Bringing People Back to the Future: The Role of Hermeneutic Temporality in Participatory Research

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Abstract
Within interpretive qualitative research such as hermeneutics, there is a strong connection between past, present, and future in forging understandings of experience. We argue that foundational concepts related to temporality in hermeneutic philosophy can play a key role in participatory research approaches. Participatory research involves working with stakeholders over time, getting to know what is important to them, and attempting to understand how research objectives align with people’s past histories and hopes for the future. We developed a model to exemplify the role of hermeneutics in participatory research, with a particular emphasis on hermeneutic temporality. This model follows the image of a ship that follows three phases: onset, sailing, and ripple effect. As illustrated with a research example in child mental health, we consider that following this model can promote the engagement process with stakeholders, emphasize the importance of people’s situated experiences in shaping a specific research study, and facilitate addressing ethical challenges that may arise.

Keywords
hermeneutics, participatory research, interpretive phenomenology, qualitative research, child mental health

Introduction
Within interpretive qualitative research such as hermeneutics, there is a strong connection between past, present, and future in forging understandings of experience. We argue that foundational concepts related to temporality in hermeneutic philosophy can play a key role in participatory research approaches. Participatory research refers to methodological approaches in which stakeholders are engaged during the different steps of the research process. As experts of a particular phenomenon through their past and/or current experiences, they become partners to the project and are involved in decision making related to the research itself. Through this process, past and current experiences of these partners shape the research project, and they imagine how their future experiences might be impacted by research. In this article, we reflect on how temporality is imagined by key thinkers in hermeneutics, and how these concepts can be used alongside participatory research approaches. An example of a research project is used to illustrate this process and approach. This reflection provides a conceptual background on which to situate the process involved in conducting participatory research. Using a participatory research approach can be challenging for researchers who strive to genuinely engage stakeholders while pursuing specific research aims (Montreuil et al., 2019). Perceiving the participatory research process through a hermeneutic lens can help clarify the processes at play while reflecting on how temporality and experiences shape the research process and outcomes.

Background

Participatory Research
By the term participatory research, we refer to “a systematic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for purposes of education and taking action or effecting change” (Green et al., 1995, Definition section, para. 1). Participatory research thus entails the engagement of

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stakeholders in the research process or outcomes. Although stakeholders often have no research expertise per se, they have expertise in a particular phenomenon through their past and/or current experiences. Therefore, they can play an active role in key steps of the research process to shape knowledge production and translation. For example, stakeholders can be involved in identifying or refining research questions, choosing the most appropriate research design and data collection methods, interpreting the data, and identifying how and with whom to disseminate the research results (Coyne & Carter, 2018). Involving stakeholders in the research process has been shown to lead to studies that are more attuned to their perspectives and inclusive of their experiences (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018; Parry et al., 2009; Wallerstein & Duran, 2017). By involving people affected by a study topic in the research process, the aim is to redress potential harms and lead to research outcomes that are more meaningful to the stakeholders, as they are directly aligned with their experiences and values (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Jagosh et al., 2012; Wallerstein & Duran, 2017). Stakeholders’ past, current, and expected future experiences therefore become central in shaping the research inquiry.

The Roots of Hermeneutic Temporality

Hermeneutics is a research tradition originating from the phenomenological movement in philosophy and focuses on interpretation of meaning. At the turn of the 20th century, phenomenology came as a new, radically different way of doing philosophy. It identified itself as a method, a movement, a practice, and a way of being that questioned the direction and scope of philosophies that came before it. Phenomenology rejected historically established traditions and modes of inquiry on the nature of knowledge and rationality and instead sought to understand experience by looking directly at phenomena as they present themselves to humans (Moran, 2000, pp. 4–5); “zu den Sachen selbst”—a return to the things themselves (Husserl, 1913/2012). An interpretive phenomenological movement was later initiated by Heidegger, which was expended upon by several philosophers and from which hermeneutics was developed. We first present briefly the phenomenological roots of temporality and then focus on hermeneutic temporality as defined by Gadamer and Taylor.

The use of the term “phenomenology” is most frequently attributed to Husserl. He developed phenomenology in response to what he believed was a crisis of the sciences, with scientists acting in passivity, without a full understanding of the assumptions inherent to the scientific inquiry (Husserl, 1935/1970). Husserl thought that knowledge could be understood by examining phenomena as they appear to consciousness (Moran, 2000, p. 3) to arrive at the essence of experiences. For Husserl, time is the most important of all phenomenological problems and also is the most difficult. He was referring not about time as an empirical entity, as minutes or hours; rather, his interest was in the consciousness of time. The consciousness of time was, for Husserl, a critical and complex form of intentionality, involved in virtually every aspect of conscious life. The consciousness of time not only exemplifies intentionality but makes intentionality possible. Even though the now, the past, and the future are mutually dependent, the now enjoys a “privileged” status; it serves as the point of orientation for one’s conscious life. The past appears as past in relation to the now, and it is in relation to the now that what is future appears as future. The now is also privileged in the sense that the now, the present, is open to the new; it is what Husserl referred to as the “generative point.” Without experiencing the now, we would not be aware of the no longer, or of the yet-to-come; we would never experience anything new that could become old (Brough & Blattner, 2006).

Heidegger furthered and transformed many of Husserl’s foundational ideas leading to interpretive phenomenology. Heidegger radically altered the course of the debate on the nature of knowledge when he argued for shifting philosophic inquiry from epistemology—how do we know what we know—to ontology—what it means to be. With this shift in perspective, Heidegger was also able to move away from inquiries about the relationship of the knower to the known, and instead looked toward the fundamental question of what it means to exist, broadened to a question of being, and what it means to be a being who is inquiring about the nature of being (Leonard, 1989, pp. 41–42; Moran, 2000, p. 60). Heidegger proposed a new ontology starting with the concept of Dasein. Dasein attempted to move beyond this impasse created by a split between the subject and its object, where “knowing” was the primary way that individuals interact with things (Heidegger, 1927/2010, sec. 59). Heidegger’s concept of “thrownness” indicates that the person is situated as Being-In-The-World: Dasein. Dasein is always “thrown,” thrown from the past into the present, and projecting itself into the future. It is the past that pushes Dasein toward the present, and the present is always imbued with a projection of future possibilities (Heidegger, 1927/2010). Finally, Heidegger introduced the notion of “time” to expand on how Dasein understands and interprets being. Time is the horizon against which our understanding of being occurs. Therefore, Dasein entails a historical and an interpretive lens (Leonard, 1989, p. 47). Heidegger goes even as far as “defining” Dasein as time (Heidegger, 1927/2010). This is a crucial piece of his argument: Dasein is not a static concept but is also constituted by interpretation and interpretive understanding. Past, present, and future are deeply intertwined. The root structure of the word “present” in German is waiting-toward (Heidegger, 1927/2010), which hints at the interconnectedness of past, present, and future states. While Husserl’s approach to understanding consciousness via phenomenological reduction implied that there was a primordial perspective of the world that transcended time, which could be known and described, Heidegger considered that description was not adequate. Heidegger argued that interpretation and analysis were required to arrive at an understanding of being. This distinction was the springboard for the inclusion of hermeneutic approaches to phenomenological inquiry (Moran, 2000).
Hermeneutics is the approach and methodology of interpretation which “focuses on the meaning that arises from the interpretive interaction” (Laverty, 2003, p. 28). Unlike the phenomenological approach in which assumptions are bracketed (i.e., put aside), researchers using a hermeneutics methodology reflect on their biases and assumptions, which “are embedded and essential to the interpretive process” (Laverty, 2003, p. 28) in order to “give considerable thought to their own experience and to explicitly claim the ways in which their position or experience relates to the issues being researched” (Laverty, 2003, p. 28). As a research methodology, hermeneutics is not a static entity but is dynamic and evolving (Laverty, 2003).

Hermeneutic Temporality

A key concept within hermeneutics that affects the view of temporality is lived experience. Lived experience—Erlebnis, in German—fuses the meaning of the word for experiencing (Erleben, verb: to be alive when something is grasped) and the word for experienced (das Erlebte, noun: what lasts once the experiencing is done). For lived experiences, the immediacy of experiencing provides the raw material to be shaped through interpretation, reinterpretation, and communication into its lasting form, the experienced (Gadamer, 1960/2004). A lived experience is not only something that is experienced, “it being experienced makes a special impression that gives it lasting importance” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 53). This hermeneutic conceptualization of lived experience shows the centrality of the meaning attributed to the experience; an account of lived experience is incomplete if it remains purely descriptive or chronological. It must contain an interpretation of significance for the person. What allows for interpretation are “fore structures” of understanding, which represent the ideas and embodied experiences that we bring with us to a situation (Heidegger, 1927/2010). Gadamer (1960/2004) and Taylor (1991) took this concept that was initially developed by Heidegger further by identifying these fore structures as formative of a backdrop or “horizon of significance” from which we can attribute meaning to a new situation. According to the interpretive phenomenological tradition, a presuppositionless stance is not possible (McManus Holroyd, 2007; Moran, 2000), nor desired, since it is this “horizon” which allows the bridging of new understandings (Gadamer, 1976). Our horizon, coined as “life-world” by Ricoeur (1981), represents our core, our inner existence, the springboard from which we interpret life events in light of what is important to us. Our horizon of significance is dynamic, shaped by our past experiences, what we are living today, and our hopes and fears for the future. Gadamer’s (1960/2004) concept of Bildung emphasizes how our past is carried with us in who we are and become as we are “cultivated” into our future (p. 10). From this life-world, the interpretive process takes on the form of a hermeneutic circle, a process whereby parts of our lives and experiences are examined in light of our horizon of significance and vice versa, how our horizon of significance is shaped by new events (Gadamer, 1976; Taylor, 1971). Gadamer (1976) contributed to describing the social nature of this interpretive process by articulating the concept of “fusion of horizons” (p. 39). In trying to understand a new situation, there is a back-and-forth movement between one’s horizon of significance and another person’s horizon of significance, whereby preunderstandings are repeatedly questioned until a bridge of understanding is created (Gadamer, 1976; Rodgers, 2005; Taylor, 1991, p. 38); this is referred to as “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer, 1976, p. 39; Rodgers, 2005) and is particularly relevant in the context of participatory research.

The Role of Hermeneutic Temporality in Participatory Research

Within participatory research, there is a recognition of the unique experiential expertise and perspectives of all partners, which is consistent with the tenets of hermeneutics (Heron & Reason, 1997). From both approaches, humans are perceived as agents who can act, speak for themselves, reflect on their lives and social worlds, shape their lives and the lives of others (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2016). When using a participatory approach to research, knowledge production is seen as a cocreative process, that is, a coconstruction between stakeholders and researchers, instead of being developed by researchers alone (Heron & Reason, 1997; Koskinen & Nystrom, 2017; Lindberg et al., 2013; Lindwall et al., 2018; Ranheim & Arman, 2014). Within this view, there is a shared interpretation of the data generated from research—a fusion of horizons—that contributes to yield a shared understanding of the meaning of the data (Gadamer, 1976, p. 39; Rodgers, 2005). A horizon is “The totality of all that can be realised or thought about by a person at a given time in history and in a particular culture” (Gadamer, 1976, p. 305). Each person has a horizon of understandings, which is embodied temporally, spatially, and culturally and situated within the whole (Davey, 2015). The fusion of horizons is the process by which a common understanding is possible. Through the participatory research process, these horizons will change for the people involved, hopefully leading to a better research process, aims, and outcomes from the perspectives of those involved. These shared understandings would be necessary to ensure a smooth process for a particular project. Drawing primarily from the ideas of Gadamer and Taylor, we developed a model to exemplify the role of hermeneutics in participatory research, with a particular emphasis on hermeneutic temporality. This model follows the image of a ship that goes through three phases: onset, sailing, and ripple effect (see Figure 1).

We present the three phases alongside an example of how the model can be used in practice from a study conducted by one of the coauthors. In this study, the aim was to use a participatory research approach to develop knowledge of relevance to child mental health services (Montreuil et al., 2018, 2019). A committee composed of children, parents, and staff members was developed and engaged in the different steps of the research process (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2018). Hermeneutics
was the conceptual and methodological framework for the overall project and influenced greatly how the participatory research process unfolded. Hermeneutics was chosen to allow for the study of peoples’ moral experiences and social imaginaries, situated within the context of the mental health setting targeted. From the start, the primary researcher intended to include the children in the research process to more closely align the study to their past and current experiences as well as to their expectations for the future. Children in mental health settings can be disadvantaged compared with other children due to the stigma attached to having a mental health diagnosis, in addition to not having full legal capacities as children. Engaging with children at the different stages of the study contributed to render the study more aligned to their own experiences instead of the researcher’s interpretation of their experiences from afar. When reflecting back on the participatory process, the different steps of the sailing model were all present and significantly contributed to the study’s success, especially the onset that was key in creating a relationship.

**Model of the Sailing Ship**

**Onset.** Participatory research involves not only working with stakeholders over time, getting to know what is important to them but also attempting to understand how the research study fits with people’s past histories and their hopes for the future. We consider researchers engaging in participatory research should be aware that “we [researchers] suddenly arrive, as it were, in the middle of a conversation which has already begun and in which we try to orientate ourselves in order to be able to contribute to it” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 69). The research process will inscribe itself in a conversation or social narrative that had begun long before the researcher’s arrival. A participatory research process will benefit from getting to know each other’s horizons of significance (Gadamer, 1960/2004; Parry et al., 2009; Taylor, 1991). The Onset of the participatory process thus begins at the development stage, before research ethics submission. One exercise that can be undertaken with participatory research stakeholders to build rapport and start getting to know each other is a visioning process whereby participants reflect and share their insights on a number of questions. Examples of questions can be: How does the research study relate to your past experience, your personal history or group’s history? What is important about this research? What are your fears concerning the research process? What do you expect out of the research project? This type of exercise brings to the fore-ground how the proposed research ties with past, present, and future hopes of each stakeholder. It allows the researchers to get to know what is important to each person, as much as it allows each person to hear the researchers’ and other stakeholders’ point of views.

These meetings can occur with all the stakeholders being present at the same meeting or separately with different stakeholder groups. For example, in the study conducted in child mental health, meetings were held separately with children, parents, and staff members to get to know what they considered important and relevant to study. This decision was made after consulting the children for their preference, in light of the power differential between adults and children in the setting where the study was conducted. Considering meetings were held separately with the different stakeholder groups, the researcher also had to share the perspectives from each group to one another. This process was performed iteratively and contributed to reach a shared understanding of the important issues present, people’s past experiences, and what people hoped for in the future. This process helped refine the topic of the study. During the meetings, children and staff members shared past experiences and identified what was most meaningful to them, what they valued. The study topic, which was initially on the use of control measures in the setting (i.e., restraints and seclusion), shifted to a focus on crisis management more broadly, including situations that did not relate to the use of control measures. For all stakeholders, this was important to better understand how challenging situations are experienced and how control measures could be avoided. Taking the time to uncover each other’s horizon of significance opened the dialogue toward defining and refining the research project—a back-and-forth movement occurred as preunderstandings of the project bridged to a common understanding of the project, fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 1976). This process was reciprocal and lead to an “anticipatory sense” of where the project was going (Davey, 2015, p. 8). The study focus was thus shaped by the stakeholder’s temporally situated lifeworlds and horizons of significance. The researcher must thus have a stance of openness to allow for the research project to be transformed in light of stakeholders’ lifeworld.

**Sailing.** Collaborating on the research project from conception to dissemination allows the people to build a shared history together (Parry et al., 2009). Developing a shared history involves building a common language that facilitates understanding. Language in this sense is different from the traditional definition of a language in its oral or written forms; instead, the desire to understand and situate the meaningfulness for the other is most central (Gadamer, 1976). Having a shared objective for the study contributed to a smooth Sailing phase.

**Figure 1. Model of the sailing ship.**
Having this shared understanding of where people had been in the past and where we were going helped with the next steps. For example, once the research study began, stakeholders were already on board with how the study was going to unfold, and the data collection phase was facilitated (e.g., in terms of accessing the setting, the fit between the type of data collection chosen and the specific setting, and what children considered important to share).

Participatory research calls us to develop “social imaginaries” for our working group (Taylor, 2004)—a common language, the norms that guide us, and the practices and values that inspire our work. Taylor (2004) describes social imaginaries as the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. The social imaginary extends beyond the immediate background understanding...to a wider grasp of our whole predicament: how we stand to each other, how we got to where we are, how we relate to other groups, and so on. (pp. 23–25)

In working together over time, it is important to incorporate time-outs, or periods to reflect on where we have been, where we are going, and if this is still where we want to go. In participatory approaches, those affected by the issue being studied collaborate actively in the research process. Their involvement and engagement in this process is not static, it will shift according to the importance they give to the project in light of the rest of their lives. For example, if there is a crisis in the community where the study is being conducted, the importance and priority of the research study will change. Horizons of significance are dynamic (Gadamer, 1960/2004; Taylor, 1991). Research projects, including their importance, are constantly reinterpreted and changing in light of stakeholders’ lifeworld. As a researcher, it is important to keep an ongoing dialogue with stakeholders and listen carefully for shifting levels of engagement, as these may slowly erode over time. The researcher is encouraged to constantly gauge if the timing is right, in a hermeneutic meaning, identifying how each step of the research process finds significance in light of the bigger context of stakeholders’ lifeworlds, including the researchers’.

In the study conducted using this approach, stakeholders contributed to the interpretation of the data: The researcher presented a synthesis of the data, which was discussed to better understand their meaning for the stakeholders. Here again, the process of fusion of horizons was key in understanding the value and meaning of the data. In one of the meetings with the children, they clarified what they considered as a “good” and a “bad” way to use the seclusion room and when they considered it was a fair use of the room. These insights—filled with concrete examples—contributed immensely to how data were interpreted and presented in the study manuscript. With the adult stakeholders, a reflective process ensued as a result of the research meetings on the relevance of certain practices and how they were labeled (e.g., how certain practices could be perceived as punitive by children but were labeled as therapeutic practices, which might require a change in terminology and practice; Montreuil et al., 2019). These reflections subsequently informed the interpretation of the study results, which would not have been possible without this extensive engagement with stakeholders. Future practices could therefore become impacted by the research process, leading to a ripple effect.

Ripple effect. Developing the research project together and working out differences create lasting ties between partners that extend well beyond the end of the research project (Parry et al., 2009), thus leading to a ripple effect. For example, based on the ties created through the study, a plan was then made to pursue another project in the setting to address questions that the stakeholders considered important and meaningful to study. This ripple effect might not have been possible without the hermeneutic process that was used to guide the participatory research process. However, due to significant staff turnover and changes to the clinical program, it was not possible to implement the planned project in the example shared, highlighting the importance of lasting ties and the limitations that researchers can face. Nonetheless, by understanding and mediating multiple perspectives, the participatory researcher can serve as a boundary agent in the creation of new relationships (Huzzard et al., 2010). Current and future collaborations can more easily stem from these relationships, either in research or by fostering community relationships. For instance, stakeholders who were actively involved in the research process can become champions for change in their community, making research results more easily implemented. Moreover, partners who have had a positive experience in the research process are more likely to engage in future projects and collaborations, extending the researcher’s possible reach. For example, stakeholders who previously worked in silos can be called to work across boundaries to address a particular issue (Huzzard et al., 2010).

Using Hermeneutics to Help Mitigate Certain Key Challenges Within Participatory Research

Conducting a participatory research project raises multiple challenges, for example, increased time to conduct the project, partnership sustainability, and unpredictability of how the project will be conducted (Banks et al., 2013; Salsberg et al., 2015). The proposed model could help researchers and stakeholders in pursuing participatory research projects by reflecting on people’s engagement and the knowledge coconstruction process. The model of the sailing ship can contribute to make explicit the engagement process with stakeholders, while emphasizing the importance of people’s situated experiences in shaping a specific research study. The lack of shared understandings can be detrimental to a project and raise ethical issues. For instance, if stakeholders’ experiences and perspectives are not genuinely taken into account, it could lead to a tokenistic participation in
which there is no concrete involvement from stakeholders in the project (Hahn et al., 2017; Montreuil et al., 2019). This lack of genuine engagement could lead to the instrumentalization of the partners in the interest of the researchers as a way for example to obtain funding or public recognition for their work based on a superficial partnership (Bélisle-Pipon et al., 2018; Montreuil et al., 2019). This tokenistic participation is also an underrecognition of the value of the partners’ experiences, which become ignored. Conversely, partners to a research project can also seek to use research to fulfill their own agenda (e.g., political activism), which would infringe upon research ethics standards (Montreuil et al., 2019). We consider that espousing a hermeneutic stance would contribute to addressing these potential ethical challenges by making more explicit people’s situated experiences. This hermeneutic process would foster a smoother participatory research process to the benefits of all involved.

Another key ethical issue within participatory research relates to the interpretation of the data. Data can be interpreted differently by different partners leading to questions as to who has the “right” interpretation (Montreuil et al., 2019). Considering the power differential that can be present between researchers and other partners, adopting a hermeneutic approach could foster an open dialogue to understand the meaning of the data for the different parties. As in the example above related to the use of the seclusion room within a child mental health setting, discussing openly with the different parties can contribute to bridge understandings and foster a reflective process to enhance the interpretation of the data.

Conclusion
Adopting a hermeneutics approach for the conduct of participatory research could contribute to a more meaningful research process for the different parties involved. The model of the sailing ship has the potential to promote stakeholders’ engagement by emphasizing the importance of people’s past, present, and future situated experiences in shaping a specific research study and contributing to address some of the ethical challenges that may arise.

Future research on stakeholders’ experiences would contribute to better understand the hermeneutic process at play within participatory research and shed light on how temporality is experienced. A more explicit examination of how people experience their participation as partners to a project would help shape research projects that are more inclusive and attuned to what stakeholders consider meaningful and valuable. Participatory research with younger children and other vulnerable populations has not been broadly developed (Coyne & Carter, 2018) and would also benefit from this type of study to prevent a superficial participation that is not tied to their past, present, and future experiences.

Acknowledgments
We acknowledge the contribution of Emilie Laberge-Perrault who worked as a research assistant on this project.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: McGill University’s Faculty of Medicine (Montreuil). Fonds de recherche du Québec–Santé (Fréchette and Sofronas).

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