Applied Philosophical Hermeneutic Research: the unmethod

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to provide insight into the philosophy and practice of Applied Philosophical Hermeneutics as a unique approach for research in the health sciences. While there are other research approaches grounded in hermeneutics, this article focuses on Gadamer’s modern philosophical hermeneutics. During my 18 years as a hermeneutic researcher, graduate students and I have engaged with people with a wide variety of experiences such as preventable medical error, Indigenous health, adult and adolescent chronic pain, social responsibility in higher education, oral health care for autistic children, and the experiences of people living with Thalassemia. Applied Philosophical Hermeneutics offers an approach to help bring researchers, clinicians, and patients together within a community of active partnerships in research. All these projects employed Applied Philosophical Hermeneutics as an approach to gain a deeper and personal understanding of the unique experiences of these diverse groups of people. Hermeneutics remains somewhat confusing as the unmethod which may lead to a dismissive attitude toward this research approach. Therefore, the intention of this paper is to present a risk-free insight into hermeneutics, which hopefully will open-up conversations and new learning experiences among researchers, students, patients, and colleagues.

Keywords
applied philosophical hermeneutics, unmethod, qualitative research, metaphoric examples, science

Introduction: The Unmethod Explored Metaphorically
Occasionally, people are confused about the applied philosophical hermeneutics research approach and why it is not a structured methodology (Bernstein, 2002; Gadamer, 1979). Structured methodologies are at the core of what is frequently taught in academic settings, leaving hermeneutical research in question. Previous experiences in research are purported to apply clear methodological considerations. Our response to this understanding has been to use the analogy of “nailing Jell-O to a tree”, highlighting however, that Jell-O (a brand name gelatine) has shape and texture as it conforms to its mould, and a context for its applications (to be eaten). Similarly, hermeneutics has a shape (centuries of scholarship and practice), a texture (a unique sensibility), and a context (philosophy) in how it conforms to the research topic at hand. However, this does not make it a perfectly reproducible and predictable methodology either. The unmethod is a philosophical approach that works with the researcher to explore the deeper meanings associated with people’s narratives and experiences as infinitely interpretable text (Ricoeur, 1991).

Nailing Jell-O to a tree offers a metaphoric visual for a process fraught with complexity, although it ought to be a

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somewhat easy task. The approach might be methodological as we do need a hammer, a nail of suitable length, a bowl of somewhat firm Jell-O, and of course, a tree. However, the variables within this context are not the method, which is tried, true, and practical with the placement of the object against the tree with one hand (while pressing the nail inwards with that same hand into the object), followed by striking the nail repeatedly until the object becomes attached and suspended. After completing this, we might step back to assess the success of this task. Unfortunately, it is most likely that the Jell-O will now have slipped off the nail and tree, becoming bespattered on the ground. The distraction from the fall then changes our perspective both literally (looking downwards) and perceptually as it invites a new view of something we thought we knew well (Warnke, 1987). The Jell-O striking the ground highlights the need to reassess our approach. It is a call to reinterpret that which is there and be more attentive to the nature of what the Jell-O is trying to tell us beyond the obvious and superficial, which needs to be handled differently than other materials. It is a call for further interpretation.

The above metaphor represents how hermeneutics exists within the context of other methodically driven research approaches. Substituting the Jell-O metaphor for hermeneutics may help to explain how it resists being completely methodological, as other research approaches assert. In this text, we endeavour to help the reader understand why hermeneutics stands alone in its uniqueness, and why it must remain an unmethod. To be clear, there are some methodological practices while we collect data from the text provided by our research participants when narratively derived; we interview, record, and transcribe the words from each interview verbatim. In accordance with our academic training, we do not use data analysis software because it distances the hermeneutic researcher further from their participants. We read and re-read the text often with others to bring forth the key Findings from which the interpretation (researcher) of an interpretation (participant) begins. To clarify, in qualitative research, we do not have Results; we have Findings. While we venture into answering our research question(s), we consider these interpretations as provisional Findings (since meaning has a multitude of interpretations). It is during the analysis of this data, this text, that hermeneutics finds its form as an interpretative process. This process is guided by months, years or perhaps decades of study, practice, and discussion while becoming more hermeneutic in thought and practice through time, experience, and conversation. For example, let us begin with a common misunderstanding stemming from quantitative research and placed onto qualitative research, that of objectivity versus subjectivity. Within this misunderstanding, objectivity is considered the gold standard and subjectivity as anecdotal, representing a fainter form of research.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, a philosophical hermeneutics scholar and educator, advocated that subjectivity is not a block to greater objectivity but rather an opening to it. In the sense of having a distinct but negotiated point of view, subjectivity can be regarded as enabling new and different understandings to arise (Gadamer, 1989, 1996). Although the research genres (quantitative and qualitative) can examine the same topics, they are vastly different in intention, method, and approaches (Patton, 2015). One cannot simply compare them, and that is because they exist uniquely and differently from one another. Therefore, they need to be respected for their scholarship and not through a superficial comparison based on positivistic ideas and objectivity (Habermas, 1980)

**Philosophical Hermeneutics as an Unmethod**

Un-as a prefix can mean non- or not-a-method. However, the way in which we are using it is to reconsider the generally accepted meaning of method as an assumptive definition, but from a qualitative perspective. The ‘un’ in unmethod (pertaining to philosophical hermeneutic research) can mean unraveling, releasing, or undoing our taken-for-granted way of understanding method, methodology, and research. From Gadamer’s philosophical perspective about learning from the Other, he wrote, “experience is initially always the experience of negation: something is not what we supposed it to be” (1989, p. 354). Indeed, the idea of an unmethod in research may be uncomfortable to many researchers at first.

While the words method and methodology are frequently used interchangeably as though they were synonyms, a methodology is the philosophical, scientific, or epistemological set of assumptions foundational to the research process. On the other hand, a research method is a specific technique for data collection that has become associated with those assumptions and perhaps adopted to ensure rigor within this research.

In terms of philosophical hermeneutics, our understanding of methodology is replaced by its philosophy where the researcher determines their ability to conduct this kind of research through their scholarship in hermeneutics. In other words, the researcher becomes the methodology. Through their commitment to the philosophical tenets associated with its history, the traditions and understanding of hermeneutics take form. For example, there are no set methods for data collection, although in dialogical hermeneutics researchers commonly use interviews to collect narrative data. However, we also consider the more expanded idea of all forms of text as being interpretable. Therefore, hermeneutics is also interpretively open to the use of history, traditions, cultural practices, sculptures, pictures, actions, paintings, poems, metaphors, and previously written literature as textual representations to help understand human phenomena. Philosophical hermeneutics has its own deep, rich philosophical history and traditions with over two hundred years of scholarship about understanding human experience, not as a method to be applied but rather as a way of viewing and interpreting the world. This view of the world is one that is
inclusive of other considerations and understandings regarding topics, persons, or things. Hermeneutics exists in the real world, our world, as it unfolds.

*Philosophical hermeneutics is not a traditional theory of interpretation. It does not seek to establish a generally acceptable method for the reading of obscure and difficult texts. Philosophical Hermeneutics, much rather, an interpretation of interpretation, a prolonged meditation upon what “happens” to us within a “hermeneutic experience” when we are challenged by texts and artworks, ancient and modern.* (Davey, 2006, p. 1, p. 1)

The certainty of method is what a researcher turns to for a series of specific reproducible steps that constitute the methodological rigor and assurance of compliance to validate their research process. Researchers in health and social sciences who select alternative research approaches like applied philosophical hermeneutics are those who are grounded within a professional discipline such as social science, education, health promotion, medicine, and others, but who are rarely pure philosophers. Becoming a philosophically based researcher does not entail learning a method to be applied, but rather, learning and developing a philosophical perspective, which leads to a transformative understanding of what constitutes research, hermeneutical or otherwise, in its totality.

**Contributing to the Conversation**

Another purpose for writing this article is to contribute to the conversation and enhance understanding about philosophical hermeneutics within social and health sciences research. The effective application of research methodologies lies in understanding the way the specific methodology aligns with the specific research population, the information being sought, and the depth of knowledge required to honour the research participants’ narratives. Philosophically based research approaches, such as phenomenology and hermeneutics, differ significantly from other research methodologies because they are not methods to be applied. They are steeped in hundreds of years of history, traditions, and scholarship; they are constituted through an understanding of the ancestors, scholars and researchers who have come before us. Gadamer’s scholarship, for instance, has evolved over his lifetime as conversational or dialogical hermeneutics explains:

*Philosophy is not, as one often hears, the professional art of splitting hairs, the search for artificial precise definitions—one who attempts to philosophizes must first of all have an attentive ear for the language in which the thinking experiences of many generations has been sedimented, long before we begin to attempt our own thinking.* (1989, p. 181)

As a discourse related to how we understand interpretation and its applications to the lived experiences of a topic of interest, philosophical hermeneutics does not (mis)-appropriate research methods. Instead, it can be understood as a question about what research means and a method that helps make us aware of the paradigmatic assumptions we make when we do research. In Vattimo’s book “A Farewell to Truth,” he writes that “science doesn’t think” (2011, p. xxx). Vattimo maintains that we cannot simply ascribe the truth of our practices to science or the application of science without appealing to what he terms “the paradigmatic horizon within which every correspondence is verifiable” (2011, p. xxxiii). This opens the question about method and its strict application wand; why hermeneutics remains a way to gain insight about another’s experience, one that may not be our own yet. This philosophical thinking about this approach needs an exploration of why philosophical hermeneutics is not a method per se but rather a philosophy that transforms the way one interprets, understands, and humanizes research. Hermeneutics is often referred to as the art of understanding and the interpretation of an interpretation through conversations between researcher and participant (Davey, 2006; Gadamer, 1996). Where conversation can be understood not as willy-nilly engagement with another person but as Gadamer offers,

> We say that we ‘conduct’ a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus, a genuine conversation is never the one we want to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reacting its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will come out of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. Thus, we can say that something was a good conversation, or it was ill fated. All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it—i.e., that it allows something to ‘emerge’ which henceforth exists. (1989, p. 383)

Conversation in this context allows the research participant to explore their experience with the researcher as it relates to their life, past, present, and with projections into their future. Here, the purpose of hermeneutics is now brought to life as it becomes available to explore the deep richness of the extended narrative. Philosophical hermeneutics offers a means to develop understandings of complex social-relational, cultural, and historical human experiences about health, perspective, and context, within an interdisciplinary framework for research and in practice. Considerations of such contexts, while they are not determining choices for methods, provoke instead the necessity for practical reason or wisdom (Hovey & Amir, 2013R. B. Hovey & Amir, 2013). These are reasons for choices of method, approaches to data collection, and the way one interprets and makes sense of the findings.
A Reflection about Science

Science, since people must do it, is a socially embedded activity. It progresses by hunch, vision, and intuition. Much of its change through time does not record a closer approach to absolute truth, but the alteration of cultural contexts that influence it so strongly. Facts are not pure and unallied bits of information; culture also influences what we see and how we see it. Theories, moreover, are not inexorable inductions from facts. The most creative theories are often imaginative visions imposed upon facts; the source of imagination is also strongly cultural. (Gould, 1981, p. 259, p. 259)

Perhaps this is why quantitative research has evolved into its perceived privileged status; because it transcends words and language through numbers, which has become one with science. Science, by definition, is a state of knowing; the knowledge achieved by multiple approaches to be able to distinguish from ignorance or misunderstanding (Science, 2021). The integrity we expect from rigorous research lies in the commitment of the researchers to achieve a level of expertise to conduct their research, which we expect to be beyond reproach.

Davey, a Gadamerian scholar, writes about hermeneutics and its relationship with science and method.

“The resistance of philosophical hermeneutics to apodictic language does not express hostility toward scientific discourse or method per se. What it does oppose is a cultural tendency that, because of its awe of science, elevates propositional language to the status of being the only legitimate framework within which what we know of the world can be communicated. Such an elevation augurs that a dangerous impoverishment of our appreciation of how language operates. This impoverishment diminishes how we experience the world.” (2006, p. 25)

Numbers may be universally understood, but it is not a reason to dismiss the spoken or written word as anecdotal or subjective. Hermeneutics may thus be considered a different way of framing science and research. It supports us in dealing with a question such as what is at work when we do research about personal health within a larger historical, cultural, and human context, and assigning meaning to how we understand health. While research may provide rich and suggestive data for practice, it is the utility of hermeneutics to take up what that possibly means for practice, understanding, and the application of new knowledge.

“... understanding is not something that takes place at the end of humanistic research about an object, it stands at the beginning and governs the whole process of questioning, step by step”. (Gadamer et al., 2001, p. 50, p. 50)

Research Questions

As with all research and possible understanding, it all begins with questions metaphorically swirling down a funnel: the hermeneutic conversation. To help students address the actual interview in context, we use the metaphorical idea of the interview as a funnel. The “open-ended” questions pertaining to the meaning of living with a certain health condition are asked at the top of the funnel. This is the very beginning of the interview to set the condition of conversation rather than short answer questions. The area where it is at its widest is where the questions and answers are free to remain reflectively and interpretatively open and alive as they ebb and flow within the story-narratives of the research participants as they are shared (Hovey & Paul, 2007R. Hovey & Paul, 2007). As the interview continues and the need for more specific questions demands explanation in a semi-structured approach, the funnel narrows. Questions become more specific such as age, education, years lived with the condition, employment, etc.

Consequently, we suggest that if we were to begin with short answer questions (at the top of the funnel), we might inadvertently teach our participants to perceive that the researchers want them to answer all questions in that fashion. It might become increasingly challenging to change the transactional exchange into a relational conversation. The same might be true with the interviewer taking notes. The participant notices what is noteworthy (pen to paper) and might believe this is a priority in answering all other questions. This approach may be considered a method, but the intention here is to help engage the participants in a hermeneutic conversation, rather than a series of check marks on an interview guide.

Event + Experience + Reflection = Perspective (Horizons of Understanding)

The irony of using an equation as a heading to discuss the unmethod does not escape us. Each part of this equation represents the potential of being a human who experiences their unique life. The complexity of human experience within social contexts and dimensions of health is a reality that confronts researchers from many disciplines related to the fields of healthcare. Each professional discipline offers a unique perspective, providing the possibility for enhanced and extended understanding when it comes together with other pre-existing understandings, enabling a fusion of horizons. As such, this may address more fully the complexity of health as a phenomenon of human experience. Hovey et al., offer this reflection, as researchers, regarding the fusion of horizons, with an application for healthcare providers and people living with chronic health conditions:

In Gadamerian hermeneutics, a fusion of horizons refers to a communicative process to understand our world, other people’s perspectives or topics; it becomes our point of view; perspective, or worldview. Our individual perspective of the world evolves throughout our lifetime, during an enculturation as people,
Understanding the complex realities of living within social, relational, and other contextual issues connected to health necessitates the application of multiple perspectives and diverse categories of knowledge, both of theory and practice. An interpretive approach to researching social and health sciences is essential to achieve understanding. It should include multiple approaches to research and extended notions of what constitutes research method among qualitative research approaches.

Research informed and inspired by philosophical hermeneutics requires inquiry into the frameworks that determine health and explores the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age. It is an exploration of the health system, its practices, and forms of knowledge that both limit and support understandings of what constitutes personal health and healthcare. Research approaches ought to include the human circumstances of health and wellness and what these reveal about evidence that informs health and wellness (i.e., programming, interventions and education, social policy, and health promotion) (Gadamer, 1979). As such, philosophical hermeneutics may extend our understandings of how social conditions impact multiple perspectives of health and wellness for individuals, families, and communities.

**Knowledge Translation and Transfer**

The knowledge translation and transfer of these findings are ultimately interpreted into meaningful contents and perspectives for diverse audiences to inform practice and education, as well as enhance opportunities for wellbeing. The use of philosophical hermeneutics as an independent and unique research approach or in conjunction with empirical and comparative research methods provides an enhanced and extended continuum for applied social science research (Hovey et al., 2016). Research within healthcare and health promotion programs is becoming increasingly inclusive of other researchers, healthcare professionals, community members, students, and others within an interdisciplinary framework. Through a collaborative approach, the intention is to generate inclusive, practical, and specific evidence to understand the sensitive nature of the vulnerable person’s experiences through multiple dimensions and perspectives of health and wellness that range from common real-world experiences to those that are exceedingly challenging and un-bearable. This is the role and possible contribution of philosophical hermeneutics and why it remains “reckless without method” as is commonly understood (mostly from the language and lens of other methodologically driven research approaches). Hermeneutics serves as a counter-narrative to traditional approaches for research within the social and health sciences. It offers the opportunity to conduct thoughtful, effective, skillful, and humane practices within contexts where prescription and assumed practices do not adequately satisfy the complexity of such contexts.

**Meeting Hermeneutics**

The origins of hermeneutics,

*Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek verb hermeneuein, which means to say or interpret; the noun hermeneia, which is the utterance or explication of thought; and the name hermeneus, which refers to the playful, mischievous, “trickster” Hermes. In bringing the messages of the gods to humans, Hermes entices interpretation. Hermes has the character of complication, multiplicity, lies, jokes, irreverence, induction, and disdain for rules; however, he is the master of creativity and invention. He has the capacity to see things anew and his power is change, prediction, and the solving of puzzles. (Moules, 2002)*

Just as language can represent an experience of clarity or confusion among people, the researcher becomes the interpreter of a participant’s interpretation of their own experience of something. We come together to converse about an experience regarding a shared interest with a hermeneutic attitude of openness to the Other, of alterity, and generosity. Kearney writes,

*I understand hermeneutics as an art of deciphering multiple meanings. ... More precisely, it refers to the practice of discerning indirect, tacit, or allusive meanings, of sensing another sense beyond, beyond or beneath apparent sense.*

*This special human activity may in turn call for a method of second-order, reflective interpretation involving a process of disclosing concealed messages, either by a) unmasking covered-up meaning (hermeneutics of suspicion) or b) by disclosing surplus meaning (hermeneutics of affirmation). In short, I understand hermeneutics as the task of interpreting (hermeneuein) double or plural meaning in response to the polysemy of language and life. (2011, p. 1)*

This idea of multiple readings of the same text is a strength of hermeneutics, as multiple perspectives, disciplines, cultures, and pre-understandings add to a more expansive interpretation of a topic of similar interest.

**Moving ahead with the Gift of Forgetting**

In Greek mythology, the river Aletheia comes from Lethe, a river in Hades. Its water, when drunk, produces oblivion of the past; thus, it is called the “river of forgetting.” Heidegger referred to Aletheia in the Hermeneutic tradition to explain bringing something hidden into the open and therefore, into unhiddeness (Gadamer, 1989). Drinking from this river bestows the gift of forgetting for those whose courage permits. The opportunity to neglect one’s past becomes possible,
opening other possibilities and ways of understanding how
people live in the world. To forget is to suffer and recover
oneself as different from before; a popular metaphor for re-
birth, new beginnings, and freedom from one’s past. Prag-
matically, to begin to understand the unmethod, we need to
forget our pre-understandings of what constitutes a research
method and methodology. If we interpret hermeneutics from
our own assumptions and lenses, redefining an understanding
of research method and methodology will be problematic. The
language from one paradigm does not easily translate and
transfer to others.

Philosophical hermeneutics within a research context be-
comes an opportunity for a text to be interpreted contextu-
ally into practice through learning to understand and relate her-
meneutically to the text and its possible contribution to ed-
ucation, healthcare, and life in general. All researchers,
including positivistic and objective quantitative researchers,
bring their pre-understandings, knowledge, and biases to the
process, all of which inevitably influence the interpretations
of research data. In qualitative research, the researcher does not
separate themselves from the topic or participant, but rather, as
they make clear their pre-understandings, they create an
opening to learn from the other. An advantage of this level of
reflective awareness is a broader lens unveiling an experience
of transcendence beyond our usual circumstances.

A hermeneutic interpretation brings the research partici-
pliant’s text back into the world as their words are lifted from
their conversation into language representative of their ex-
perience. Gadamer writes about language as a means to bring
the inner text of a person’s thinking and understanding into the
world, thereby making it available for others to experience.

Language and thinking about experience are bound to-
together: Experience itself seeks and finds words to express it. We seek the
right word—i.e., the word that really belongs to the thing (or
experience) so that the thing comes into language. (Gadamer,
1989, p. 417, bracketed word added by author)

**Why We Need the Unmethod**

As researchers, if we are more comfortable applying methods
and specific methodologies to ensure that rigor and validity
of research are retained, then why would we not want to create
precise and repeatable sets of methodological steps for her-
meneutics? Philosophical hermeneutics falls outside the will
to method – a colonization of its thinking, ancestry, and re-
search application – because it cannot be constituted in or
through a precise methodological repetition. Rather it is
constituted through an in-depth philosophical understanding
of what comprises rigorous hermeneutic research and what
does not. Regarding this, Davey writes,

>The will to method exhibits a colonizing tendency. On one level,
the focus and drive that attaches to the organizing power of the
will to method is philosophically attractive. However, the
energetic impetus toward orderliness and closure betrays an
imperviousness toward alterity. The will to method has an
imperious insensitivity to other voices and reduces the complex
variety of human experience to its own terms. This reductive
impetus is not an expression of invincibility but of an inability to
face the risks of dialogical exposure. (2006, p. 21)

This tension perceived or that otherwise exists within the
health and social sciences’ encultured mindset is that research,
education, and understanding can be reduced to best practices;
into tool kits and templates to guide humanistic and tacit
interactions. The belief is that all one needs is a toolkit or
structured set of best practices to replicate an equation of
research without commitment to the depth of thinking, scholar-
shop, and insight from years of practice from which
they were derived. In “Mixed Methods” for example, a
quantitative researcher can take up qualitative research as an
add-on with no real experience or understanding of the
complexities of qualitative research. This weakens the purpose
and intention of qualitative research and yet has become
acceptable because journal reviewers of such methods lack the
‘rigor’ to expertly review these kinds of research papers. This
can impact the quality of qualitative research (Hovey et al.,
2016). As a result, this lowers expectations of what constitutes
qualitative research, making it pedestrian and giving the
impression that it is easy to undertake. This weakening of
qualitative research may then become scrutinized as ‘typical’
for this research and be justifiably representative of current
research approaches. As Davey reminds us, we need to be
mindful of our propensity toward methodological strength
based on reproducibility. It may create a false sense of rigors
through toolboxes and templates, the “fast food” of qualitative
research.

**Research Participants**

There exists a danger in covering up failure and disregarding
the risks of what it means to be a research participant.

As Davey explores,

>The “will to method” promotes a dehumanizing mode of con-
sciousness. Because it attacks the structures of scientific and
philosophical method, philosophical hermeneutics has been
characterized as an irrational and unmethodological mode of
thought. Philosophical hermeneutics is, however, opposed neither
to the value of academic rigor, nor to the virtues of methodo-
logical research. What it is implacably opposed to is the attempt to
privilege or monopolize reductive approaches to truth and ac-
tuality. (2006, p. 22)

Hermeneutical understanding with another individual is an
ethical encounter that can lead the researcher and participants
to think differently and perhaps in unexpected ways about a
topic they thought they already knew well. Learning and the
possibility of hermeneutic understanding depend upon our
readiness to change our self-understanding as we encounter research participants. The motivation to methodologically compartmentalize a particular approach and uncover a truth as the only legitimate approach has potentially negative consequences. The ontological short-sightedness of the will to method reduces it into, potentially, “a dehumanizing form of consciousness” (Davey, 2006, p. 22). If the will to method trends toward closure, hermeneutics promotes openness and attentive philosophical atmosphere. Hermeneutics is shaped by the belief that while any interpretation cannot embrace the whole of a story concerning a given topic of interest, this very particularity contributes to interweaving the individual story with others’ stories of the same experience for a more complete community of understanding.

Method versus Unmethod

Research in a general sense requires a balance between method and unmethod. It should not create tension but rather point to the necessity to engage, challenge, and articulate multiple perspectives of knowledge. The contribution of the Other (whether a research participant or interdisciplinary colleague) is not their ‘Otherness’ per se but what they might be able to teach us thanks to their unique perspectives. The Other discloses possibilities, knowledge and understandings that are not presently our own. This places us between ourselves, so to speak, between what is disclosed of how we have understood ourselves in the past as being from our discipline and how we might be transformed by future, new ways of understanding. The discomfort of unlearning and relearning throughout the hermeneutic process may be taxing but prepares us for the widening of our horizon of understanding about the topic at hand. While conversing with the Other, they also invite us to become open to alternative possibilities that are not our own and develop and enhance our understanding. In doing so, the possibility to learn with and from each other becomes possible (Hovey & Craig, 2011R. Hovey & Craig, 2011).

The commitment to understand philosophical hermeneutics as an unmethod is substantial because, fortunately, there are no books entitled philosophical hermeneutics 101 or hermeneutics without tears to ease the experience. Hermeneutics calls one to become involved, listen carefully, and learn from hermeneutic scholars and other researchers who have dedicated their time, interest, and talent specifically to becoming a hermeneutic researcher.

The Recklessness of Philosophical Hermeneutics

Delving into hermeneutics becomes an ongoing reflective movement and contemplation of how one views their world, understandings, and practices while questioning one’s attitudes and previous experiences of an epistemological grounding to become an interpretive researcher. As Gadamer et al. explain:

*Philosophical hermeneutic understanding is not something that takes place at the end of humanistic research about an object, it stands at the beginning and governs the whole process of questioning, step by step.* (2001, p. 50)

This becomes increasingly relevant within the context of researching vulnerable people’s life-changing experiences. There is always a need to go deeper toward gaining an understanding that expands and extends current understandings. The depths of human science research are the place where philosophical hermeneutics acts as an invitation for the researcher into a venture of the possibility of finding the unexpected. Consequently, this article is an invitation into the unknown, the unsure and limitless venture of messy scholarship – Jell-O nailed onto a tree – within human experience.

The Art of Understanding: Text Rather than Stats

Human beings experience and understand much of their world through language and symbols associated with their social, cultural, and family context (Kleinberg-Levin, 1989). Thus, language provides an opportunity for both understanding and knowledge and is why hermeneutics is regarded as the art of interpretation (Dowling, 2004). When research participants speak of their experiences, the researchers recognize the familiar within the unfamiliar through the help of language and metaphors (Gadamer, 1986). These identification and recognition processes require the researchers to allow themselves to recognize parts of themselves in the participants’ narration, bringing them out of their past selves and closer to their future selves (Gadamer, 1986). Gadamer writes that hermeneutics is “the classical discipline concerned with the art of understanding text” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 164). However, he brings to our attention that hermeneutics would have to be understood comprehensively to embrace the whole sphere of art and its complex questions. Gadamer writes that text is not restricted to the written word:

*Every work of art, not only literature, must be understood like any other text that requires understanding, and this kind of understanding has to be acquired. This gives hermeneutical consciousness a comprehensiveness that surpasses even the aesthetic consciousness. Understanding must be conceived as a part of the event in which meaning occurs, the event in which the meaning of all statements, those of art and all others of tradition – is formed and actualized* (1989, p. 165).

He further points to the question of the universality of hermeneutics and what can be open to interpretation, such as art and text. Text is a representation in words or images of phenomena, be they ideas, actions, experiences, incidents, etc. (Crotty, 1998). Ricoeur defines hermeneutics as the theory of the operations of
understanding in relation to interpreting texts (1975). Ricoeur then identifies: “The first locality which hermeneutics undertakes to lay bare is certainly language, and more particularly, written language” (1991, p. 54). The world of the text and the world of the reader interpenetrate one another through a fusion of horizons. The reader belongs to both the experiential horizon of the world imaginatively and the horizon of their action concretely. In this way, a work is transfiguring such that it points us toward what is outside of us, toward the practical field of worldly encounters (Ricoeur, 1975). Crotty adds: “Skilled hermeneutic inquiry has the potential to uncover meanings and intentions that are in a sense, hidden in the text. Where interpreters may end up with an explicit awareness of meanings, and assumptions, that the authors themselves would have been unable to articulate” (1998, p. 91).

In terms of a research approach, Hermeneutics has evolved into the art of gaining understanding and insight through the fusion of horizons of an individual’s experience and those of the interested other person (the researcher). It appears that philosophical hermeneutics can stand alone in itself. However, hermeneutics as a research approach or methodology requires something to interpret, such as a text (Dowling, 2004; Gadamer, 1989). Text should be considered in its broadest of terms not to restrict or reduce the potential of discovering an understanding from the text. For interpretative material, hermeneutics needs conversation in the shape of person-to-person interaction or person-to-text interface. For example, the text generated from illness narratives is literally and metaphorically generated by being-in-the-world and by being human (Gadamer, 1989). The narratives from the participants gathered from the interviews were generated through conversations about living with challenging life situations. Therefore, as the interpreter of these narratives, the researcher, is interested in understanding the text itself by reawakening its meaning through our interest in a topics’ interpretation. The researcher must be committed to learning from the Other first before they begin to write about that experience. The philosophical hermeneutic researcher needs to learn that language, however challenging in its raw form, as it is essential and necessary to bring the suffering narrative text back into the world. There is no interpretative certainty in hermeneutics; all interpretations are provisional, as the ‘text’ awaits another perspective, toward new and different understandings. Without a sense of what that traumatic experience was like, how it felt, and what it means to live with it, it remains only an academic or imagined understanding of suffering.

Unmethod for the Unknown; Concluding Thoughts

Researching into the venture of the unknown of a personal narrative is the explorative underpinning of philosophical hermeneutics. It offers a means toward building an equilibrium within health and social science research. This is done through co-created research through complementary and supportive understandings inherent within the tenets of interdisciplinary or community research. Engagement with the ontology of human beings enables hearing, listening, and interpretation of that which is around them: the experiences of others. One begins to sense an opening to other possibilities, opportunities, and innovations for research, which may have been abandoned, rejected, or forgotten. Perhaps it is within the recklessness of hermeneutics as a research approach that researchers go to find different perspectives of being-in-the-world. Hermeneutics, the art of understanding, is unaffected by reductionist methodologies, objectification, and positivistic declarations for rigor and statistical truths. It is within contextual referencing that philosophical hermeneutics appears reckless because it does not abide by Cartesian derived epistemologies with notions espoused by popular and therefore acceptable models of truth, as well as a method for health sciences research (Gadamer, 1989). The process of subjectification does not take place between two selves but also places us between ourselves. It opens a differential space between unquestioned past self-understandings and future potentialities for understanding. The event of hermeneutical understanding is the emergence of such a being-in-between. This attribute is its strength, as it remains philosophically different than a fixed method. Rather, it is a way of researching that is about subjectivity and the ontological availability of the Other. Contrary to a researcher’s epistemological approach, traditional methods reject lived conditions, and one’s contextual reference as unimportant when the research goal is to control and predict. These are seen as confounding, difficult to control and predict future outcomes, and insignificant. Hermeneutics’ ventures into uncertainty are an inquiry into an-Other’s experience, an experience which is about living (a life) with troubling conditions (in a shared world) such as illness, poverty, disability, older age, etc. Hermeneutic inquiry means uncovering that which could be missed because the new and different understanding cannot be captured through methodological certainty. Philosophical hermeneutics advocates that subjectivity is not a block to greater objectivity but rather an opening to it. In the sense of having a distinct but negotiated point of view, subjectivity can be regarded as enabling a new and different understanding to emerge (Gadamer, 1989). Keep Calm and Hermes On!

Authors’ Contributions

The first author conceptualized and contributed the framework for the manuscript. All authors made substantial contributions, revised the work critically, and approved the version to be published.

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