

# THE RELEVANCE OF PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH



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## ABSTRACT

*Within a framework informed by the rhetoric of contemporary ethnography, philosophical hermeneutics, and nursing scholarship, this article focuses on the way data could be interpreted in qualitative health research. It seeks to encourage readers to critically reflect upon three key issues:*

- (i) *That the experience both of doing fieldwork and analysing it constitute part of the data,*
- (ii) *interpretation in qualitative research is helped along by an intimate examination of what it means to be part of the subjective world of fieldwork, and*
- (iii) *that inter-subjectivity between researcher and researched can be examined within the rubric of historical consciousness.*

## OPSOMMING

*Binne 'n raamwerk, omvorm deur die retoriek van kontemporêre etnografie; filosofiese hermeneutiek en verpleegkundige vakkunde, fokus hierdie artikel op die wyse waarop data binne kwalitatiewe gesondheidsnavorsing, geïnterpreteer kan word.*

*Die artikel poog om lesers op drie belangrike aspekte te laat reflekteer:*

- (i) *Die ervaring van veldwerk en analisering maak deel uit van die data,*
- (ii) *interpretasie in kwalitatiewe navorsing word aangehelp deur die intieme bestudering van wat dit beteken om deel van 'n subjektiewe wêreld van veldwerk te wees,*
- (iii) *die inter-subjektiviteit tussen navorser en dit wat nagevors word, kan binne 'n raamwerk van historiese bewussynsruubriek bestudeer word.*

## INTRODUCTION

This article has been written in response to issues raised in two recent articles by P.J.J. Botha - *Health and Healing in New Testament Times: historical understanding and the health care debate*; and M. Naude and M. Muller - *Selecting the case study design for research in nursing science*. (Health SA Gesondheid, Vol 1, no. 2, 1996).

In Botha's (1996) article there is well-informed discussion of interpretation and understanding in crosscultural values of healing and the formation of meaningful relationships with patients. Botha's (1996) contribution to understanding health and helping relationships through New Testament insights also highlights the significance of historical awareness through conversations regarding health care and healing (Botha, 1996:10).

Naude and Muller (1996) challenge nurses to explore the advantages and disadvantages of doing qualitative research using the case study method. What is particularly valuable about their contribution is the way in which the authors have opened up the topic of interpretation and bias in research. The researcher's bias, they argue, should be clarified and assumptions about methodology made public so that the researcher's orientations regarding interpretation are clear to all who read the research.

Upon careful examination of the ideas expressed by these authors (Botha, 1996; Naude & Muller, 1996) an interesting link can be observed in relation to the way one understands and interprets information in health care scholarship and research. In the pursuit of scholarly excellence, these authors have

interrelated with each other. It is the writer's considered opinion that they challenge the reader to rethink the way health and helping clinicians as well as researchers view health, illness (Botha, 1996) and assumptions/theoretical orientations in health research (Naude & Muller, 1996). What makes this crossover particularly exciting is their openness for consideration of concepts and issues that are of extreme relevance to the nursing and health research setting (Koch, 1994). The idea being advanced here, is that there is a complex set of conditions, historical and philosophical, that inform us about the way people are cared for during sickness and healing (Botha, 1996) as well as the generation of data in qualitative research (Naude & Muller, 1996.)

The *connecting up* and *working through* of this linkage and ensuring analysis served as a catalyst to writing the present article.

### **The focus of this article**

Within a framework provided by philosophical hermeneutics, this article addresses the inevitable role of the *person and self* in the relationship between health research and caring. In particular, this article will focus on the way that data is interpreted in qualitative research (Denzin, 1994). This article is written in such a way as to encourage readers to pause and reflect upon what it is in the qualitative research process, that enables the generation of data from a particular point of view, that is itself informed by a rubric of historical issues for the researcher and researched, as well as the research context (setting) and group under scrutiny.

This is thus a theoretical article and at the heart of the discussion is the following question: What contribution (if any) can philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1976) bring to the multidisciplinary study of people in health, helping and healing relationships? To answer this question we draw upon the rhetoric of contemporary ethnography (Marcus, 1986 & 1995).

## **QUALITATIVE INQUIRY**

Researcher and sociologist Denzin (1994), in *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, describes the process of making sense of fieldwork notes, reflections, and interview transcripts - the products of ethnography - a kind of interactive art whereby the researcher takes the reader to the heart of the matter for interpretation. Denzin (1994:500) argues that in the qualitative sciences, there is only interpretation and the one way to enact it is to decide upon a particular perspective, at a particular moment in time, guided by the fundamental belief that nothing in the social world speaks for itself. Within this approach lies the view that interpretation in qualitative

research is neither formulaic or mechanical, and the interpretive, or phenomenologically based text emphasises socially constructed realities, local generalisations, interpretive resources, inter subjectivity, practical reasoning and ordinary talk.

The intention, according to Denzin's argument, demonstrates the researcher to be both writer and interpreter, both inextricable entwined with data as they interact with it. To accommodate the fragmentation and simultaneity of research in a cross-cultural context, it is in the present article argued that interpretation of data is through what Gadamer (1976) calls a "*fusion of horizons*" between past and present, that meet in the present. This means that interpretation in research evolves from events in the field. Events brought to the research setting by the researcher (Naude & Muller, 1996) and the historical consciousness at play in understanding health (Botha, 1996). Also significant in this process is the many interpretations generated as the result of constant movement within the experience of *doing* research.

Viewed this way, interpretation can only be undertaken by the sustained conscientious and deliberate scholarship with chosen literatures that speak to what the researcher perceives to be relevant during data generation. That is, the sitting down and writing out of text, working it through interpretively and believing that it is wanting to tell me a story. As Denzin (1994:507) sees it:

*"..the author attempts to weave a text that re-creates for the reader the very real world that was studied...their actions, experiences, words, intentions, and meanings, are then anchored inside this world as the author presents experience-near, experience distant, and local theories of it. Readers take hold of this text and read their way into it, perhaps making it one of the stories they will tell about themselves. They develop their own naturalistic generalisations and impressions, based on the tacit knowledge and emotional feelings the text creates for them.."*

Decisions about what "*authors insert into the situations of individuals being studied...*" is aligned to what Heidegger calls the fore-structure of understanding. That is, the notion that all we experience begins with same level of previous knowledge or historical understanding that will inevitably influence what is noteworthy, problematic, strange, exciting, dull or enigmatic about our field of study. Acceptance of the notion of fore-structure of understanding is recognition that these pre-conditions operate in the design and implementation of research. There exists a connection between the research and the world of the researcher that serves to appreciate the identity which they bring to the relationship. An identity that remains part of the researcher's world:

“...by whatever complex chain of connection and association that is profoundly relate to the world I am studying. (A) chain of pre-existing historic or contemporary connection and association between ethnographer and subject...(that) remains a defining feature of the current modernist sensibility in ethnography...” (Marcus, 1995:117).

Botha's (1996) analysis addresses the above contentions of historical and modern issues at play in understanding human well-being. There is a thoughtful concern for looking beyond the obvious in the way one does interpretation of people and their culture.

## PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

Cohen & Omery (in Morse, 1994:146) defines hermeneutic's goal as:

“...discovery of meaning that is not immediately manifest to our intuiting, analysing and describing. Interpreters have to go beyond what is given directly. Yet, in attempting this, they have to use the ordinary, everyday given as a clue for meanings that are not given, at least not explicitly...”

### Prejudice, consciousness and history

To empower this situation an approach is needed whereby pre-judgements and pre-understandings are seen as a means to guide and facilitate interpretation rather than distract it. The idea being advanced here is that conscious use of fore-structures, fore-conceptions allow us to constantly revise and engage meaning and interpretation. The hermeneutical task, as Gadamer (1975) sees it, begins with the text (i.e. language, explanation, symbol, gesture of participants) wanting to tell us something through a process of assimilation of prejudice so that the hermeneutical mind is driven forward to self construction and discovery that gives rise to a *flourishing hermeneutics*. A hermeneutics that guides understanding as a rough abbreviation of the whole (Gadamer, 1975:236).

The relationship between readers and the way they take hold of the text is akin to how a musical score finds its way into our consciousness. Music, like art, *means* something to us, *moves* something in us, so that we come into contact with the situations it evokes. We can apply this concept to the present article, where the author is concerned with the integration of actions, meanings and intentions from the field that moved him to interpret the articles by Botha (1996) and Naude & Muller (1996). Through the integration of information from each as well as the hermeneutic literature, interpretation is an interactive art that wrestles with a variety of intervening, inter-subjective issues.

In the research setting, interpretation of research products is the result of experiences with the research group and questions under scrutiny as well as a process open to explore the multiple meanings of events. By examining how we interpret, research products' meaning, interpretation and representation are deeply intertwined with each other (Denzin, 1994:504).

Benner (1993:xiv-xv) speaks to these issues from the point of view of nursing research. Breakdown in the human condition, with which nursing is primarily concerned and through which one's interest in the research topic and group is led, cannot be understood through a series of law-like, concrete structures. By engaging the interpretive process the researcher seeks to understand the world of concerns, habits, and skills presented by participants' narratives and situated actions. Understanding human concerns and meanings cannot be done through causal lawlike formulations.

From this point of view, interpretation involves a process that adroitly informs of the way understanding has been achieved and, shifts between one locale and another, juxtaposing the cultural world, in which participants and researcher are embedded, with the local situation.

All understanding leading to interpretation involves the use of prejudice. That is, the application of views and experience of the research group or individual under scrutiny. Prejudice is, in this sense, the collective impression of an event, object or person made up of biases, pre-knowledge, beliefs, ideas and attitudes toward the event, object or person. Prejudices (*die Vorurteile*) of the individual, Gadamer (1975:245) writes, far more than his judgements (*seine Urteile*) constitute the historical reality of his being.

Grondin (1994:111) commenting on Gadamer's use of the term prejudice in interpretation, identifies its use following a struggle. Itself motivated by a nineteenth century prejudice - the belief that objectivity could be achieved only by precluding the integration of subjectivity in understanding. When applied to the research setting, subjectivity in prejudice (derived from a dissatisfaction with the Enlightenment) is something to be recognised and worked out interpretively. That is, by being in conversation with prejudice we learn to understand it, see its potential. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings (Gadamer, 1975:269; see also Koch, 1996:174-184). As a hermeneutically alert interpreter of ethnographic information from research we are using prejudices to remain open to the meanings, ideas, references and experiences of

people during interviews, participant observation, networking, any situation in which there is information relevant to the research from sticking blindly to their own prejudgments and fore meaning, thus situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it (Gadamer, 1976:268).

Grondin (1994) summarises the portrayal of Gadamer's argument in *Truth and Method*, as one that takes into consideration the notion that all previous discussion of method is situated in the quest for knowledge through truth. According to Gadamer, historicism's delusion consisted in trying to displace prejudices with methods in order to make something removed from the self and situation. What understanding is and requires, is a *self-understanding*, an understanding that occurs differently from one period to another, one individual to another.

## INTERPRETATION

### Working things out

Understanding and application of ideas to emerge from the interpretation inherent in it are invisibly fused by this approach. In what Grondin (1994:114) describes as the call for the elucidation of our historicity, the working out of the hermeneutic situation calls for awareness and application of the limits historically effected consciousness brings to our experience of the world we studying:

*"To understand something means to have related it to ourselves in such a way that we discover it in an answer to our own questions but "our own" in such a way that these questions, too are assimilated into a tradition and metamorphosed by it. Every act of understanding, even self understanding, is motivated, stimulated, by questions that determine in advance the sight lines of understanding. Understanding results from the ongoing dialogue between what is meaningful and what is observational"* (Grondin, 1994:117-118).

This means that in research, interpretation always includes something of our situation. Working out our fore-projections allows for subject matter to be understood and affirm its own validity in relation to it. That way we can be critically aware of our prejudices, the direction of what is suggested or inferred by them and what this may mean to interpretation.

Inclusion of our situation as self critique within research inevitably leads to a consciousness of historical understandings that operate throughout the interpretive process. This means that our understanding events of the present is transformed into a thinking relation they have with the past. Here, the nature of historical consciousness consists of events of the past incorporated with events of the present.

### Confronting what actually happens

When confronted with this in interpretation, we ask through what means do we *take in* information from fieldwork? What does (actually) happen in data generation and interpretation, and why? How is our interpretation transformed into the written record? How do we describe all that happens? How do we select what is inferred and all that takes our eye and ear (our senses, really) during participant observation? Is it possible for us to state why we chose a particular interpretation, issue, follow-up question, location for fieldwork? Why do we ask certain questions in *that* particular moment or setting, to *that* particular person or group? Why do we allow clear themes and content to pass without comment, only to pick up on something else the participant says or, something else we see? Our preparedness to consider the everyday concerns of interpretation integrates hermeneutics and ethnography as a shared activity between researcher and participant.<sup>1</sup>

Gadamer's (1976) influence upon interpretation in the present article speaks to the subjective and interpersonal nature of the universal and particular. Rather than an attempt at mere description of another's experience, interpretation is through conditions in which understanding is achieved and enhanced, and, ultimately decided upon. As researchers we are using the self as the primary resource for gathering and analysing qualitative information (Burns & Grove, 1993). Questions that arise from *all that is in the field* are a means to bring about understanding and interpretation between the situation being studied and the person studying it.

Here Gadamer (1976) speaks to interpretation of and reflection from experience rather than its mere description and reporting. This approach is receptive to fieldwork opportunities and experiences as the interpretive technique engages values and meaning systems as these issues relate to a variety of ethnic and social trends. In short, a qualitative appreciation of what people (primarily respondent and researcher) actually *do and feel* during the research process.

The purpose of spelling out these relationships is to appreciate the composite nature of the research questions, the researcher, and group under scrutiny. Application of prejudices comes not from attempting to withhold or suppress them, but rather to recognise and work them out interpretively (Grondin, 1994:111). The notion of prejudice is applied this way in the present article so as to generate the critical awareness called for by Botha (1996). Working out prejudices gives direction about what is suggested or inferred by them and what this means for the conduct of research and interpretation.

### Horizons and reflection

Through this having of prejudice both researcher and

respondent are, through merging their particular point of view operating at a particular time (e.g. during interview or participant observation) creating a fusion of experience and ideas. Understanding is thus a fusion of past experience, historical understandings as well as qualities that exist in the research question and group under scrutiny. Nicholson (1991:153) explains that our own mode of thought is an horizon we cannot eliminate: to understand something from the past is to experience the fusion of its horizon with our own. Here the notion of fusion provides Botha's (1996) discussion of historical understandings and insights in health and healing currency for ongoing concern rooted in the horizon of past, present and future understanding.

The mechanism used to interpret these experiences is by using world view and historical consciousness (i.e. pre-knowledge, beliefs, ideas and attitudes toward health, illness, healing) to constitute a pre-understanding or prejudice to the experience of participants. Prejudice, Gadamer writes, stresses application of content without the exclusion of one's self, whereby, the important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings (Gadamer, 1976:269). A hermeneutically trained historical consciousness means that we remain open to the meaning of another person, text or experience. An openness that always includes our situation the meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it (Gadamer, 1976:268).

During the course of engaging the hermeneutically trained consciousness in ethnography, the researcher engages in a process of reflection. They are open to consider at length and in some depth the array of issues that influence what Marcus (1985:108) describes as a self conscious account and meditation upon the conditions of knowledge production as it is being produced. This means replacing textually the observational objective *eye* of the ethnographer with his or her personal, sometimes pejoratively viewed *narcissistic I*.

The concern with this situation is, of course that we could become intoxicated with the personal, or as Marcus puts it, the *narcissistic I*. Knowledge, Marcus (1995:109) continues, arises not from the monologist authority or voice, however self critical, but from dialogic relationships in the field. With the aid of hermeneutics the intellectual functions of reflexivity in ethnography occur within the open circular application of pre-knowledge, pre-understanding and a Gadamerian notion of prejudgments (*der Begriff des Vorurteils*) that serve to inform and guide questions and reflection during simultaneous inquiry of realities.

The present article responds to Marcus's claim that ethnography must show interest in the global perspective in conventional local contexts and sites (and) the influence such topics as ethnicity, race, nationality and colonialism upon ethnographic description and explanation (Marcus, 1995:106). To accommodate the fragmentation and simultaneity of researcher in a global and local context, interpretation is thus without the use of bracketing so that the unit of treatment and analysis of data is through what Gadamer (1976) calls "*fusion of horizons*" (*Horizontverschmelzung*) between past and present that meet in the particular present (Thiselton, 1980:307). Gadamer (1976:302) defines the concept of horizon as the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. The implications of horizon when viewed within the notion of prejudice means that to have a horizon means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it.

When we explore this vision, horizon is the place to concentrate the structure of mental work characteristic of ethnography, working through the hermeneutical situation as much as field terrain. The idea being advanced here is that where horizon is something into which we move and which moves us (Gadamer, 1976:304), there exists in the complex nature of ethnographic fieldwork, opportunity to engage field relationships that are both situated in the recent and distant past whereby the horizon of the past out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is always in motion. The interpretive process is made up of a circle moving backwards and forwards, in and around part and whole as well as between the initial fore-structures (pre-understanding) and what is being revealed in the data of the inquiry. The researcher uses this understanding to examine the parts of the whole, and then re-examine the whole in light of the insight they have gained from the parts (Leonard, 1994:57). This means that interpretation of the research data takes place in the space between horizons to constitute *one great horizon* that moves from within to beyond the frontiers of the present, (thus embracing) the historical depths of our self consciousness (Gadamer, 1975:304-5).

While in conditional agreement with the notion of interpretation through a fusion of horizons and hermeneutic alertness of prejudice, one must raise the question of tradition as an all encompassing horizon that informs interpretation. When hermeneutic experience is occurring in situations involving multiple effective histories e.g., migrant communities displaced by war or famine, there might be fragmented historical continuity between the past from which the participant came and the interpreters anticipation of meaning for the group. Consideration of this view has implications for the study of different

cultures and religious groups as fieldwork, is constituted of the ever-present juxtaposition between spiritual and cultural situations in the shadow of social and economic hardship. The horizon of participants is inextricably linked to the recent and distant past history of their culture and religion.

To overcome the limitations associated with compromised historical continuity in hermeneutic interpretation, the researcher must, as Botha (1996) reminds us, recognise the significance of the past occurring in the present. Communication involves the effective coming forward of historical horizons (both researcher and researched) operating simultaneously with the historical horizon we bring to a particular moment during data generation. Historical consciousness exists in both past and present and applying this to the concept of horizon reveals the significance of the past to today's experience such that, what the researcher is trying to understand can be seen in its true dimensions (Gadamer, 1975:303).

### **Putting one's own bias to work**

Therefore, Gadamer (1975:268, 552) argues, the researcher must remain open to the meaning of the other person or text in such a way that there is no scientific method whereby to distinguish the true from the false, to avoid error, or reach truth. The idea being advanced here by Gadamer applied to cultural research and scholarship reveals itself through the fluidity and multiplicity of possibilities in both conversation and thought as witnessed, interacted, collaborated and absorbed within a range of prejudices and expectations, i.e. the fore-structures of understanding, during the research process.

To be aware of this as one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth, respects the hermeneutic situation as evolving through the mental tasks for research (Gadamer, 1975:269). Fieldwork questioning is both purpose and product of the conscious trying to interpret and reinterpret participant experiences. Viewed this way, trustworthiness is established through the reader getting into what has been written, being able to audit the events, influences and actions of the researcher (Koch, 1996:178).

The constant process of new projection and understanding constitutes ongoing movement in interpretation. Gadamer quotes Heidegger (1962:153) from *Being in Time* to examine the implications of the hermeneutic circle for fusion of horizons:

*"In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing, and we genuinely grasp this possibility only when we have understood that our first, last and constant task in interpreting is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and*

*fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of things themselves"*

The sort of interpretations to emerge within the hermeneutic circle are greatly enhanced by application of prejudice, horizon and fore-structure of understanding. Here there is a deliberate moving away from law-like generalisations even after the research has been written.

Viewed this way the interpretive process has no clear pathway, rules that govern its depth or rigour in the way tradition directs quantitative research. What this implies is the need for a clear information and decision trail about the means that the researcher arrived at a certain position (Naude & Muller, 1996). The interpretive process is fluid in that it moves back and forth, between part and whole, between an aspect of understanding and continued understanding of the subject in view.

This is because as the reader comes in to contact with the contents of the research, the researcher assumes that they too will be bringing a set of pre-understandings to the text that in turn implicate what the reader regards as unexpected or of particular interest. The *musical score* referred to earlier in the present article is the product of the reader's horizon and the horizon of the text and how it was generated. The hermeneutical task for the reader is facilitated by:

*"...the text wanting to tell the interpreter something (through the process of newness) with constant assimilation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices, awareness of one's own bias, and this gives rise to flourishing hermeneutics which guide understanding as a rough abbreviation of the whole..." (Gadamer, 1975:236).*

From this perspective and through a sense of the past, the health researcher is able to inform the present through which they can guide questions and interpretation of the researched. The hermeneutical connection is determined by the pre-judgements, brought to the present, which in turn constitute the horizon of a particular moment.

### **Fieldwork journal**

Application of the hermeneutic circle in research could be undertaken through use of a fieldwork journal. Here the fieldwork journal is a place to record a running account of experiences including personal feelings and involvement during data collection. Feeling and emotion surrounding aspects of personal comfort, anxiety, surprise, shock, revelation are all of analytic significance. This is because feelings enter into and colour the social relationships the researcher engages

in during interpretation. Second, in the author's considered opinion, personal and subjective responses will inevitably influence the choice of what is noteworthy, what is regarded as problematic and strange, and what appears to be mundane or obvious. One often relies implicitly upon such feelings and intuitive events to influence the course of methodological decisions as well as other stages of the interview and observation process.

What confirms this task as a journal rather than a diary is that the above processes enable recognition and development of interpretations through practical application of fieldwork relationships, and decisions recorded in the journal are made available to the reader in the interests of the study's claim to rigour (Koch, 1996). On these grounds the fieldwork journal seeks an elucidation with reality as the hermeneutical component of knowing the real power in our ability to see what is questionable (Nicholson, 1991:154).

## CONCLUSION

This article was devoted to how one may go about interpretation during health research. The writing of this article was stimulated by recent scholarly articles that, on closer examination, revealed important links between historical and philosophical understandings of health and helping professionals in healing and interpretation in qualitative health research (Botha, 1996; Naude & Muller, 1996).

This article revealed that data interpretation using beliefs and ideas to constitute a pre-understanding (prejudice) to the experience of participants is one way to mediate between issues of interpretation and truth. This means that both researcher and researched are self interpreting, and this is a respected source of data. Research ideas from the rhetoric of contemporary ethnography were drawn together without the use of bracketing so that the unit of treatment and analysis of data was through what Gadamer (1975) calls the *fusion of horizons*. Understanding of this fusion is the result of open interpretation and re-interpretation between the researcher's horizon of prejudice and experience in the field. Understanding originates in the researcher's historical context and Heideggerian notion of hermeneutic circle thus leading to a rich interpretation of meanings in everyday life, symbols long forgotten and interactions between researcher and participant. Also discussed in the present article is a historical consciousness as process, whereby understanding events of the present can be illuminated by a thinking relationship with the past (Botha, 1996). The nature of historical consciousness consists an amalgam of local, historical and international concerns. As a researcher and writer *takes in* information from fieldwork using insight shaped by personal narrative, context, cultural and stylistic conventions as well as an interpretive framework informed by experience. The interpretations

one ends up with are an accomplishment borne out of a working through historical consciousness and the composite nature of the research question and group under scrutiny.

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<sup>1</sup> Through interpretative effort light is shed on the meaning of being a particular individual and it is by virtue of culture and language that we, as researchers and scholars, have the inquisition we have, and hence see something of the dimensions to our field of study.