

Interpretation

A Political and Social Practice

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The purpose of this article was to illustrate that interpretation is a political and social practice and to explore the conceptualization of interpretation as a political and social practice within the discipline of nursing. A critical view of language, meaning, and interpretation reveals that words are influenced by sociopolitical context and empiricism is engulfed in interpretations derived from the environment. The deliberations reveal that how we perceive our nature of being in the world affects our interpretations. In contrast, from a critical theory lens the discussion reveals that interpretation becomes a process of penetration of different contexts and of an evolutionary praxis effecting transformation. **Key words:** *critical social theory, empiricism, interpretation, language, political practice, social construction, social practice*

THE noun “interpretation” presents many faces. Interpretation is viewed as an act or process of interpreting or elucidation, or as the result of interpreting and presenting an explanation or as a particular view of an artistic work, or explanation of the environment, or it refers to the allocation of significance to the terms of a purely formal system.¹ The purpose of this article, however, was to illustrate that interpretation is both a political and social practice and to explore a conceptualization of interpretation as a political and social practice within the discipline of nursing. I begin this inquiry looking through a critical social theory lens and by exploring the foundational concepts of language, meaning, and interpretation. Next, I compare and contrast interpretation and empiricism in order to illustrate that they represent very different epistemological orientations. On the basis

of that comparison, I deconstruct the interpretation of self and argue that interpretation provides insight only when considered within particular sociocultural and political contexts. Interpretation intersects with critical social theory, and drawing on that theory, I reflect on meaning, interpretation, representation, and nursing. In this article, I argue that within the discipline of nursing we need further critical discourse, reflection, and research into illuminating the worldview that interpretation is both a political and social practice.

INTERPRETATION IS BOTH A POLITICAL AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

Language, meaning, and interpretation

A discourse on words is a precursor to deconstructing language, meaning, and interpretation. Pinker² writes that we fashion our “breath into hisses and hums and squeaks and pops and listen to others do the same,”² that we do not blurt out isolated words, but rather we combine them into phrases and sentences “in which the combination can be inferred from the meaning of the words and the way they are arranged.”^{2(p1)} For example, if we say “rose,” we may think of any rose, but if we say a lush, deep wine red color rose, with a mystifying perfume that scents the room, the

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picture that comes to mind will be different from that which comes with the sole use of the word rose. He suggests that we engage in such process with words because we like the sound, and when we listen to speech we can be led to think thoughts that we have never before thought. Similarly, a person who is unable to see or hear is able to formulate a pattern in his or her mind that holds meaning through the senses. Thus, as Pinker suggests, we like the sounds because details of the sounds we see, feel, and hear and sensations generated through touch and smell contain information about thoughts, feelings, ideas, and intentions. Moreover, we are fitted with a means of filtering the details of the sounds and sensations that contain information, and we are provided with tools* to share our ideas in all their unfathomable vastness with others.²⁻⁴ Unless, however, all senses are able to communicate (through sound and silence) in a language that makes sense to one self and others, there is a risk of forming misinformed schema.

Misinformed schemas are perceptions of the world that are based on misinterpretations and can be revealed when communications of the investigations of the component parts of a whole, and their relations in making up the whole, are examined and found to be inadequate and lacking in coordination and lead to sensory misinterpretations. This idea behooves us to be cognizant of the question "do we ever know the whole?" Because the notion of interpretation may lead us to believe that we always know only in part . . . our understandings are always only interpretations, as in our immediate interpretations we will be able to see only through our lenses, and through the lenses of the sociocultural or political context that we are situated in, but not through others lenses. At this juncture, I believe it is vital for us to be mindful of the fact

that there is a slippery slope between interpretation as language and patterns of communication versus interpretation as a perspective on reality. However, this is not to negate that in a conversation with many people there are as many different perceptions or interpretations as there are the number of persons participating in the conversation, with all the persons participating in the conversation being able to find meaning in the conversation.

But how do we interpret what a word or a formulation of a word or thought (as in for people who have lost their hearing or sight) means? We refer to dictionaries; we check thesauruses; we may focus on the translations of the word in other languages; we think of the antecedents to a word, and we may attach the meaning from our experiences and interactions with others and of the utilization of the word to find meaning.

In contrast, Wittgenstein⁴ states that "Every word in language signifies something" . . . and he suggests that . . . "we have so far said nothing whatever; unless we have explained exactly what distinction we wish to make."⁴(p7) He refers to a word game and suggests that meanings of words are derived out of the language and actions in which the words are interwoven, and as a metaphor he uses the game of chess. He states that the question "What is a word really?" is analogous to "What is a piece in chess?" He implies that every piece has a part to play, and in playing the game each part generates its own meaning. In contrast to Wittgenstein, as another metaphor, I put forward a woven cloth in which a word represents a single thread, but the meaning of the thread emerges as the thread takes its place among the other threads in the woven cloth. It is given meaning by the other threads around it and the relationship it has interwoven with the other threads. This metaphor reveals my belief that words and their meanings are socially and politically constructed, as I also believe that "words" are continuously enriched by the people, contexts, and environments around them—the thread became a part of the woven cloth as it intertwined with the other threads, and becomes

*I refer to tools of vocal speech, the written word via pen and paper and use of the computer, hearing, and use of brail, sight, touch, smell, and sign language to filter and transport information.

one with the other threads to form a beautiful woven cloth.

To explicate, I refer to Wittgenstein⁴ who poses the question,

When philosophers use a word—"knowledge," "being," "object," "I," "proposition," "name"—and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?^{4(p48)}

In response, he proposes that what is required is to bring words back from the meta-physical to the everyday use, and use the words in a sense that is familiar to the audience. He further argues that "a failure to understand meanings of words is that the grammar that is used is lacking in clarity and comprehensiveness or in other words 'per-spicious representation,'"^{4(p49)} and as a result the meaning that is produced is just the understanding that consists in seeing simple connections. Further, he adds that to know how a word functions, "one has to look at its use and learn from that."^{4(p109)} Again, I infer, learning from Wittgenstein, that in order for me to understand a word and language, I have to understand it in relation to its contexts and its environment.

On another note, Pinker² suggests that "the theory that words work by a conventional pairing of sound and meaning is not banal or uncontroversial."^{2(p2)} He refers to the words "sneer, cantankerous, and mellifluous that naturally call to mind what they mean."^{2(p2)} Further, he refers to the peculiarities of sound symbolism and how it stimulates reactions, and for its part remarks that it was "no friend of the American women in the throes of labor who overheard what struck her as the most beautiful word in the English language and named her newborn daughter *Meconium*, the medical term for fetal excrement."^{2(p3)} He posits that this example indicates that interpretations of phenomena are also affected by the sound that symbolizes the word.

In contrast to sound symbolism, I reflect on the *power* of words and language to evoke feelings and sensations of happiness,

joy, euphoria, elation and unhappiness, sadness, pain, disharmony, war, and oppression to name a few. In particular, I reflect on the following evocative rhetorical questions and answers in the next paragraph to reflect the power of language and its effect on interpretation to show how language, meanings, and interpretations *are* socially and politically placed.

Why is a person who is fluent in his or her own language but is unable to speak the English language fluently during a presentation at a conference⁵ made to feel embarrassed? Perhaps, from the person's own perspective, he or she has been acculturated subconsciously to feel inadequate if he or she is unable to speak the "perceived popular and accepted language" or perhaps it stems from a lack of confidence in self as a person, but not necessarily in one's knowledge of the subject matter. Are the (audiences) supportive or judgmental of the language the person is speaking or the words spoken, or the intonation, expressions, and body language, or do audiences listen with an open mind? Perhaps the expectation of an audience is high regarding the presenter; perhaps they expect a person who attends a forum to share information and knowledge to be able to communicate in a way that is able to transfer knowledge or information effectively. Perhaps communicating effectively means the use of multiple modes of communication by any one person with each presenter presenting in 2 or more languages, verbally, or written as well as in art form, whether it be a poster or sculpture. Does the inability to speak the English language imply that the person has less to offer? My answer would be no, and perhaps we need to learn to be more open and accepting of different ways of communicating, and learn to sieve the content or the knowledge and value that a person brings, rather than judging the value of a person or what he or she is sharing superficially (by the color of the dress, the color of the skin, and the way he or she looks, where he or she comes from, the sound and words he or she emanates when he or she speaks). Does it mean that the

person who is different should be marginalized and made to feel oppressed? Again, the answer would be no. Perhaps we need to learn to appreciate and acknowledge differences, and learn to listen in different ways from different senses. Does it mean that the person has to feel pain, anger, discomfort because he or she does not appear to have conformed to the norm? Again, the answer would be no, and perhaps we need to learn to be open and place ourselves in the person's shoes to enable us to know what it is that the person who is being marginalized is going through. Must we always say what is deemed to be politically correct or must we always tell the truth if that is what is felt genuinely? Perhaps, within each context, we must always say what is genuinely felt or we will become embroiled in consequences of saying what is politically correct as opposed to what is genuinely felt. This is not to say that there is only one truth, or that there is only one genuinely correct answer, but it is to say that each individual person must be honest in his or her responses. For example, if there are 20 persons listening to a presentation, there will possibly be 20 different responses, but each response must be what that individual person feels. Must we always be aware of the consequences of how others will interpret or misinterpret us? Perhaps yes, but then keeping in mind as to whether it is always possible, I posit that we must provide justifications and rationale and paint a picture surrounding the actions and speech so that the context in which we speak and act is understood and represented accurately.

Reviewing the rhetorical questions, although they do not appear to have a narrative thread, I believe that there is an invisible thread to enable the reader to experience the power of language, the messages language can convey, and how persons' experiences are affected by language and the different sociopolitical contexts in which they are situated. Therefore, in comparison, to follow up on the questions in the preceding paragraph with another set of rhetorical questions, I ask why is it if a non-English-speaking

person can expend effort to learn English to communicate, an English-speaking person cannot expend the same effort to speak a language other than English? Why is it that a nurse from a non-English-speaking country is made to feel embarrassed if she is unable to effectively communicate verbally? Will another person fluent in the English language unable to speak her ("native") language feel embarrassed by her inability to speak the ("native") language? Will he or she feel marginalized and oppressed or will he or she feel that he or she speaks "the globally recognized language" and therefore he or she is superior? On another note, why does anyone have to feel oppressed or marginalized?

In response to the questions in the preceding paragraph, and in contrast, perhaps the oppressed and marginalized need to draw courage and feel challenged in knowing that they are in the knowing. And perhaps they are indeed "more knowing" and veritable leaders in the knowing because of their ability to communicate in more than one language. In comparison, perhaps the persons acting the part of oppressors are not in the knowing, and need to be guided and be exposed to *really* seeing, hearing, and feeling the world with an openness and an authentic knowing. I pose these questions, because if we believe that we are to *really* contribute to knowledge and theory development of nursing (making the world a better place), then we need to be *really* open to acknowledging and respecting all views, interpretations, and ways of being in the world. I believe the rhetorical questions posed in this paragraph might lead different thinkers in different directions—depending on the meanings, inferences, and interpretations ascribed—but I believe it will provide evidence of the power of language and the role language plays in meaning and interpretation, and reveal how language and interpretation are socially and politically placed.

Interpretation and empiricism

Where does the preceding discussion leave interpretation and empiricism? Does asking

questions in the way an empiricist would pose them rule out opportunities for multiple potential meanings of words as stated? How are interpretation and empiricism different? Some may argue that interpretation is the science of science and that all science is ultimately interpretation. In stark contrast, an opposing view may be offered that the whole point of science is that there is no ambiguity and there is no room for interpretation—Newton's Law is Newton's Law! This lends me to posit that how the meaning of interpretation, in contrast to empiricism, is perceived depends on a person's "experiences" that he or she carries with him or her when reflecting on the differences between interpretation and empiricism, and the meaning of the word, experience, or science of interpretation. For example a person coming from a hard-core science background would say that there is no room for interpretation as facts are facts. However, in contrast, a person coming from a softer background would argue that there is interpretation in science, as the interpretation of science or the facts of science have to be considered within the environmental or sociopolitical context that it is situated in.

Or conversely, examining the difference between empiricism and interpretation, I moot the question "is empiricism related to truth?" Gergen³ suggests that philosophers over centuries have "critically appraised the concepts of objectivity, truth and empirical knowledge."^{3(p227)} He cites Plato's *Theatetus*, which speaks to the notion and questions "if there is no truth, objectivity of objective knowledge, then on what grounds should skepticism be accepted?" and suggests that "it is important to realize that the claims to truth are no more grounded than claims to skepticism."^{3(p227)} This incoherency lends the notion that we are to accept the notion of truth at the same time of acknowledging that there is no truth but "intelligibilities . . . that . . . are socially constructed, but question as to how constructionism be true,"^{3(p227)} which lends me to think that even constructionism exists within different sociopolitical contexts.

Another issue that springs to mind is the concept of validity in research and interpretation of findings, because to a certain extent we are constantly seeking to validate research, practice, and our actions. Shavelson⁶ posits that in the design of quantitative research, "it is crucial that alternative explanations be ruled out . . . so that the intended interpretation is the most plausible one or even the possible interpretation."^{6(p19)} He suggests that critical questions to be asked are questions that are related to the interpretation or validity of the data. For example, a question can be asked as to "what is the extent to which the interpretation of the results may be generalized to another situation with other people?"^{6(p19)} Shavelson⁶ writes that the ideas of internal and external validity underlie the validity of a research study. On the one hand, he writes, "internal validity focuses on the extent to which the outcomes of a study result from the variables that were actually manipulated, measured or selected in the study rather than from other variables not systematically treated."^{6(p20)} On the other hand, he writes that "external validity of a research study is the extent to which the findings of a particular study can be generalized to people or situations other than those observed in the study."^{6(p20)} Reflecting on these concepts, I concur that there is a compromise between internal and external validity, and reflecting on this tradeoff, the questions I put forward for reflection and to guide thinking are, "to what extent can a valid research be carried out in the strictest lab conditions and add value to theory and knowledge development (given the shock it may receive on being faced with the constantly changing and evolving world outside the lab doors?)" and "to what extent can valid research be carried out in a manner that the interpretations of the data can be generalized?" Perhaps the answers to these questions are found in the literature on effectiveness research, although this becomes debatable if one were to deny the possibility of generalizing the research.

In contrast, in qualitative research, interpretations of the data require immersion of

self in the data and resurfacing with the participants' conceptions as well as emerging with preconceptions and biases of self that will bring the participants' voices to the foreground⁷⁻⁹ and contribute to the validity of the research. For example, if you view a painting, you can describe in detail what you see. Next, if you enter the painting you will derive more than what you see; but if you are to obtain the full meaning behind the painting, then you need to go beyond what you see, inasmuch as there is a version of truth to be found if you just look hard enough, although different people may perceive different truths depending on their worldview and interpretations. In staying true to authentically listening to participants and what other persons say, we need to recognize (as much as possible) our preconceptions, ideas, and biases. When our painting is viewed or our work is read, the part of the painting that occupies what emanates from the participant comes to the foreground, and this, in turn, promotes the validity of the interpretations derived from the research. However, in this process of bringing the participants' voice to the foreground, I would suggest that it is important to bring the context that the participants are situated in also to the foreground and achieve validity via member checking devoid of superficiality.

From another perspective, reflecting on the early influence of empiricism on interpretation, conceptual analysis and semantic analysis of words and concepts have been the locus of preoccupation of nurse scholars.¹⁰ According to Thompson,¹⁰ empiricists argue that if concepts hold ostensive definitions, they can be linked to corresponding pieces of reality, and serve as foundational epistemological units. Using the metaphor of a pyramid, Dickoff and James¹¹ claim that the base of the pyramid comprises concepts and categories unique to nursing, and provides a foundation for nursing knowledge. They present the view that at the second level, observation statements or hypotheses are empirically tested and present the middle range theories.¹¹ Next, at the final level, they in-

fer that the prescriptive theory or situation producing theory materializes. Thompson¹⁰ posits that the concern with hypothesis testing reflects the need for foundations from early empiricists, and I add that in the light of interpretation and empiricism, words, concepts, and language or "what is communicated" requires measurable perspicuous operationalization of words. This process gives the impression that with empiricism the art of interpretation is the search for truth, and what we need to look for, given all the evidence, is "what is the truthful, accurate, and measurable interpretation in a particular given context?" At this point, pertinent reflective rhetorical questions to ask I believe are, "is this possible?" and "by which and whose definition are we perceiving the truth?"

In contrast, however, the difficulties experienced by empiricists in distinguishing empirically meaningful propositions or hypothesis testing have fast forwarded the empiricist transgression to focusing on conceptual schema and using cognitively meaningful propositions in which to empirically test conceptual schemes.¹⁰ Mirroring this view, Thompson¹⁰ cites Kuhn, Laudén, Lakatos, and Rorty who demonstrate that "scientific disputes are not resolved by the canons of deductive logic,"^{10(p374)} but by steering "scientific development with imaginative, innovative,"^{10(p374)} and I add inductive practices. To add, Gadamer, as cited by Thompson,^{10(p375)} demonstrated that "human understanding occurs through the interpretation of tradition," and has argued that interpretation of tradition is the route to our way of being in the world. Further, he posits that where empiricism is concerned, "tradition is the total background of practices, vocabulary, concepts, and hypotheses that humans bring to a project" (Gadamer, as cited by Thompson^(10,p375)) and prejudices and prejudgments invariably influence the projects as tradition programs the process of understanding. This I believe confirms my outlook and inspires me to think that, although unintentional, empiricism is engulfed with a cobweb of interpretations regarding the environments

and contexts in which it lives or struggles to survive.

Interpretation of self and in hermeneutics

Critically reflecting on the preceding discussion regarding interpretation and empiricism, I believe the views articulated derive from looking inside the window from the outside. But now in the following paragraphs, I will look and see what is inside the window from inside by stepping inside the window and beyond.

What do I mean by looking inside the window from inside and stepping inside the window and beyond? In addressing this question, I will first briefly review the Cartesian view of the person in relation to interpretation and then view the Heideggerian and hermeneutic phenomenological view in relation to interpretation. The Cartesian view holds that the person is a subject who is "uninvolved with entity passively contemplating the external world of things via representations that are held in the mind,"^{12(p316)} and is led by questions related to "how do we know what we know,"^{12(p316)} or I posit "how do we know who we are," which begs the question, "if we don't know who we are, how do others know who we are? What are others' interpretations of us?" As an example, from the Cartesian view, reflect on a woman in a wheelchair against a window, a woman who can look out of the window but spends her time huddled and folded into the wheelchair without a sound emanating from her lips, a woman who as a result of being a long-term patient, and always being positioned in the day by the same window, and because of her silence appears to have blended or merged into the background of the wall and window. I wonder, and posit from a Cartesian view, if she may be perceived as an object, as she may reflect with a sigh in her thoughts, from a Cartesian view, that "for some I am an object," but if persons expend time to search for meaning with her, from an Heideggerian phenomenological existential view,¹³ she may reflect that "for others I am a person and a presence"

Explicating the notion of interpretation of self in hermeneutics, I digress on a relevant tangent and explore the ontological question of "what is being" as proposed by Heideggerian phenomenology, which answers by saying that

there are many things which we designate as "being" . . . , "and we do in various senses. Everything we talk about, everything we have in view, everything towards which we comport ourselves in any way, is being; what we are is being, and so is how we are. Being lies in the fact that something is, and in its Being lies in the fact that something is, and in its Being as it is; in Reality; in presence-at-hand; in subsistence; in validity; in Dasein; in the "there is."^{14(p276)}

I take Heidegger's view of being as related to our way of "being" or "being there and present" in the world. However, in relation to operationalizing the concept of "being" I take it to relate to what Leonard¹² infers in the question "what does it mean to be a person," which leads to the questions "how do we know who we are" or "who am I" and the view that I need to know myself and find meaning in me before I look to interpreting others and meaning in them. Looking at self, Leonard suggests, will enable people (nurses) to "move away from an uncritical belief in science and only the use of the scientific method,"^{12(p316)} and not to negate the value addition of traditional science but to acknowledge its appropriate use, and appreciate the value of meanings of stories obtained from participants.

On another note, Van Manen¹⁵ cites Sartre who describes the act of looking at someone through a keyhole motivated by curiosity, jealousy, or vice and losing oneself in the world of the person beyond the keyhole. However, he writes "all of a sudden I hear footsteps and realize that somebody is looking at me,"^{15(p25)} and from that standpoint, I find myself looking at myself through the eyes of the other, and I become overcome with shyness, guilt, embarrassment, shame (depending on the purpose or intent of looking through the keyhole), as I see through others' eyes at what I am doing. Van Manen writes, "I see myself because somebody sees me."^{15(p25)} Van

Manen thus articulates that phenomenology is, on the one hand, a “description of the lived-through quality of lived experience,” and on the other hand, a “description of meaning of the expression of lived experience.”^{15(p25)} He goes on to say that the presented descriptions are somewhat different, in that on the one hand, the first description is that of the “life world as lived,”^{15(p25)} and the second is that of a mediated life world as “expressed in symbolic form,” and suggests that all description at any point in time and place is ultimately interpretation.

I posit, learning from Van Manen¹⁵ and Heidegger,¹⁴ and reflecting on the preceding paragraphs that all descriptions start with how we perceive ourselves, and how we perceive the nature of our being in the world or our ontology, and our ability to use language in a way that gives meaning to our interpretations of self and others, and experiences. At this juncture, if I reflect on my existence in the world, and my relationship to the world, I concur with Heidegger that the world with its *mélange* of sociocultural, political, and economic intricacies existed before I arrived. Further, although there may be traits and ways of being that are inherent in me, learning from Heidegger,¹⁴ I believe that I am qualified to infer that my way of being in the world is not devoid of socioeconomic, and political, context, but is rooted in historical, economic, cultural, and social dynamics, including that of intersecting multiple oppressions, inclusive of gender, class, ethnicity, race, and ageism. Thus, I believe I am further qualified in presenting the thesis that my interpretation and others’ interpretation of how I am in the world is invariably influenced by a *mélange* of social and political minutiae.

Interpretation within sociocultural and political contexts

Leonard¹² holds that as humans from an early age we interpret ourselves in light of our cultural backgrounds. She states that “all of those hidden skills and practices and the linguistic meanings that are so all-pervasive as

to be un-noticed and yet make the world intelligible for us, create our possibilities and the conditions of our actions.”^{12(p321)} So “through whose sociocultural and political lens do I make my interpretations”? As a Sri Lankan, do I interpret the relationship between, for example, a nurse and a patient from my own cultural and political lens? What is my Sri Lankan lens? Does it relate to my entrance into the world, and my life’s experiences or does it relate to my cultural heritage, the pure fact that I am Sri Lankan, and includes the history of Sri Lanka, and Sri Lanka’s evolutionary journey as a country? From the perspective of Heidegger, I believe I am compelled into thinking that I need to interpret the relationship between the nurse and the patient, not purely from a (my) Sri Lankan lens, but from a “me” or my “lens,” and describing exactly what I see using the power of linguistics and language, and describing the background of the picture to include the context in which the relationship is occurring. I posit that I would also include from where I am coming and how I see what I see. The context in this sense I believe will include the immediate environment and context in which the relationship is taking place as well as the extraneous context that is external to the immediate context. In reasoning the preceding ideas, I reflect on Hall¹⁶ who articulates the view that “while not wanting to expand the territorial claims of the discursive infinitely, how things are represented” . . . (or I posit interpreted) . . . “in a culture plays a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role.” This, Hall¹⁶ infers, “gives questions of culture and ideology (and ways of being I posit) and the scenarios of” . . . (I conceive interpretations) . . . “representations—subjectivity, identity, politics—a formative, not merely an expressive—place in the constitution of social and political life.”^{16(pp253-254)}

To elucidate through rhetorical questions, I pose after reflecting on international conferences. Is there a culture at international conferences? What is the culture that is propagated at international conferences? Who delineates the culture or who says what

culture is acceptable? Is the culture a conformist culture? If you conform you are accepted, if you don't, you run the risk of being marginalized, oppressed, and not being heard even though the work that you do is worth listening to and will contribute to enriching nursing? On another note, do people *really* mean it when they say "be open to new ideas and initiate new ideas". . . given the multicultural context in which numerous countries are placed because of migration, effective modes of travel, and the job market. To what extent are people effectively living in a globalized context and to what extent are nurses involved in "really" global and multi-culturally competent nursing care, education, and research? To what extent are doors really open to greet new and different ways of thinking and interpretations? How are new and different ways of thinking brought out into the open or interpreted, and through which lens or whose lens are these ways of thinking exposed to the world? Does the socio-cultural and political climate or context influence the way different ways of thinking and different ways of being are brought out into the world? At this juncture, I present a view articulated by Smith and Hodkinson¹⁷ that the process of analysis, evaluation, and representation is neither terminal nor mechanical but like a delicate dance of balance, interpretation and representation are always ongoing, emergent, unpredictable, and unfinished and are always embedded in ongoing historical, socio-cultural, and political contexts.¹⁷

Interpretation and critical theory

From a critical theory perspective it is assumed that truth exists as "taken for granted realities" shaped by historical, social, political, cultural, gender, and economic factors that over time are considered real.¹⁸ Within critical theory, interpretation becomes a process of reflection in action—evolutionary praxis effecting transformation.¹⁹

On another note, Habermas²⁰ writes the idea that "mastery of an abstract system of rules, based on an innate language appara-

tus system of rules, regardless of how the latter is in fact used in actual speech". . . "is a competence". . . that has . . . "a monological capability"^{20(p361)} or, I posit, a 2-pronged capability. He suggests, the capability "attributes the intersubjectivity of meaning" to the receiver and sender who are "equipped with the same programme" to enable communication.^{20(p361)} Further, he suggests that

speech the actual language behaviour would then have to be explained as the result of an interaction between linguistic competence and certain psychological, as well as sociological, peripheral conditions which restrict the application of the competence. While the system of linguistic rules determines, on the one hand, whether a sequence of expressions is correct or deviant, these restrictive conditions determine, on the other, whether a correctly formed expression is unusual or acceptable in a given situation.^{20(p361)}

This view lends the impression that the receiver and sender are equipped with subjective and objective knowledge or intersubjectivity, and linguistic competence, to enable them to interact and find meaning within the context of psychological, sociological, and peripheral conditions.

Habermas²⁰ also dawns the idea that critical theory involves the process of bending over backwards on self, or, I posit, engages the process of stepping outside of self and seeing something from a new perspective (like the soul stepping out of the body and looking at the world afresh taking into account all contexts). He infers, and I concur, that being a self-reflexive person and able to penetrate a given context will give power to the person to account for his or her own conditions of possibility, as critical thought, I believe, is dyed-in-the-wool to evolutionary rationality, and as Welch²¹ indicates will involve acknowledging that we all are situated in a context that is shared to a certain extent by the persons in our sociocultural and political environment, including our families, professional groups, and social circles.²¹

In the process of stepping out of self, however, Gadamer infers that as humans

we are not devoid of prejudices that can be tested in a straightforward and neutral manner, and as humans we can discriminate between blind and enabling prejudices through dialogue. In contrast, Thompson¹⁰ infers that the work of Gadamer reflects failure to confront social and political conditions as sources of domination and authority in contemporary times. Predialogue, however, reflecting on Gadamer's inference, intriguingly Freire²² adds, and I concur, that in the process of dialogue it is important to be cognizant of the essence of dialogue: *the word*. Because he says that it is within the word that the 2 dimensions of reflection* and action can be found, and posits that if "one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers."^{22(p68)} The meaning I epitomize from this discourse is that in interpretations of action and reflection, from a critical standpoint when (I am) or we are involved in interpretations of a matter of concern, interest, phenomena, and stories, it is imperative to be cognizant to critically *re-reflect* on the reflection and action delineated and penetrate the historical, sociocultural, economical, and political context to find true meaning and transform the true meaning into enabling and facilitating the oppressed and the oppressors or effect revolutionary transformation for the benefit of empowerment or dawn of a new way of being.

In contrast to Habermus and Gadermer, Derrida expresses the view that things that happen or are experienced will always happen or be experienced once and only once²⁴ Furthermore, he infers that anything that happens has to be either repeatable (he uses the

term *iterable*) or recollected from one's memory to be anticipatable or recognizable.²⁵ I infer from Derrida's point of view that some persons will always have experiences, and anything that happens is a part of that experience and it is eventful, and interpreted within the context of the experience as it happens.

Meaning, interpretation, representation, and nursing

Reflecting on the preceding paragraphs, I dawn that from whichever paradigmatic lens I look, listen, and feel, interpretations and the meanings underlying interpretations are embodied in historical, sociocultural, political, and economic context. But then the questions that behoove me are "how are these interpretations represented?" and "when do these interpretations and representations begin to conceive meaning or effect nursing?"

To explicate, representation is broadly defined as the process by which members of a culture use language (verbal and/or nonverbal) in the forms of art, signs, and/or symbols) to produce meaning.³⁻²⁶ This definition carries the important axiom that things, objects, people, and events in the world do not have any final or true meaning; meanings are contextual and through language and discursive practice change from person to person, one period to another, and from one culture to another.²⁷ Hall asserts that it is "us" "in society" who make and re-make meanings by forging links between people, events, experiences, the mental concepts we carry in our heads, communication, and the interpretation and deconstruction of those meanings. Consequently, representations of these meanings are always in the process of evolution,²⁶ and are "born of coordinations among persons' agreements, negotiations, and affirmations."^{3(p48)}

Hall¹⁶ posits that, on the one hand, representation is a way of viewing reality that exists "outside" the means by which things are represented. On the other hand, he posits that the term representation can also stand for "radical displacement of that unproblematic notion of the concept of

*Boychuck Duchscher²³ posits that reflection is a key in creating critical consciousness and this "disposition is realized by critically analyzing perceptions, cultural assumptions, and social expectations that dictate how human beings relate to their world."^{23(p578)} She moves on to advocate that "the emphasis is on facilitation of self-understanding so that the person becomes aware of institutionally, culturally or socially embedded ideologies that have been unknowingly or unwillingly internalized."^{23(p578)}

representation.^{16(p253)} Deconstructing this quotation, I learn from Hall that events, structures, and relations have conditions of existence outside the sphere of the discursive. But as Hall¹⁶ and Freire²² suggest, and I concur, it is within the discursive, subject to context and language, that those events, structures, and relations have meaning, and it is through the dialogue that transformational interpretation is able to come into being.

In contrast, Schwandt²⁸ posits that as individuals encounter new experiences, their minds construct representations of those experiences that are structured by their own previous knowledge and beliefs.²⁸ He argues that representation speaks to topics such as voice, audience, and the “other,” and the author’s place in the reflexive texts within a discursive or dialogical form. However, Schwandt²⁸ conceives, and I concur, that it is critical to note that representations of phenomenon, experiences, are always through the writer’s cultural lens (or through my lens). For instance, although I may disseminate what I learn from the participants after “member checks” and the use of quotations, when I present what they (the participants) say, even though I may take all necessary precautions, I will be cognizant that I will always be presenting my ideas through my cultural lens and contexts that I have penetrated and found meaning. A rhetorical question—where does this leave the participants’ voice and their interpretations of reality? Can what is revealed by a participant in a research study, or can the findings of a “hard core science” study, *ever truly* be represented if both stories and findings are invariably colored by the researcher, writer, or presenter’s lens, and from where they are coming? Perhaps when interpreting participants’ voices we need to be cognizant of the fact that the participants’ voices are sieved through the interpretations of the voices by the researcher or writer or the presenters’ lens and their respective sociocultural and political contexts. This means that in the context of the application of findings to practice or theory development in nursing, we (I am) are

responsible for critically reflecting and deciphering from where the particular researcher or researchers are coming and their ontology. It also means then that the findings will be colored by the lens of the immediate researchers, writers, or presenters, and by our (my own) lens influenced by the very nature of how we are (I am) interpreting the presented research.

Thinking further, I posit additional answers for reflection. In the world of interpretation, and in terms of research, I believe the researcher moves between what is learned from participants, the interpretation of what was learned through his or her cultural lens, and the articulation of what was learned. Thus, as Denzin²⁹ posits, the researcher is required to address issues closely related to multiple representations of reality and to the interpretations of that reality, and he eloquently articulates that “representation . . .” is always self-presentation. That is, the “other’s presence is directly connected to the writers’ self-presence in the text . . . the other person that is presented in the text is always a version of the researcher’s self.”^{29(p503)}

Reflecting on the discourse in the presiding paragraphs, influenced by Schwandt,²⁸ I invoke the question, “how do individually constructed representations, different with each historical, social, and cultural and political context (each different from each other, but all of value), contribute to the production of new knowledge and beliefs?” Shifts in meaning, I posit, can to a certain extent be an individual act, but as individuals are situated in shared contexts the shifts in meaning also involve the community, and ideas about what is legitimate change as different contexts influence and intervene in the process of meanings evolving and coming to the forefront. Further, I posit that new knowledge or experience either finds a place within an existing scheme or pattern or conversely forces persons to critically reflect and modify the painting of how things are in order to take account of it and derive meaning. Gendlin³⁰ expresses similar thoughts eloquently in the following paragraph that states that

Phenomenology has no problem going beyond a single person's private experiencing because experiencing is inherently an interaction process in a situation with other people and things. What appears is neither internal nor external, neither just private nor just interactional. My situation is not just "subjective" since the others in it are more than I can experience, but neither is it "objective" since my situation does not exist apart from me.³⁰(pp147-148)

CONCLUSION

Interpretation is not a standalone concept; it is embedded in a *mélange* of contexts and is unquestionably socially and politically placed. In summary, a review of language, meaning, and interpretation reveals that words and the power of words are influenced by the sociopolitical context, and it is the power of words and language that can infuse meaning and sway the wind. Then, examining interpretation and empiricism, I conceive, although unintentional, that empiricism is engulfed with a cobweb of interpretations derived from the environments and the context in which it lives or struggles to survive fully, and the researcher given the researcher's ontology in the world, the research is invariably colored by the researcher's lens, and interpretations of the empirical research is also invariably colored. Next, reflecting on interpretation, self, and hermeneutics, I find that how we perceive ourselves, and how we perceive

our nature of being in the world or our ontology, affects our interpretations of the world in which we live, and our way of being. Further, interpretations are ongoing, emergent, unpredictable, and unfinished and are always embedded in ongoing historical, sociocultural, and political contexts. In contrast, analyzing interpretation from a critical theory lens, I posit, interpretation becomes a process of penetration of different contexts and of reflection in action or an evolutionary praxis effecting transformation.

In conclusion, I find myself with more questions than answers, but I feel that through the questions and metaphors and analogies, and via use of the power of language, I was able to critically reflect on whether interpretations are socially and politically placed. On reflection, I believe that I have not concluded each of the areas reflected on in this article but have only somewhat "stirred the pot" or "woken the mind" or "initiated a taste" for more critical discourse on the nature of interpretation, and given rise to the need to delve deeper into the question of not whether interpretations are socially and politically placed, but given rise to the questions of (a) to what extent do we actually represent with precision in a value-adding manner meanings of stories and "scientific" findings? and (b) How do we immerse ourselves in the dance of meanings and interpretations and emerge with true representations?

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