Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Clarifying Understanding

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Abstract

The philosophical orientation of Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology is explored in this paper. Gadamer offers a hermeneutics of the humanities that differs significantly from models of the human sciences historically rooted in scientific methodologies. In particular, Gadamer proposes that understanding is first a mode of being before it is a mode of knowing; what this effectively offers is an alternative to the traditional way of understanding in the human sciences. This paper details why the work of hermeneutics is not to develop a procedure for understanding, but to clarify the conditions of understanding. In this explication, the author examines the hermeneutic experience and, in the process, relates it to both the practical and the historical horizons of the lifeworld of health professionals, particularly nurses.

Introduction

Contemporary culture holds the physical world and its tangible objects in high regard. This respect is based on a culturally situated awareness of empirical science and the way that it has earned a reputation for delivering important objective truths. The culture of science encourages individuals to uphold its methods as the main standard upon which they judge and come to know their world. In particular, the scientific method supports individuals to free themselves from bias, and to attain distance from those contextual features that are unique to their life history. Simply stated, science simulates the production of effects that would not come about by themselves; it impressively cultivates outcomes by attempting to control and at times eliminate the natural, unpredictable experiences that are the hallmark of each human life.

This article diverges from the dominant research tradition of modern empirical science by offering a detailed exploration of interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology. In particular, it draws on the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who offers an interpretive hermeneutic philosophy that transcends the models of the human sciences rooted in traditional scientific methodologies. Within an interpretive hermeneutic research tradition, the *intent is not to develop a procedure for understanding, but to clarify the conditions that can lead to understanding*. To engage in the experience of understanding is likened to a reflective discovery of sorts, one that is very different from an objectified method of knowledge attainment. The interpretive hermeneutic research tradition attends to the realization that in all journeys of discovery, such as those involving human research, one can never hope to discover everything. In other words, when embarking on this type of practical philosophical inquiry, it is important to recognize that all resulting understanding will never be complete: some experiences will remain undiscovered

The Primary Concern of Hermeneutics

The origin of hermeneutics in its modern day use dates back to the 17th century, where it gained importance in the context of biblical studies (Crotty, 1998). Scholars, according to Crotty, turned to

hermeneutics to provide guidelines for interpreting scriptures. Since the 17th century, hermeneutics has moved into many areas of scholarship and been applied to text other than scriptures, including unwritten sources.

The meaning and scope of the term "hermeneutics" is an important consideration in a research study that concerns itself with interpretation. Etymologically the roots of the word hermeneutics lie in the Greek verb *hermeneuein,* which is generally translated as "interpret" or "understand" (Crotty, 1998; Palmer, 1969). The noun *hermeneia* means the utterance or explication of thought; and the name, *Hermeus*, refers to the playful, mischievous, "trickster" Hermes (Caputo, 1987; Grondin, 1995; Moules, 2002). As the divine, wing-footed messenger of the gods, Hermes was gifted with the ability to translate or interpret messages from the gods into a form that humans could understand. This process of bringing messages from beyond our own realm of experience into a humanly intelligible form involves language.

Six different domains of hermeneutics emerged during modern times, each representing a standpoint on the act of interpretation (see Palmer, 1969). Although each domain brings to the forefront legitimate but different influences on the act of interpretation, there are particular hermeneutic domains that suit the unique beliefs, philosophies and practices of the interpretive inquirer. The two domains that offer the greatest meaning in the context of this particular hermeneutic inquiry are the phenomenology of existential understanding and interpretive procedures. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and, later, William Dilthey (1833-1911) are cited as pioneers who contributed to the modern beginnings of the interpretive alternative in Western philosophy. Both reacted to the rationalistic sciences and indicated their inadequacy in understanding human phenomena (Hughes & Sharrock, 1997). Since Dilthey, many fundamental postulates of the rationalistic sciences have been brought into question. His work prepared for the move from epistemological understanding toward ontological understanding in the human or cultural sciences (Ricoeur, 1973). The writings of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) offer a detailed exploration of the phenomenology of existential understanding and the interpretive alternative.

The primary concern of hermeneutics is the philosophy of understanding (Geanellos, 1998). Elucidating the conditions whereby understanding takes place is a central feature of hermeneutics, and this is repeatedly emphasized within Gadamer's philosophical writings (Schwandt, 1999). Above all else, hermeneutics proposes that there are no such

things as measurable behaviours, stimuli, and associated responses. Instead, investigation is prompted through such things as encounters, lifeworlds and meaning (Van Manen, 1977). Suffice it to say that all human science research efforts share a common feature: the desire to explore and become more familiar with the human lifeworld. Our life-world reflects both our way of being in the world and the structure of meaningful relationships that we create in the world.

Interpretive hermeneutic understanding differs from other ways of understanding by presupposing that all texts and non-texts are strange and inaccessible - and, as such, distanced from the interpreter. But a paradox exists: for, despite the sense of strangeness and distance between the interpreter and the individual and/or text, there is an assumed link or commonality between the two, making the event of understanding feasible. This event of understanding is an on-going effort basic to our being in this world. Scientific modes of understanding entail a kind of knowing that moves away from existence and personal experience into a world of concepts. By contrast, interpretive hermeneutic understanding is rooted in a historical encounter and concerns itself with personal experiences of being here in this world (Palmer, 1969, p. 10). Furthermore, in hermeneutic interpretation, language is pivotal, because it shapes all situations and experiences that we find ourselves in. Language and understanding are inseparable structural aspects of human-being-in the world (Laverty, 2003).

The opportunity to engage in hermeneutic understanding is likely to arise when individuals undergo any experience that serves to disrupt the ordinary, taken for granted aspects of existence. As Travelbee (1971) suggests, human beings are motivated to create meaning in the different experiences that shape their life. Any number of life experiences can motivate the individual to search for meaning, such as the arrival of illness. Through our own unique experiences, we are moved to reflect on our dominant ideologies and usual rules of understanding, and this becomes all the more important when we realize that our dominant ideology offers minimal help in assisting us in coming to know the phenomenon that has motivated our interest. In other words, the individual becomes more aware of the limitations that exist within the dominant, scientifically oriented perspective with its tendency to reduce human experience to the law of averages. Interpretive hermeneutic understanding is born from the recognition that all human experiences are both rich and complex.

Efforts toward understanding the unique experiences of each individual involve not so much a mental or

intellectual process, but rather a way of being, a way of behaving in our existence (Grondin, 2003). This way of being and behaving does not correspond with the common instrumentalist conception of understanding, which is rife with criteria, norms, and foundations. It is a way of being and behaving that can never be taught. In other words, it does not come about as a result of learning rules; rather, it is formed or cultivated through our own unique experiences. It is within our experiences that we come to recognize how our attachment to a firmly grounded knowledge base promotes a form of ignorance where we are unprepared to recognize what we do not know. Experience, when approached from a stance of openness, places our mental and intellectual processes at stake, and demonstrates a willingness to surrender our attachments to our current knowledge. Through this way of being, individuals are intent not on knowing *more* but on knowing *differently*. Simply stated, the inquirer is prepared to surrender, through a stance of openness, what he or she currently knows, and it is in this surrender that the inquirer has the potential to be transformed. An example that many individuals can relate to is parenting. Prior to becoming a parent, we possess a predominantly mental or intellectual understanding of what we believe parenting is. It is only through a life experience that brings us closer to the lifeworld of parenting that we are motivated to surrender our prior conceptions or attachments to what we once thought parenting would be. Maybe we thought that it would be easy to have 'obedient children' and that parents of disobedient children were doing something wrong; something which we intellectually conceptualized could be remedied through 'proper parenting'. But now our experiences prepare us to relinquish our intellectual attachment to this way of knowing, and, in doing so, we come to realise that parenting is wholly different from what we once imagined. We are thus transformed and now understand parenting in an entirely different light.

What this indicates is that, when the individual, as inquirer, brings together ontology and epistemology - ways of being and ways of knowing - there is more opportunity to move beyond the limitations associated with knowledge constructed purely from the methodologies of the natural sciences: methodologies which rely on a predominantly epistemological and instrumentalist conception of understanding.

Working the Fore-Structure of Understanding

What interpretive hermeneutic understanding offers the inquirer is the ability to begin to see the way in which our blind attachment to certain classifications and categorizations limit how we understand and come to know our world. Heidegger, as explained by

Gadamer (1960/1989), speaks at great length about the *disclosure of the fore-structure* of understanding in the hermeneutic experience. The fore-structure, according to Heidegger (1927/1962), is an innate capacity that exists in all individuals to intuit the meaning of being. What the fore-structure offers is a shadowy grasp of the existential nature of existence. More specifically, what is implied is that every encounter we have is grounded and guided by something that exists in advance - an already decided way of conceiving that which we are interested in. Within the fore-structure of understanding, whenever we know and understand something, the interpretation is founded essentially upon what Heidegger (1927/1962) frames as our fore-having, fore-sight and fore-conception. What all of this guides us to understand is that there can never be a presuppositionless stance in any act of interpretation. Awareness of this often taken for granted aspect of our existence - that we possess a fore-structure of understanding - is what helps us to relinquish our attachments to how we currently know and understand the world.

There is little value in an interpretive approach to understanding where one engages in a particular, concrete kind of interpretation. For both Heidegger and Gadamer, "working the fore-structure" involves a desire to overcome incessant habits of thought, which they each identify as distractions. These distractions are seen as projections of meaning imposed onto the individual and/or text. What Heidegger emphasizes is our tendency, as soon as meaning emerges in a text, to apply or project that meaning to the text as a whole. Take, for example, the issue of suffering. In an article by Gregory (1994), he talks candidly about the medicalization of suffering and its reduction to a physiological event. Suffering, according to Gregory, has been depersonalized by health professionals, and this "fore-conception" of the health professional is neatly packaged into popular conception. This conception, which is evident throughout the medical literature, identifies pain and suffering as interchangeable (Gregory, 1994). What this does is to reduce suffering to one of its many aspects, pain. Furthermore, the broader context of suffering is then viewed as having only one applicable meaning, physical pain, which is accordingly applied to the individual or the text as a whole. Health professionals consequently conceive of suffering as controllable and, with minimal input from the individual or text, turn to a tool that guarantees some form of immediate action, pharmaceuticals. Both the health professional and the suffering individual, based on this popular conception, are thus engaged in a relationship where there is disembodied knowing. The relationship lacks depth of meaning because it is guided predominantly by the tenets of an epistemology that is empirically based. The effect of this stance, or health care

tradition, is the way that it discounts, amongst other things, the fore-structure of understanding.

Health professionals, even though they do not often vocalize it, recognize that each individual's existence or emergence in the world manifests itself in a unique fore-structure of understanding. However, through the nature of the health professional's work - caring for individuals in an unpredictable environment with a perceived lack of time - there is pressure to conform to a certain way of being, and most often this way of being moves the health professional to categorize, through inductive type reasoning, the client and his or her identified area of concern. In other words, health professionals' fore-structure of understanding has been reduced to that of 'popular conception'. One way to change fore-conceptions that have been reduced to 'popular conceptions' is to examine them as they arise through what Heidegger and Gadamer call the *hermeneutic circle*. Heidegger described the hermeneutic circle as the anticipated movement of fore-understanding (Gadamer, 1960/1989). Within this circle, understanding moves beyond the usual stance of subjective or objective interpretations; instead, what is offered is the interplay of movement between tradition and interpretation.

Exploring the Art of Understanding

Understanding is defined as the original characteristic of the being of human life itself (Gadamer, 1960/ 1989, p. 259). When speaking of understanding, Gadamer holds that traditional hermeneutics has in fact inappropriately narrowed the horizons within which understanding 'stands'. For Gadamer, as for Heidegger, all understanding is ultimately self-understanding; it is the individual's mode of being. To clarify this notion necessitates a more extensive exploration of the art of understanding or *Verstehen*.

The art of understanding is akin to a game in which a to-and-fro movement characterizes the encounter with that which we seek to understand (Schwandt, 1999). Any interpretation or understanding from a hermeneutic perspective always begins with the interpreter's fore-projections, our fore-projections being a product of our situatedness in the world. "We understand the world before we begin to think about it; such pre-understanding gives rise to thought and always conditions it" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 11). Therefore, to begin the process of understanding, such as in the early phase of a research study, one must start by reflecting on one's own fore-projections or pre-understandings and the meanings that exist within them in an effort both to determine their legitimacy and to contain their influence on new understanding.

My own fore-projections are born from my history,

culture, language and sociopolitical experiences, and constitute the familiar horizons of my lifeworld. For example, as a health professional, I am situated within a certain dominant perspective of illness. What I know about illness is often based on technical knowledge or scientific reason. Technical knowledge offers me greater control and mastery over the event of illness, mostly through compartmentalizing the individual who is experiencing illness. In other words, technical knowledge constructs and frames the illness experience in terms of specific clinical discourse, such as the overt reliance on objective data and clinically verifiable facts. Getting to know the Being of another occurs in a very different way from getting to know specific things about that Being. Sociologist Arthur Frank (1991) brings this into sharp focus by utilizing the notion of *the ride vs the story* in his explication of the illness experience. Dominant clinical discourse divorces experience (the ride) from the meaning (the story) and seeks to tell individuals who they are and how they feel.

Awareness is growing amongst health professionals of the limited way in which context or story is addressed in both research and practice concerning the individual's illness experience. Often this occurs because of the basic assumptions health professionals hold about what illness specifically is. When illness is constructed in a technical and highly epistemological way, context is notably absent, and gaps or breaches in inter-subjectivity ensue. Without bridging this gap, illness is severed from the context of thought, feeling and perception, and this gives rise to obscurity in meaning. Expressing what appears to be a similar idea, Thorne, Nyhlin, and Paterson (2000, p. 304) explain that the realities of chronic illness and the general assumptions underlying health care relationships lead to several contradictions. One that is particularly relevant to research and practice concerning illness is the way that health professionals know the pattern of illness in a general sense, whereas the individual understands his or her illness in an infinitely more sophisticated sense (Paterson & Sloan, 1994; Thorne, Nyhlin, & Paterson, 2000). When health professionals limit how it is that they come to know individuals, how does this influence research and practice concerning individuals and their illnesses? Heidegger suggests that "someone who accepts and passes on the current chatter, even if the chatter happens to be in some sense correct, sheds no light of his own" (Inwood, 1997, p. 48). For health professionals who wish to shed some light of their own, the desire must thus exist to move beyond the clinical literalism - the truth, facts, and clinical detail - they have come to associate with individuals facing life-changing events like illness.

To begin the process of transforming current ways of

knowing, there must be a willingness on the part of health professionals - in research and practice - to merge their own history and culture with the history and culture of an unfamiliar other. One's ability to experience and understand the encounter with the other will be directed by the initial fusion of the familiar - your own lifeworld - with the unfamiliar - the individual other's lifeworld. From here, it is possible to begin to challenge the taken for granted attitudes and beliefs that are part of each individual's context and history. In other words, this type of research and practice involves a willingness to engage in a progressive letting go of what we currently know and understand. In brief, this is the beginning of hermeneutic understanding.

Accomplishing the goal of arriving at a new understanding entails engagement in language: which is where the world is disclosed to us.

Language and the Disclosure of the World

Both Heidegger (1927/1962) and Gadamer (1977) identify language as integral to hermeneutic understanding. It is in language that our world is disclosed to us. The world that is spoken of here is not the environmental scientific world, but the lifeworld (Palmer, 1969). Common to modernity is a view of the world as a possession or the property of our own subjectivity. To think of the world in this manner makes it highly impersonal, so that world, figuratively speaking, stands outside the individual. In other words, within this view, world is something that exists within our highly subjectively oriented thinking. From a hermeneutic perspective, it is an error to think of the world in this manner. The world is not impersonal; it is something that exists between individuals. The world and our existence in the world is what creates a shared understanding between individuals, and the medium that makes this understanding of the world possible is language. Language is where the world resides, and hermeneutic experience, as we understand it, occurs in and through language; it is language that discloses the world in which we live.

Beginning with Heidegger, and then with Gadamer, there has been a movement away from what is termed the classic view of language - a view that was influenced in the late 18th century by science and rationalism. Within this classic view, language is merely an instrument of thought and communication, shaped and mastered by the individual. According to Taylor (1997), language, in the classic view, is understood within the confines of science and rationalism.

Both Heidegger and Gadamer transcend the limitations of the classic view of language. Diverging from the dominant perspective, Gadamer (1977) expresses that language is not reducible to an instrument or tool. Instead, by nature of birth, one is born into language, and for that reason it is already with us. As people grow into language or linguistic interpretation, they are already biased in their thinking and knowing. Using children as an example, Gadamer refutes the still popular claim that learning to speak means learning to use a pre-existent tool for designating a world that is already familiar to us. He calls it madness that humanity thinks it can in some way re-discover the original language of humanity. To conceptualize language presupposes that one has a consciousness of language. What is really happening here, according to Gadamer (1977), springs from the unconscious operation of language; in other words, to reflect about language is to once again draw back into language. Gadamer and Heidegger share the perspective that human beings are already at home in language; that birth grants an enclosedness in the linguistic world in which one lives. Drawing on the hermeneutic circle, Heidegger and Gadamer identify the value of language from their non-classic perspective.

Language, within the hermeneutic circle, is essential to *lichtung* or 'clearing'. More simply stated, language opens access to meaning, and is the condition on which the human world is disclosed. Such disclosure is not intra-psychic - that is, it does not occur exclusively within a person; rather, it occurs in the spaces between humans. Language, for that matter, is the dominant force defining the space that humans share with each other (Taylor, 1997). Language is never a private affair, but instead is shared between humans. For that reason, language cannot be viewed as a subjective happening (Schwandt, 1999). There is an "I-lessness" to language, most evident in the fact that "Whoever speaks a language that no one else understands does not speak. To speak means to speak to someone" (Gadamer, 1977, p. 65). Language and speaking are understood as a to-and-fro play that transcends subjectivity. Gadamer (1977) describes this through the use of a game metaphor:

> The back and forth movement that takes place within a given field of play does not derive from the human game and from playing as a subjective attitude. Quite the contrary, even for human subjectivity the real experience of the game consists in the fact that something that obeys its own set of laws gains ascendancy in the game. To the movement in the determinate direction corresponds a movement in the opposite direction. The back and forth movement of

the game has a peculiar freedom and buoyancy that determines the consciousness of the players. … Whatever is brought into play or comes into play no longer depends on itself, but is dominated by the relation we call the game. (p. 53)

Tightly bound in the mysterious yet dominant nature of language is the ongoing issue of understanding. Understanding is not limited to an activity of the "I", or something that happens to self; rather, like language, understanding involves a loss of self. Understanding arises out of being. To engage in understanding a text or person does not mean getting inside the person's mind. Instead, it simply means being open to the perspective from which the person or text has formed the views to be disclosed. Understanding, if created in this way, transcends the subjectivist and objectivist stance, and is more of a movement between what Gadamer calls tradition and interpretation.

Illuminating the Fusion of Horizons

Demonstrating that all understanding is ultimately interpretive and hermeneutical, Gadamer utilizes Edmund Husserl's phenomenological concept of "horizon" and Martin Heidegger's account of the radical historicity of the human situation and human understanding (Dostal, 2002). All understanding, according to Gadamer, is a historically effected event or situation that is both linguistic and dialogical. Gadamer (1960/1989) explains that an essential feature in defining our present situation is the concept of horizon: "The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (p. 302). Individuals who possess a limited horizon have difficulty seeing far enough and may overvalue that which is nearest to themselves. On the other hand, an individual who is said to have a horizon is not limited to see only that which is nearby but is able to see that which is beyond.

When attending to historical understanding, the concept of horizon is also significant. Gadamer (1960/1989) emphasizes the importance of gaining an appropriate historical horizon so that we are able to understand something in its true dimensions. The appropriate historical horizon that Gadamer speaks of requires inter alia a willingness on the part of the inquirer to not try simply to transpose him- or herself into a particular historical time. The inquirer must question whether or not there is a historical horizon in which s/he as an inquirer already exists, and a historical horizon from the past in which s/he as the inquirer is trying to place him- or herself. What this offers to the inquirer is realization of the importance of questioning whether there are such things as closed horizons and what limitations arise when we engage in this predominantly abstract way of thinking. Because of the historical movement of human life, Gadamer suggests that there can never be a closed horizon and a singular standpoint from which the inquirer seeks to gain understanding. Rather, a horizon is something into which we move and that moves within us (Gadamer, 1960/1989). To that end, the horizon of the past is always in motion. In recognizing this, the inquirer comes to understand that the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past: "There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. Rather understanding is always a fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves" (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 306). Gadamer's philosophical ideas go to great length to attend to the role of historical understanding in all interpretation, and to the illumination of the fusion of horizons in extending understanding (Palmer, 1969).

When Gadamer speaks about the fusion of horizons, he offers a distinct movement away from traditional research and its accompanying focus on method and methodology. Most extraordinary is Gadamer's ability to think beyond the idea of understanding as a strictly instrumental process. In particular, Gadamer points to the false claims of method and the way that our abandonment of the humanist tradition in the 19th and 20th centuries led to the dominance of method. Gadamer's hermeneutics strives to build a new bridge to the humanist tradition (Grondin, 2003). His concern with the humanist tradition starts off with the notion of culture or *Bildung*, which he believes constitutes knowledge for the humanist tradition. Although *Bildung* has several meanings in German, Gadamer (1960/1989) characterizes *Bildung* as the properly human way of developing one's natural talents and capacities. Humanity is something that we develop and cultivate as human beings and which differentiates us from non-human animals. As such, humans are constantly in the process of self-development through engagement with culture and civilization. It is in building and forming oneself through *Bildung* that one assumes a stance of openness to other points of view and perspectives that differ from one's own (Grondin, 2003). "What makes the human sciences into sciences can be understood more easily from the tradition of the concept of *Bildung* than from the modern idea of scientific method. It is to the humanistic tradition that we must turn. In its resistance to the claims of modern science it gains a new significance" (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 18).

The humanist tradition reminds us that the human sciences are about our very being, elucidating the

importance of being open to the social, historical and temporal nature of life, and the role of language in all understanding. The difficulty that many individuals experience in carrying out an interpretive hermeneutic research study, and particularly a study based on Gadamerian hermeneutics, *is the lack of examples within the literature to guide their analysis*. This is where caution must come into play and one must resist seeking out concrete examples for interpretive hermeneutic based research studies. When concrete examples are conveniently offered, there is a risk of creating a fixed standpoint and a solitary horizon of meaning. To engage in research from a fixed stand-point and a solitary horizon is very different from the humanist tradition that Gadamer characterizes in his discussion of *Bildung*. In a philosophically based research study, it is most important to call on the nature of the inquirer's being, as well as his or her culture and history, also known as the horizon in which s/he stands. The horizon in which one stands is unique to the individual and to one's involvement in a particular research study. In recognizing the uniqueness of the horizon in which each individual stands, one is opening oneself to the real possibilities that exist within human consciousness.

There is recognition in the literature of the lack of examples available to guide research studies based on the philosophical perspective of interpretive hermeneutics. In response to this, Lawler (1998) writes: "One of the great dramas … is making the transition from philosophy to methodology. In the case of phenomenologies, the philosophy seems to overpower the methodology" (p. 109). Caelli (2001), in similar vein, identifies two of the greatest challenges that face phenomenologists: "The lack of articulated methods in phenomenological research and the greater challenge of understanding the philosophical underpinnings" (p. 276). Caputo (1987), in describing hermeneutic inquiry, also reflects this ongoing concern with method and offers a cautionary insight. To remain so highly focused on a certain methodology, according to Caputo, makes science subservient to method, so that method rules instead of liberating. For Gadamer, a philosophical interpretive hermeneutic inquiry transcends the use of method as we have customarily come to understand it, and especially the way it exercises a monopoly on the notion of truth. Gadamer's hermeneutics serves to remind us of the real possibilities that exist within human consciousness and that a phenomenological approach helps to bring this into consideration.

In his *Truth and Method* (1960/1989), Gadamer characterises interpretive hermeneutic inquiry as phenomenological in its method. By calling his method phenomenological he does not subscribe to Husserl's account of the phenomenological method, but aims rather to indicate that the task of the enterprise is descriptive; in this instance, according to Dostal (2002), descriptive of the hermeneutical human experience of understanding. Within the phenomenological nature of Gadamer's hermeneutics there is always a concern with the philosophical underpinnings. In addition, Gadamer emphasises the value in recognizing that it is not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens over and above our wanting and doing, that is of the utmost concern in the hermeneutic experience of understanding.

Jardine (1992) illuminates this value by explaining that, at the beginning of any interpretive work, there is a deliberate showing of questionable-ness, where the topic directs the character of the work. Take the example of a hermeneutic research approach involving the experience of individuals living with chronic illness. It is not enough to ask each individual *"Can you explain to me what living with a chronic illness is like?"* Each individual's understanding of an experience, such as living with chronic illness, has a deep connection with his or her history and culture. Therefore, to really engage in the topic, there needs to be a sharing of his or her experiences - a story telling of sorts - and it is in these stories that meaning and understanding are disclosed. Furthermore, it is often *within* these storied experiences that questions arise, and the questions serve to direct the interpretive dialogue. Questions that arise from the dialogue with the research participants are often very different from what the researcher envisioned prior to the encounter; it is the something which happens beyond the limits of what we may initially have wanted.

In one's pursuit of a research question and a method of analysis, it is important to realize that the character of the work could be rendered something else, something unintended, if one's perception and interpretation of validity were left unchecked. One's choice of method determines the direction the research takes and the types of outcomes achieved. Koch and Harrington (1998) explain that we drive our research with our "values, histories and interests" (p. 887). Qualitative researchers in the social sciences during the last two decades demonstrate a continued preoccupation with rigour, especially reliability and validity (Koch & Harrington, 1998). The result of this preoccupation with rigour is that much of current qualitative research is methodologically driven. Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend that we are so endowed with the tenets of science that we take its associated assumptions for granted. To remain tied to our inherited and culturally situated understanding of validity carries the risk of disregarding our own pre-understandings and setting out on a passage created by a specific methodology.

Crotty (1998), a phenomenological methodologist, discusses the hold our culture has on us and the way that it shapes how we see things. Crotty encourages the researcher to not remain straightjacketed by the conventional meanings we are taught to associate with our phenomena of concern. On a similar note, Gadamer attends to the troublesome risk that accompanies interpretation. To that end, he states that, when engaging with the individual, there must be a willingness to admit the limitations of our own understanding (Coltman, 1998, pp. ix-x).

The limitations that are born from our assumptions can be so profound that the topic of the research no longer directs the character of the work. For example, when engaging in research concerning life-threatening illnesses, the issue of validity often centres on those aspects of the individual's illness that can be quantified and controlled - features that are void of human context. Arthur Frank (1991) speaks about his experience with cancer and how, in the hospital setting, he was straightjacketed by the conventional meanings that health professionals applied to his particular disease. In essence, his disease stimulated the creation of a new version of his identity: he became the disease. As Frank explains, by being a person situated in the hospital setting he experienced first-hand the way his diagnosis all but crowded out his name, making way for him to become a passive object of investigation and, later, of treatment. Medicine's understanding of such things as pain, according to Frank, has little to do with the ill person's experience. Medicine has no interest in what pain means in the context of the individual's life. Instead, medicine sees pain only as a symptom of a possible disease. Yet, by all accounts, pain is about many things, such as disruption of relations, losing one's sense of place and finding another, and so forth.

What Frank's narrated experiences with illness offer is an example of a Western notion of realism. He became his disease and its related categories of understanding. What was being validated was what was already understood by the health professionals, namely their assumptions about the general categories of his disease and the progress of treatment. Angen (2000) elucidates that "This view posits a real world of objects apart from the human knower. … Knowledge, according to realist assumptions, must be obtained through an objective distance from the world" (p. 380). The individual and who one is in the context of one's life takes a back seat to one's disease. One becomes one's disease and this is what becomes the object of investigation. Validity, from this perspective, relies heavily on method, since careful specification of method is thought to be the only way to achieve certain knowledge. In this regard, the interpretivists' understanding contrasts markedly with more traditional understandings of truth and validity.

Describing an interpretivist understanding of validity, Angen (2000) states: "Truth, from an interpretivist perspective, is no longer based on a one-to-one correspondence to objective reality. … The social discourses we are engaged in, through our past and present interactions with the world around us, constantly inform and reformulate our understanding, our interpretations, and our claims to knowing" (p. 386). Returning to Frank (1991), he states that "relationships between patients and medical staff … involve people who are intimate with each other but rarely become intimates of each other. For a truly intimate relationship people need a sharing of time and personal history and a recognition of each other's differences" (p. 53). Frank's storied experience helps elucidate the way in which interpretive understanding is based on inspiration and not methodological calculation. Furthermore, in all attempts at and events of understanding, rules are not the guarantors of truth.

Hermeneutic Experience as a Learning Experience

Both the experience and the understanding of truth that Gadamer draws to our attention differ from what is found in everyday understanding. In addition, they represent an important aspect of his hermeneutics. When thinking about the dominant Western way of regarding experience, it is easy to identify that it is equated with a certain type of awareness. This awareness, however, is simply understood as a passive reception of sensations that is somewhat analogous to feeding information into a computer or opening a lens on a camera (Risser, 1997, p. 89). As much as these experiences accumulate and perhaps enable an individual to say "I have a broad range of experiences on this paricular phenomenon" [I know the truth], it does not transform the individual who has had the experience (Risser, 1997). In contrast, the hermeneutic experience that Gadamer brings to attention is more than a simple accumulation of experiences: it is a *learning experience*. When individuals have a learning experience they undergo a radical shift in their consciousness.

Everyone can recall a personal learning experience. Take the example of experiencing the first death of a loved one. Although we may have had a great deal of experience building up an awareness of what it is like to lose someone very close to us, the experience of actually living through the loss of someone important to us creates a radical shift in our previous views. The individual is transformed in such a way that his or her previous views are completely negated; hence, Gadamer calls this a "negative dialectical experience" (1960/1989). After experiencing the error or partiality

of our previous views, we are too experienced to re-live the experience of believing in them (Warnke, 1987).

Gadamer identifies that what we learn through our life experiences transforms our earlier views, and after this transformation we can never return to our previously held views. "Gadamer calls this process a reversal in consciousness … experience leads to the recognition that that which one previously took as the truth of the object under study (the 'in itself') is precisely that: simply that which one took as its 'truth' (the 'in itself for us') and not its truth at all" (Warnke, 1987, p. 26). To be open to experience in this way is what Gadamer means by hermeneutic consciousness. What experience teaches the individual is that s/he does not know everything. In this way, there is a readiness to be radically undogmatic, and to be prepared to have and learn from new experiences (Weinsheimer, 1985).

There are various ways in which we can view experience: it may be conceived of in terms of an end point, equalling knowledge, or in terms of a process, such as we see in hermeneutics. Experience as a process is what concerns us most here. Experience, when conceived of in a dialectical, historical, negative sense, stimulates a rupture between self and world. Hermeneutics finds its origins in this rupture (Weinsheimer, 1985). Illness, for that matter, exemplifies an experience that has the potential to stimulate a rupture between oneself and one's world. Hermeneutics offers the individual a way to respond to a world that no longer fits the customary order of things. This is where Gadamer (1960/1989) cites the difference between hermeneutics and research method: method responds to this alienation with alienation, and hence distance, objectivity and control, whereas hermeneutics seeks to understand the strangeness. All experiences, in the hermeneutic sense, are learning experiences. Our experiences serve to revise the way in which we understand our past and anticipate our future, and for that reason are tightly interwoven with our historic past and our present. The process of self-understanding, according to Gadamer (1960/1989), is located within the temporal structure of an individual's lifeworld and moves in a metaphorical circle of experience, interpretation and revision (Warnke, 1987).

Experience, in the hermeneutic sense, often arises from disappointment. It is often during our own disappointing experiences that we find ourselves in a world that no longer fits the customary order of things. This experience moves each of us to discover quite by accident that our beliefs about the phenomenon of concern were, at best, questionable. This becomes a trigger of sorts that motivates the individual to start to question his or her predominantly one-sided and highly subjective understanding of the phenomenon in question. During this questioning, it is not unusual for the individual to notice how inadequate his or her previous understandings were. As Weinsheimer (1985) explains, in order to be able to access any phenomenon, such as illness, we must first destroy the evidence that hides it. Openness to our own disappointing experiences motivates this process of destruction, bringing into question our subjective understanding. The disappointing experiences serve to rupture a once familiar world, and it is during this rupture that we are moved to an experience of self-understanding that Gadamer calls *Verstehen*. It "is the name of an experience that is strangely, yet humanly enough, as much a knowing as a *not knowing*. It is actually less a form of knowledge than a mode to find one's way around in the absence, as it were, of such a knowledge" (Grondin, 2000, p. 7).

Finding one's way in the "absence of knowledge" begins with a genuine desire to engage in the active process of listening. It is here that individuals begin to share in common meaning. Heidegger (1927/1962) appropriately calls this the path to awakening. The path to awakening, Heidegger suggests, is created through a discourse that "makes manifest what one is talking about in one's discourse … that is, it lets us see something from the very thing which the discourse is about" (p. 56). In hermeneutical research, the difficulty of existence is realized. Interpretive hermeneutics is not set on making things look easy; it clearly establishes the toil and trouble that is part of every individual's life. It recognizes that what shows itself, what is readily apparent, is in fact prior to the phenomenon as ordinarily understood. Here we are moved to see the difference between phenomena as ordinarily understood and the phenomenological conception of phenomena.

In ordinary usage, when speaking of a phenomenon, what is described often relates to some characteristic which an entity may have. In other words, a phenomenon is frequently understood by means of those entities that are accessible through empirical intuition (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Phenomena, as ordinarily conceived, are equated with a meaning system that is often given to us through birth, such as that health is the absence of disease. On the other hand, the phenomenological understanding of phenomena asks us to be aware of our everyday meanings, and to open ourselves to phenomena in their stark immediacy, in an effort to see what emerges for us (Crotty, 1998, p. 82). In this light, the world can be viewed as a seething cauldron of potential meaning that is held down by our received notions (Crotty, 1998; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962).

To engage with human phenomena, one must be willing to disclose what is enclosed, to see things in their immediacy, and, more importantly, to seek a fresh perception of the world. This, in turn, moves the individual toward new understanding.

Conclusion

Interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological research is not an easy endeavour. Above all else, it requires a commitment to engage with the philosophical underpinnings of interpretive phenomenology as a way of moving toward clarifying the conditions of understanding. As indicated in this paper, no method or set framework exists upon which researchers are able to rely to clarify the conditions of understanding. What is available is something that is present in varying degrees in all of us, namely a desire to broaden our current horizons of understanding. It is through openness to our own life experiences that we are moved to challenge our historically and culturally situated ways of knowing and understanding. When we are able to bring together the horizon of the known with the horizon of the unknown, we are prepared to experience, amongst other things, a shattering of prior ways of knowing and understanding. This can lead to what Gadamer calls a negative dialectical experience: we emerge from such experiences wiser and sometimes sadder. We realize, in assuming a hermeneutic stance of openness, that there can be no such thing as absolute truths, and that what we understand and know today is forever in the process of changing.

It is within the workings of an interpretive inquiry that individuals realize the poverty of limiting their horizon of understanding to their own one-sided reflections. Gadamer helps each of us understand that, within an interpretive hermeneutic inquiry, no one stands above and before all others: we are all at the centre of inquiry. It is here that we can breathe new life and new insights into the phenomena of concern. Furthermore, it is only through dialogical engagement with that which we are seeking to understand that the importance of learning through experience emerges.

The philosophical orientation of interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology helps one realize that a change in perspective does not necessarily mean a devaluing of the scientific method in human science research. Despite the limitations of the scientific method, everyone has greatly benefited from this form of inquiry, especially in the area of knowledge acquisition. However, the emergent trend in human science research recognizes that the scientific method alone cannot explain human experience or, more importantly, precipitate an understanding of it. Hermeneutics is a philosophical approach that can help the inquirer understand human phenomena in human science research. Reshaping understanding in research necessitates engagement in the science of interpretation. Both Heidegger and Gadamer, through their distinct philosophical developments, offer the researcher the philosophical underpinnings for more fully understanding the contextual, complex life of individuals, including those who are living with illness.

About the Author

Dr Ann Holroyd lives on Vancouver Island, Canada, and currently teaches in the BSc Nursing programme at Malaspina University College. In 2005, Dr Holroyd graduated with her PhD from Monash University in Australia. Informed by the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, her PhD thesis offered a dialogical account of what it means to live, on a day-to-day basis, with chronic illness. The general aim of the study was to bridge the gap that exists between the way health professionals know illness and the way individuals understand and experience illness. Dr Holroyd has continued to engage in research that involves interpretive philosophical hermeneutics. Her latest inquiry involves an exploration of one of the many challenges facing health professionals, which is recognizing the importance of creating a shared horizon of meaning in their work. More specifically, the inquiry illuminates how health professionals, as researchers, need to be aware of how their chosen conceptual framework creates a lens or stricture through which they come to know and understand individuals. Insofar as this inquiry highlights the way that the methodological approach of philosophical interpretive hermeneutics emphasizes that what is learned from experience extends beyond the strictures of a formalized method, it encourages health professionals to strive toward a middle way of thinking in the research encounter. Ann Holroyd is currently in the process of applying for a post-doctoral fellowship focused on interprofessional communication.

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