



A Philosophical Perspective of Hermeneutics Study of Lived Experience of University Students with Self-Harm

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ABSTRACT

Self-harm is a phenomenon characterized by the intentional infliction of injury or pain on the body, often without suicidal intent. Despite its prevalence, studies on this phenomenon within the Indonesian context remains limited, particularly in terms of the role of peer support. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the lived experience of university students who engage in self-harm and the perspectives of their supportive peers using hermeneutics phenomenological approach, rooted in the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer. The complexity, sensitivity, and profoundly personal nature of self-harm was also explored using ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological foundations of hermeneutics. The strength of hermeneutics inquiry to explain meaning and context was assessed by a review of pertinent studies. The results identified several obstacles associated with ethical considerations and participants engagement. This shows that future nursing studies must focus on the development of nursing theories specific to self-harm, the integration of spiritual and religious perspectives, and culturally sensitive interventions. In addition, the current study validates the significance of hermeneutics in the advancement of nursing knowledge and practice in the context of mental health issues among young adults.

Keyword: Hermeneutics, Self-harm, University Students



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1. Introduction

Several studies have been carried out to examine a diverse range of populations (Lewin et al., 2024), contributing to the exploration of self-harm across disciplines and deepening the understanding of its meaning from the perspective of individuals (Mughal et al., 2023), parents (Wang et al., 2022), and nurses (Ostervang et al., 2022). According to Naz et al. (2021), self-harm is a maladaptive behavior that is intentionally carried out for reasons other than suicide. It is frequently used as a means of alleviating mental pain rather than a lethal purpose (Tharani et al., 2022). In addition, Emerson et al. (2024) reported that only 5% of self-injurers intend to commit suicide. Although Holm & Severinsson (2010) identified self-harm as a coping mechanism among sexually abused women, its impact remains detrimental (Tharani et al., 2022).

Several consequences often occurred after the behavior, such as wound care and antipathy from nurses during the treatment (Mulhearn et al., 2021). Despite the victim's request for personalized patient care, the level of expertise of healthcare professionals, and the process of interprofessional collaboration, stigmatization

by healthcare professionals typically continues (Aggarwal, 2021). According to Lewis & Hasking (2020), self-harm among university students must be addressed specifically in terms of definition and methods. This is primarily because there is a difference between self-mutilation and self-harm. Self-mutilation is often found pathologically among people with mental health diagnoses, while self-harm only occurs once without any lethal method. Therefore, the mental health evaluation must be assessed for depression and risk for suicide in the future.

Da Silva Bandeira et al. (2022) reported that university students, particularly undergraduates, often experienced difficulties with alcohol misuse and mental health issues during their academic careers. The results showed that approximately 50% of college students met the diagnostic criteria for mental disorders, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Tresno et al., (2012) showed that 21% of university students in Indonesia had attempted suicide at least once in their lifetime (self-harm). Statistically, 63% of young adults (20-39 years old) are the age group most likely to engage in self-harm compared to older people (Tharani et al., 2022). In addition, 80% of adolescents (19-24 years old) commit self-harm across countries, including European countries, the United States of America (USA), and Australia (Greydanus & Shek, 2009). In Indonesia, there is no official statistical report related to self-harm. However, Liem et al (2022) found that 45% of young adults (18-35 years old) engaged in self-harm during the COVID-19 pandemic due to feelings of loneliness and hopelessness. The overwhelming sense of despair has driven individuals to engage in self-harm during the pandemic by jumping from multi-story buildings and deliberately drowning (Kim et al., 2022).

Emerson et al. (2024) reported that various methods are used to commit self-harm, including burning, cutting, head banging, hair pulling, and drug overdose. The most prevalent among young adults are self-cutting, self-poisoning, and drug misuse (Tharani et al., 2022). These methods are prevalent among adolescents from Asian backgrounds, particularly those from South Asia (Naz et al., 2021). The majority of people who engage in self-harm have a psychiatric diagnosis and a history of the behavior. Self-harm is frequently perceived as a deeply personal act and as an expression of past traumatic events (Claréus et al., 2021). However, in Asian countries, the behavior is interpreted as infractions of religious principles (Aggarwal, 2021). Wang et al. (2022) concluded that the primary caregivers of people who engage in self-harm through lethal methods experience a sense of hopelessness and stress. This issue is further exacerbated by the widespread public stigma associated with the behavior. Parents perceive self-harm as a negative experience that leads to destructive behaviour and emotional distress (Fu et al., 2020), leading to the inability of victims to share their experience.

Several studies have shown that 60-70% of individuals who engage in self-harm are more forthcoming about their experience with friends than with parents (Armiento et al., 2014; Heath et al., 2009). This phenomenon can be attributed to various factors, including emotional support, the need for privacy, and a sense of empathy. Consequently, the high level of stigma associated with self-harm often leads victims to seek solace and openness in friendships. Studies also suggest that health professionals frequently show a lack of understanding towards this behavior, while parents who become aware typically react in less supportive ways, such as denial, avoidance, or feelings of shame (Özen-Dursun et al., 2023). Acknowledging the behavior with peers offers emotional relief and enhances the relational bond between the victims and their peers. Despite the importance, there remains a scarcity of studies focusing on experience of peers who support friends engaging in self-harm. Therefore, it is important to explore how self-harm is experienced by university students and supporting peers in Indonesia.

2. Philosophical Framework

Several studies have built upon existing phenomena and their associated study questions. Therefore, a study framework is necessary to address the questions and uncover the phenomena related to the identified problem (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Philosophy is a method used to identify and explore the meaning and the significance of human life experience from various perspectives, as well as question the existence of natural beings (Tembo, 2024). Human experience is conveyed as a personal journey but has a global perspective with many contributing factors, such as cultural, social, economic, historical, and political factors. It is deeply dug into the substance of the nature of a particular discipline. Therefore, philosophy is characterized as a scientific discipline that demands logical inquiry, a deep passion for knowledge, and a complex nature. The retrieval of this knowledge demands thorough analytical and critical reasoning with a rigorous intellectual investigation of core questions.

In nursing, philosophy is part of the nursing knowledge evolution (Tembo, 2024). It consists of 3 elements, namely ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Ontology refers to the fundamental inquiry into the existence

of nursing science and knowledge, which ranges from abstract concepts to empirical measurements (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Nurses identify phenomena and formulate questions regarding the existence of these phenomena in studies. Meanwhile, epistemology in nursing is how the basic phenomena are known, described, or measured. Axiology, values, and moral ethics have been reported to have an important effect on comprehending a phenomenon or scenario.

Some studies in the field of self-harm showed that the issues are extremely delicate. In reality, self-harm concept was discovered to be in a state of evolution in the context of attributes, antecedents, and its impact (Lewis & Hasking, 2021). Self-harm is also a multidimensional phenomenon that is related to social and contextual factors as part of the human experience (Tharani et al., 2022). Consequently, to fully understand the lived experience of students who engage in the behavior, hermeneutics, a philosophic approach to science, is suitable for capturing its significance and connection to the world where the students live through a circular process of data interpretation. Gadamer is the philosopher selected for the current study's methodological approach.

In the 20th-century philosophical discourse, Hans-Georg Gadamer is considered a pivotal figure (Williams 2021). Gadamer, a student of Martin Heidegger and a contemporary, made a substantial contribution to the establishment of hermeneutics tradition that serves as the foundation for hermeneutics phenomenology. The primary concern of the philosopher was the nature of comprehension, which was assumed to be perpetually embedded in the historical, dialectical, and linguistic contexts. As this study critically evaluates historical backgrounds and preconceptions, engages in dialogues with participants, and contemplates the role of language in both relational and textual interactions, Gadamer's insights served as a major foundation. The lived experience of students with self-harm was significantly illuminated by hermeneutics philosophy. Ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology were articulated as follows:

2.1 Ontology

Ontology addresses the fundamental nature of reality and what is assumed to exist within a given field of inquiry (Pazurek & Koseoglu, 2020). Considered as a human science, nursing views ontology as the foundational beliefs within the core concerns of the discipline. It addresses the question, "What phenomena or nursing situations should be recognized as existing truth within the scope of nursing knowledge and practice?" In the context of self-harm, it is the lived experience of university students who commit self-harm and their supporting peers. It is a unique and deeply personal reality for each individual. This field acknowledges that self-harm is not a one-dimensional behavior but is influenced by the individual's subjective reality, including their psychological state, social environment, as well as cultural and historical background. In hermeneutics philosophy, "lived experience" is not the acquisition of knowledge but an approach to being receptive to potential change. "Lived" is an openness to experience facilitated by the very act of experiencing (Nicholas Davey, 2016).

2.2. Epistemology

Epistemology, or the sources of knowledge, is the exploration of knowledge creation (Williams, 2021). It refers to the study of how knowledge is acquired, how phenomena are understood, and how such knowledge is organized within a discipline. In nursing, epistemology focuses on how knowledge is derived from nursing situations or phenomena in clinical practice, study, and education. The epistemological approach involves seeking to understand self-harm through the firsthand accounts of university students who engage in this behavior and their supportive peers. It recognizes that true understanding comes from exploring their perceptions, meanings, and interpretations of self-harm, rather than relying solely on external, clinical, or theoretical perspectives.

2.3 Axiology

Axiology is a branch of philosophy that focuses on values and moral ethics. It considers the normative questions for components valued by the discipline (Matheson, 2020). Several studies have shown that nurses must cultivate self-awareness regarding their professional responsibilities in nursing care delivery. It is important that nurses consistently consider ethical principles in their practice and study, specifically during data collection. In the context of self-harm studies, the researchers must understand that self-harm as a phenomenon contains disturbing and traumatized underlying factors. In some cases, the young adult and the parents feel uncomfortable talking about experience due to emotional triggers. Therefore, the axiology branch take some strategic approaches to minimize ethical issues with hermeneutics approach. It is necessary for the

researcher to value empathy and respect for the participant's experience and be culturally sensitive to understand experience.

2.4 Methodology

The methodology proposed for self-harm study was hermeneutics philosophy by Gadamer. According to Burke & Neumann (2024), hermeneutics referred to an interpretation of the meaning through written text as well as observation. This was a circular process to capture all the themes that emerged, or "fusion of horizon," a foundational concept that captured how understanding emerged through dialogue and interaction between different perspectives (Foss et al., 2016). The fusion of horizons challenged traditional notions of objective knowledge, emphasizing that all understanding was subjective and influenced by context. This encouraged humility and the recognition that one's perspective was just one among many, promoting a more dialogical approach to knowledge and understanding.

3. Relevance of the Philosophical Approach to the Phenomenon

Analysis in hermeneutics fundamentally followed hermeneutics cycle, progressing from an initial, naive understanding to a more explicit comprehension that could arise through the process of data interpretation and explanation (Foss et al., 2016). Furthermore, hermeneutics captured the interrelationship of the phenomena and answers the ontology and epistemology questions (Ray & Locsin, 2023).

Self-harm referred to a phenomenon that had been studied for decades. From an ontological and epistemological perspective, ongoing investigations across several fields, including nursing, focused on questions about what self-harm was and how to explore individuals' experience with it. Numerous studies showed that it was a unique personal experience shaped by multiple factors, such as culture and history. Furthermore, it was evolving with the attributes, the methods, and the specific situations that could trigger self-destructive behavior. Exploring this experience was well-suited to hermeneutics approach, as studies on self-harm were not only ethically sensitive but also required deep interpretation beyond the author's prior understanding of the subject. Several reasons why hermeneutics method was particularly appropriate for studying self-harm among young adults were showed.

4. Review of Relevant Hermeneutics Approach

Some hermeneutics studies were found to be related to self-harm behavior among youth. In case of self-harm among young women with borderline personality disorder in Norway, some emerging themes related to the participants' view of self-harm experience were found. Many strategic data collections were applied, including emails, journals, and in-depth interviews for those who agreed to perform the face-to-face interview (Holm & Severinsson, 2010). However, there was no specific detail about the recruitment of the participants, leading to their suffering from borderline personality disorder/BPD, which was acknowledged as one of the personality disorders with manipulative behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The result had some bias related to psychiatric symptoms. However, this study effectively captured the lived experience of the participants regarding the meaning and history of self-harm, despite focusing solely on women diagnosed with BPD who had a history of experiencing abuse and violence.

Another study by Tofthagen, Talseth, & Fagerstrom (2017) among men recovering from self-harm showed that recovery was a turning point based on hermeneutics approach applied. All emerging themes appropriately answered the study questions and offered an interesting look at the lived experience of self-injured. Claréus et al. (2021) explained the lived experience of young people with hermeneutics approach and van Manen's technique for analyzing the data. The data collection used various methods, from interviews and document evaluation, such as email, reports, etc. Emerging themes showed the trauma experience surrounding those with self-harm.

All 3 studies faced difficulties in engaging with the participants due to the sensitivity of the issue before data collection. Hermeneutics must be valuable to capture the lived world of the participants, as the lived beings were questioning. Furthermore, it captured all of the lived experience of those with self-harm who encountered some challenges during interaction. This must be mitigated with another communication approach that could be valuable to support the data collection.

5. Implications for Nursing Study and Practice

According to scholarly articles, there were some suggestions to establish the context of self-harm studies

to expand nursing knowledge in the future. First, it was necessary to conduct further exploration of the spiritual context and self-harm behavior among young adults, as there was limited study in these 2 areas, particularly in qualitative studies (Greydanus & Shek, 2009). Second, self-harm was part of the human response that entailed too many variables, such as age, domestic violence, gender, and problematic relationships. However, there was very little nursing study exploring the meaning of self-harm within this paradigm and theories (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2023). Third, it was necessary to address the nursing intervention specifically for self-harm behavior, since the nursing interventions related to self-harm nowadays were associated with wound care and patient-nurse communication (Kruzan & Whitlock, 2019). Although studies of the young adults who committed self-harm showed that more than interpersonal interaction was needed, these individuals must be closer to counseling and explore more about the initial background for self-harm (Lewis & Hasking, 2021). Fourth, it was necessary to capture the meaning of self-harm perspective in the view of religious leaders in Muslim countries, including Indonesia. Self-harm was commonly associated with the weakness of religious belief and practices (Tharani et al., 2022). Religious leaders or preachers played an essential role in the community, for society took their opinion as guidance in many cases.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, self-harm refers to a human response influenced by multiple factors, including social and cultural issues, as well as a history of past abuse. Numerous studies have been conducted to explore the phenomenon of self-harm from various perspectives, including qualitative studies using hermeneutics approach. Hermeneutics method, particularly as developed by Gadamer, has been widely used to gain deeper insights into complex phenomena, such as self-harm. However, in the Indonesian context, there is a lack of studies using Gadamerian hermeneutics to examine the perspectives of university students who engage in self-harm and their close peers.

Hermeneutics is particularly relevant in addressing fundamental questions about self-harm, such as what self-harm means to those who engage in it, and how results can be interpreted through Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons. Therefore, studies using this approach hold ontological and epistemological validity and can yield results that inform future studies. This contributes to decision-making, specifically in promoting student mental health at the university level and supporting peers who play a significant role in the recovery.

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