"It's All Greek to Me": Bridging Psychological and Philosophical Perspectives in Understanding Veteran Carer identity

Hannah Johnstone

PhD Candidate, School of Law and Applied Social Sciences, Robert Gordon University, Scotland

h.johnstone2@rgu.ac.uk | h.l.johnstone95@gmail.com

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7909-685X

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Introduction

Until last year, if asked about philosophy, I would have said, "it's all Greek to me". As a psychology student and researcher, philosophical ideas such as phenomenology, ontology, and epistemology felt distant from the lived experiences I was studying. My doctoral research on the lived experience and support needs of veteran spousal caregivers, focused initially on identity transitions, but it soon became clear that psychological theories alone could not explain these transitions. Grappling with philosophy forced me into a state of discomfort, unsettling my assumptions and pushing me to re-examine the foundations of my work.

This reflection explores how grappling with philosophy has not only clarified my research direction but also addresses the question: does philosophy have a role in answering today's real-world challenges? I consider this question in the context of my doctoral work on the identity transitions of veteran spousal caregivers.

Research Context and Philosophical Foundation

I am a second year PhD candidate exploring the lived experiences of veteran spousal caregivers with the goal of developing targeted mental health and wellbeing interventions. As the daughter of a veteran and a former military child, this work is deeply personal. I am the sole subject of this particular reflection, not my participants. My methodology is exploratory-sequential mixed methods, with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith & Eatough, 2016) forming the qualitative phase. Until recently, I believed psychological theory alone could underpin my research. I have now come to see, however, philosophy's foundational role in guiding critical inquiry.

I first engaged with IPA (Smith & Eatough, 2016) during my master's research which explored the lived experiences of the intimate partners of veterans and whether they play a role in mental health recovery (Johnstone & Cogan, 2021). IPA (Smith & Eatough, 2016) is well suited for

investigating experiences that the participants are still trying to make sense of, making it ideal for identity-focused work. IPA is inherently phenomenological, grounded in the analysis of how individuals interpret and find meaning in lived experiences (Smith & Eatough, 2016) and takes ontological and epistemological positioning from key phenomenologists such as Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer (Tuffour, 2017). During my initial use of IPA (Smith & Eatough, 2016), I focused on procedures rather than philosophical foundations. It was only later in my PhD that I began to appreciate that philosophy was not just a background theory, but integral to understanding identity. I began integrating my empirical grounding in psychology with a deeper philosophical inquiry.

Personal Encounter with Philosophy

My first encounter with philosophy came at 17 whilst reading Camus in a French A-Level class. I had just read L'Étranger (Camus, 1972) , and whilst the philosophy originally eluded me, the core idea of an indifferent universe resonated deeply. At university, I took a philosophy elective alongside my psychology degree. When asked, "how do we know we're not dreaming?", I instinctively reached for empirical answers, brain waves, REM sleep, missing the philosophical point entirely. Unsurprisingly, I dropped philosophy before my second year, assuming I would not return to it. I went on to complete a psychology BSc (Hons) and MSc, publishing my master's dissertation, and working in the charity sector before returning to academia. Now pursuing a PhD in Applied Social Studies on veteran spousal caregivers, I've come to understand that my earlier dismissal of philosophy was premature. Psychology gave me the tools, but philosophy offered the foundations. It is through my doctoral research that I began to fully appreciate the philosophical underpinnings of inquiry.

During the first year of my PhD, I began to realise that formulating a research question is a philosophical act, one that is grounded in ontological and epistemological assumptions. During a researcher development seminar, I realised I needed to engage more deeply with these foundations, especially given the qualitative nature of my mixed methods design. I also came to understand how my psychological training shaped my interpretation of data, and how my ontology can inevitably shape my epistemology. I simply had not recognised it until then.

Critical Insights

When considering the question of "how well are our concepts, theories, and methodologies in the social sciences keeping up with 'real life' changes?", I reflected on my very recent exploration into the philosophical discussions of personal identity as it relates to veteran spousal caregiving, the central concept within my PhD. I had first approached this concept through psychological frameworks. I examined theories about how caregivers generally reconceptualise their identity,

moving from spouse to carer (Hughes et al., 2013) as well as psychological and sociological theories and frameworks examining military culture and the role of identity in veteran transition (Adams et al., 2019; Pedlar et al., 2019). I also engaged with phenomenological approaches, such as Ardent's (2018) concept of "my story" which emphasises the political and relational dimensions of identity and Ricoeur's (1990) narrative identity, which focuses on how individuals weave their lives into coherent personal narratives (Čapek and Loidolt, 2021). It was not until one of my supervisors suggested I take a step back and decide on my ontological and epistemological stances of personal identity that I really began to see why philosophical frameworks are so vital to research.

Over the course of 4-5 months, I worked on clarifying the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of my research, which involved, reading philosophical discussions on the meaning of identity. During this period, two frameworks became central touch stones in moving my research beyond psychological descriptions towards philosophical engagement. Ricoeur's (1990) narrative identity and Sartre's (1956) concept of radical freedom challenged me to consider how individuals' agency in shaping and weaving their identity into a coherent narrative during caregiving transitions. I identified a synthesis between my recently developed interest in philosophy and my long-standing passion for psychology. One example is experimental existential psychology, where experimental methods are used to investigate the existential impact of the key universal truths, identity, death, and what it means to be human (Koole et al., 2006). Another is existential psychotherapy, which applies philosophical insights to support individuals facing existential concerns (Koole, 2010). When I debated with one of my supervisors about why narrative identity as understood by Ricoeur (1990), Bruner (1990) and others was a better fit for the construction and reconstruction of veteran spousal caregiver identity, I realised I had achieved what I needed to. I had found my footing in philosophical identity theory and committed to a clear position: that personal identity is narrative in nature, constructed and reconstructed through the stories we tell ourselves and others

Lessons for Other Researchers

This leads to the central question of my reflection: does philosophy have a role to play in answering the questions of today? My answer, which would have originally been a no, is unequivocally yes. The process of revising my response from a "no" to a "yes" has been, at times, somewhat challenging, as I endeavoured to set aside (or bracket, as Husserl would say) my pre-conceived ideas of the psychological concepts of personal identity and allow the philosophical discourse to speak for itself. There were numerous occasions when I had to distance myself from the material I was engaging with in order to understand what personhood might mean compared to identity over time (a distinction which I can, now, at least make without confusing myself). I came to appreciate the positionality I was marking out for myself. I can now say, for example, that my stance on personal identity is that it is narrative in nature, constructed by the narratives we tell ourselves

and others, and that the freedom to choose whether you weave this narrative into your identity is indeed radical. I have been able to explore the concept of "the phenomenology of the event" (Neumann, 2023; Romano, 2014), and investigated how this might link to the psychological concept of post-traumatic growth (Henson et al., 2021; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This exploration provides a fascinating interdisciplinary starting point for my data collection. I would not have been able to do this a year ago, let alone when I published my original piece of research.

Without philosophy, I would not have a framework to explore veterans' psychological experience of personal identity. Without philosophy, I would be unable to engage meaningfully with the potential theoretical advances which are desperately needed for this population. Engaging with philosophy has been both disorienting and transformative. Without this grounding, my research might remain methodologically competent but intellectually and emotionally shallow. For other early career researchers working in the social sciences, especially with complex, human-centred topics, I offer this: let philosophy trouble you. It might feel as if you are going down a tangential path, distracting yourself from the current theories. But, if we can engage with the work of those before us, we can create a deeper understanding of the real-life challenges of the communities and populations we wish to research. Engaging with discomfort became part of my method, an invitation to look beyond tidy frameworks. Discomfort is not a distraction from research; it is often its deepest method.

Hannah Johnstone *is a PhD candidate based in Scotland. Her research background is in psychology and mental health, with a particular focus on the military and veteran community. Her doctoral work examines identity, wellbeing, and the lived experiences of spousal caregivers of veterans. She has previously published on the experiences and role of intimate partners, as well as the veteran experience in the UK, and currently teaches in further and higher education.*

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