when he saw a "white beggar," his mind thought, "To be poor and black was normal, to be poor and white was a tragedy" (p. 219). Ideas and ways of seeing the world often take an experience of difference to be revealed. Just as Mandela was taken aback by his socially conditioned view of the world, I was startled as I learned, through the process of enduring a hermeneutic of self, how my subversive social conditioning and human frailness, in turn, affects what I think and correspondingly how I act as an agent of change.

Moving from THREADs to themes

Three themes surfaced: Going to and from the call looked at what gathers as one examines the journey of understanding the desire to work cross-culturally. I came to see the nature of the call on my life to care for other, prodding me to become a global coworker. From this come questions to the reader about the call on their own life. The second theme, Doing in-between: the spiraling movement of care, wrestled with what one does and how one does it within the context of working cross-culturally. I identified the importance of first gaining the acceptance and trust of those one seeks to work with, for "to maintain long term change, it is the people who need to be centred, not the problem" (Fleck, 2008, p.131), and "Authors of change need to draw horizons together, creating freedom for the doing to continue without them" (p. 131). This offers a challenge to the reader related to their way of working with others toward achieving change. The third theme, Being-there: being their, showed the internal tensions of how to be authentic to oneself, one's family, and one's faith amid difference. I concluded this chapter saying, "It is peering into my inner core. If the experience of the trip to Malawi is surface walking then this is open cast mining" (p. 155). I came to see how important it is to first spend time coming to know self before offering oneself as a global coworker. The message is that any person at the threshold of such work needs to find a way of going through some sort of pilgrimage of recognizing how self affects and is affected by others.

Although each theme was complete in itself, the guiding themes were so interrelated they created a whole and showed the tensions in the going-doing-being paradigm. No one story was ever about just one thing. Everything wove together. I would focus on one thread only to realize that it needed to be rewoven into the fabric of the whole to show itself amid the complex tensions. I lived in the tension of "what I was working on right now" and the pull back to the all-consuming whole, not just of this particular research project but the question of the future calling for me and my family into such work. It was a creative process yet demanded a product that captured my search for the ontological meaning within working with HIV epidemic cross-culturally. My experience of presenting insights from this research in face-to-face settings is that it engages others with thoughts of their own cross-cultural experiences. They, too, return to self to see how their interactions with others have affected and could affect others.

Trustworthiness

Koch (1996) has recommended that "each inquiry determine its own criteria for rigor (trustworthiness)" (p. 174). A key to trustworthiness is openness. Interpretive texts in this study come in three forms: personal (journal notes and daily reflections), collective (interview transcripts), and literature. These forms of language require the same treatment of interpretation acknowledging that it is not possible to bracket the researcher out of the hermeneutic circle. For the hermeneutic circle to show rigor, there needs to be clear acknowledgement of whose voice is being heard, not only for representation of the voice but to show how the fusion of horizons is happening. The space is created for meaning to be formed if the readers can allow themselves to become both readers and authors simultaneously, in the sense of a vessel of ideas rather than an owner. The reader then understands differently and maybe with new clarity, yet as Vanhoozer (2007) has suggested, this clarity is still "provisional," providing "partial glimpses" so the interpretive reader remains in what Gadamer (1989) termed "the play." This method invited the reader to explore for themselves where the clarity can be and where there needs to be a deeper look at one's own horizon.

This openness is an even greater challenge in a hermeneutics of self approach, for one's assumptions and prejudices are so embedded as to be part of the taken-for-granted lens by which one interprets. I recognize the layer upon layer of revealing that lies at the heart of a hermeneutics of self. I wrestle with the moral and the political issues of cross-cultural HIV and AIDS work for to ignore them, because of political correctness, would reduce the trustworthiness. I invite readers to recognize that they, too, have their own view, their own beliefs, their own life experience. It takes a long, intense look in a mirror for me and for you, as I describe in my thesis:

> The act of looking in the mirror takes courage. It starts by seeing the outside image. This image can reveal the way we feel or who we are like. But in the ontological mirror, when one pauses long enough, the reflection can bring light on deeper things; and in so doing the thing itself is revealed. As we look in the mirror it is not for us to become central but to see ourselves as others see us. As we look in the mirror it is important to understand that the image will change as we grow for this is the nature of life. As we look in the mirror we can ask "who am I?" "who is God?" and "how can we live well with others?" . . . From there, the change, the transformation, can be authentically owned, but authenticity starts with me (you). As we walk, let us talk. (Fleck, 2008, p. 169)

Personal transformation that happened through this hermeneutic of self has been profound, equipping, and informing. In the next section I give glimpses of how the reflective thinking revealed insights layer by layer.

An example of preunderstandings data (first phase)

> *One thing about HIV is that I struggle to understand how people can have hope when life, from an outside perspective, seems so hopeless. I guess reluctantly because of what it might mean. (Fleck, 2008, p. 111)*
>
> From the outset there is a tension between hope and hopelessness. Whilst I go into this experience of HIV programs with the desire to seek hope, there is a questioning of what will this mean. For me, this hopelessness is where the doing begins. I go seeing a need and I have taken-for-granted that I can help. I have skills and ability so I am going to do something which I have seen-in-advance needs to be done. Yet

> there is something inside me which I have already grasped before I go. Doing across borders needs to be done in relationship with others, so I have "ready made ideas" about how the doing needs to be done. (Fleck, 2008, p. 111)

The preunderstandings interview set me thinking before we left for Malawi and kept me thinking about issues such as relationship through the entire process. The tension between hope and hopelessness provoked one of the key insights of the study; it is a tension present every day in a country such as Malawi, to which there are no ready solutions. One must, rather, find a way to live with the tension. It is one thing to talk about such tensions at a theoretical level; it is another to be there and experience their pull.

An example of field data (second phase) and analysis

> *As I sit here typing I looked out the window at an 8 foot high brick fence, and on the top there are shards of glass for my protection. Every door has three bolts and pad locks, there are bars on every window and reinforced gates in front of every door. Just over that fence people are dying of malaria, HIV, starvation, pneumonia, bacterial infections. I understand that when I say my protection, I mean more protection of property, rather than protection of self. The wall, though, feels almost like is a way of keeping me in. I feel constrained. It brings out a sense of uncertainty. A heightened sense of not knowing who to trust and who not to trust. The challenge will be discernment, and that will only come from experience. How on earth am I going to do this? (Fleck, 2008, p. 147)*
>
> Once again I confront a paradox. There is an unfamiliarity which is striking. In this excerpt it is this unfamiliarity which brings me to the question of why am I going to leave New Zealand? Exploring the risk of life living in a "compound" under lock and key is constraining even if it is just for protection of property. The issue of culture shock is widely written about. The reality of sitting and thinking in a foreign land opens the door of what does it mean for my family to live away from New Zealand. Over the fence people are dying of things unacceptable in the west, the eight foot high fence brings a disconnection to this. Is this disconnection real? The shards of glass, bars, reinforced gates and locks highlight our foreignness. We will always be seen to have more possessions therefore be vulnerable? (Fleck, 2008, pp. 147-148)

The questions that arose as I sat looking out the window stay with me to be grappled with again and again and again. The data I wrote while in Malawi enabled me to return to a specific experience, to rethink what it might mean. The difference between western and local, rich and poor, haves and have-nots, held through my study. It is an injustice every global coworker lives with, knowing they are among the privileged; they have more access to protection and justice than those they work with. The question of how they deal with that has no easy answer. Each global coworker faces the challenge of such discernment. The discussion around dealing with the risk of living as a foreigner in a country of poverty is not unique to Malawi. The questions, tensions, and angst I raised are likely to be part of the experience of others involved in such cross-cultural work.

An example of interview data (third phase) and analysis

> *I am challenged how the model of knowing your HIV status before having unprotected sex in a particular situation at a particular time works in Malawi, if outside of this situation condoms aren't consistently being used. Is the concept of condoms as the HIV prevention method flawed?*
>
> *Is the use of condoms a transference of a model that works elsewhere? It seems that we try to put this model on another situation without really grappling with the situation and how sexuality is lived in reality.*
>
> *Time and time again, we heard that there were questions about how HIV had come to people within the church. One story was about a couple who after VCT (Voluntary Counselling and Testing) could not find a place in either partner's life where HIV had had a window. After some time of frank questioning, the wife's infection was linked to the practice of prenuptial rites.*
>
> *Prenuptial rites don't have condoms as part of the custom. Therefore, a condom as the sole answer is fundamentally flawed. So the question becomes how do we deal with that? One of my questions is how do we use our resources and knowledge as we approach this context? (Fleck, 2008, p. 117)*
>
> This excerpt begins with the theoretical notion that personal knowledge of HIV status combined with condom use may be applied to the Malawian context. Transplanting methods without contextualizing them can make the model incomprehensible. Accepting local customs brings into question the adequacy of the HIV prevention method of condom use and therefore new questions are raised. What is it that I am trying to contextualize? What is my core message and how does that intersect with the necessary acceptance of otherness? In the above example, if my aim is to reduce the rate of HIV transmission how do I view prenuptial rites? (Fleck, 2008, p. 117)

An interviewer prompts me to think more about the complex nature of how HIV is transmitted. In doing so, I grapple with the limits and barriers of my interpretive abilities. Knowing what one does not yet know emerged as a vital aspect of working as a global coworker. The issues around HIV transmission arise in different contexts, but the questions the cross-cultural worker needs to raise are the same. Always they need to be mindful of the narrowness of their own interpretive lens.

As you will see from these examples, a hermeneutics of self does not necessarily lead to answers but, rather, leaves one grappling with questions. In this there is a freedom created for others to question and explore their own cross-cultural interactions. My research pointed to some questions one needs to actively address towards working effectively and respectfully with others in cross cultural work. It is these questions that are transferable to any other cross-cultural situation. They arose from a specific context and experience where the answers are colored and shaped in particular ways, yet those same questions can go to other situations to break through taken-for-granted understandings, misconceptions and forgotten biases to reveal afresh how-it-is and how-it-could-be.

Fundamental questions

The fundamental questions that emerged from this study offered as generic tools to guide the practice of others were as follows.

How do you know you should go?

I reflected deeply about my call to cross-cultural work. This research offered me the opportunity to test the authenticity of the call by tasting the experience, reflecting on the experience and opening oneself to the questions of others. These strategies are available to others outside of a research paradigm. Such rigorous testing proves a call as likely to be resilient amidst the hard challenges bound to lie ahead.

How are you going to make a difference?

I learned that if I was to make a difference I first needed to learn to listen to others, to build their trust, and to believe in their potential. I came to see that such engagement was an act of love. Others need to find their own answer to this question.

Who are you going to be?

I came to see I needed to offer myself as servant, as one who would seek to understand, to learn, to build trust, to accept and to be open. A person embarking on cross-cultural work needs to consider the vulnerability of such a mode of being-with, of being-their: their friend, their partner, their servant.

What will sustain you in your involvement?

This research enabled me to see that we need to first live realistically within our human capacity, unobstructed by our wrong thinking of who we are or what we should or can achieve. However, we also need support such as webs of nurturing relationships, regular breaks away, and a deeply held sense of Sabbath, which makes a time of reflective rest a normal pattern of living. Thinking, questioning, and coming to understand afresh needs to be an ongoing discipline toward responsive and responsible sustainability. A person going into cross-cultural work for the first time needs to address these vital issues of sustainability from the outset.

When cross-cultural workers work through such questions in relationship to who they are and who/where they are going to serve, then the people from the other culture, such as the people of Malawi, will surely benefit from a relationship that is more open, more respectful, more responsive, and less distorted by misunderstandings. Further, the relationship is likely to be more enduring.

Hermeneutics of self as research

In any hermeneutic study the stories of human experience are brought to analysis. In a study such as this that experience is personal. Yet, the insights have the same sense of coming close to the essence of what it means to be human. We, the researcher and supervisors of this research, believe that any person contemplating becoming involved in cross-cultural work, especially if that means moving to another country, would find value in dwelling with the findings of this study. The questions Kenneth grappled with are questions that need to be faced by anyone in a similar situation. In his conclusion Kenneth quoted Milosz (as cited in Bourne & Polanski, 2006): “The work of human thought should withstand the test of brutal, naked reality. If it cannot, it is

worthless" (p. 38). We acknowledge how painful yet rewarding this deeply self-reflective experience has been. For Kenneth, there was rich insight that we believe is likely to resonate with others. He looked back on the three themes and sees that the first had been about faith, the second about hope, and the third about love. He wrote:

> Faith without hope would die or hope without love quickly becomes hope-less. Love which does not create faith in the "other" or give hope to carry on is the closing down of love itself. To go in faith needs hope to keep it grounded. Love provides the sustaining aspects to keep the going and doing alive. If our "doing" is to be done from who we are, our passion and our call, then learning how to read and interpret culture is of critical importance. Working with culture needs to be based around learning to listen but in our listening we need to understand that there is a tension between who we are and who we will become. (Fleck, 2008, p. 158)

Although the initial interest of HIV and AIDS remains the driving force to this exploration, there is a sense that HIV and AIDS fades to the background as the human-to-human encounter moves to the fore. Yes, this research is about Kenneth's story, but we argue that it is a story that resonates and informs a much wider audience. We created a method for Kenneth to bring insightful recommendations to the preparation process of global coworkers. He has proven the transferability of his insights as his call to be involved in HIV and AIDS work took him to Asia, not Africa. The place and culture were different, but he knew the questions to ask of himself and those he was to work with. He had already done much of that self-work. Further, he was acutely aware of the listening that needed to be done through the journey ahead.

Conclusion

There is a place for a hermeneutics of self within research methodology. It enables a researcher to dwell with what is closest, which is often the hardest to see. Involving a range of conversational partners opens questions one may not bring to oneself and this strengthens the study. Working with THREADs promotes rich thinking. It is by no means an easy way out for one is called to wrestle with one's own assumptions, challenge one's own beliefs and publicly reveal vulnerability. It is a life changing experience for the researcher. For the supervisor it means the personal becomes the focus of scholarly analysis. Trust is needed to underpin such vulnerable exposure. The gift to the reader is an armchair opportunity to reflect on the possibilities within their own life experience. Such a methodological approach is valuable in situations where for whatever reason it is not appropriate to interview "other." We argue a hermeneutic of self happens where life is lived. It is situated in the experience, and it is here that the cross-cultural gaps are discovered. Such a self-examination is beneficial in its own right, especially where there is a call for self-awareness, self-growth, and recognition of the otherness of other. The nature of being human is that in the place of profound honesty, differences fade away, and we discover that my vulnerability is your vulnerability, my struggle is your struggle, my questions are your questions, and my dreams are the dreams countless have had before. A hermeneutics of self offers a mirror that allows each of us to see self afresh. The one is the all, yet it is only in focusing intensely on the one, by the one-who-is-the-one, that all may glimpse afresh what it means to be human.

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