

# **Social Work and Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

**Andrea M. Newberry**

## **Abstract**

In this article, I discuss the connections between social work practice and interpretive approaches to knowledge building, introduce and situate hermeneutic phenomenology for novice social work researchers, and explore the fit between hermeneutic phenomenology and social work. In this paper, I also present a historical, methodological, and philosophical overview of the roots of hermeneutic/interpretive phenomenology from Augustine to Sartre. I advocate for the congruence between an hermeneutic approach and social work research due to its focus on inquiry as application, emphasis on the situated nature of human experiences, concept of attention to the unspoken or undisclosed, idea of the hermeneutic circle as a link between individual experiences and larger structures, fusion of horizons, and inclusion of the practitioner identity in research activities.

## **Keywords**

hermeneutics, interpretation, phenomenology, social work

Social work is interpretive and so emerges its affinity to hermeneutics and interpretive approaches to knowledge building such as hermeneutic phenomenology. In this article, I discuss the connections between social work practice and interpretive approaches to knowledge building, introduce and situate hermeneutic phenomenology for novice social work researchers, and explore the fit between hermeneutic phenomenology and social work.

## **Social Work and Interpretive Approaches to Knowledge**

Interpretive inquiry is highly consistent with social work due to its inclusion of concepts of (situated) agency, closeness to subjects (with subjects understood as human actors), and a critical inter-subjectivity that seeks to disrupt oppressive social discourses through a hermeneutic understanding that connects

---

### **Corresponding Author:**

Andrea M. Newberry,  
Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary  
Email: amnewber@ucalgary.ca

private troubles to public issues. With an ontological orientation that embraces truths over Truth, and an epistemological approach emphasizing understanding and description over prediction and control (Lavery, 2003), interpretive approaches allow social workers to appreciate human experiences in all their situated richness, without being compelled to make universal claims about the generalizability of findings. It is the relational, reflexive, artistic aspects of interpretive research that allow the depth and nuances of human experiences and social work interventions to really shine.

Human beings are subjects rather than objects and this existence of human agency means that there can be no absolute laws of human experience and behavior, as may be sought of phenomena in the natural sciences. While powerful external forces may exert themselves upon human subjects, the existential recourse to choice is ever-present, and subjects can and will respond to their environments in new and creative ways. Heidegger conceptualized this post-structural understanding of choice as situated freedom, whereby human beings exercise free will in the context of their political, social, and cultural realities (Lopez & Willis, 2002). While recognizing factors that may influence human behavior, the social sciences must not follow the natural sciences in the pursuit of Truth, generalizable to all times, places, and peoples. So critical is the belief in agency that, without it, the only role for social work would be at the macro level. Social work is itself a constructed (and contested) activity (Payne, 2005), in which practitioners move back and forth between the macro and the micro. Despite its focus on structural issues (Mullaly, 1997), social work is at the same time deeply concerned with the most intimate of human experiences.

Each encounter with a client (whether the client is an individual, a family, a community, or a classroom) is a new experience. In the context of working with individuals, in particular, failure to experience this newness with each new encounter alienates the social worker from the client, to whom the experience is profoundly personal. At the same time, an experienced social worker draws from the experiences of others like the client to break down walls of shame, loneliness, and hopelessness, and in doing so, situates the client's own story in an ever-expanding web of human concerns. Social workers attend to each individual's experiences, in order to honor the newness of the narrative. After understanding the clients' narratives on their own terms (the idiographic), the social worker can reflect upon and share with the client knowledge that may be useful to the client's own healing, and in particular that which connects private troubles to public issues, thereby reducing feelings of self-blame and isolation. The social worker is changed by each such encounter, entering the hermeneutic circle, and bringing new pre-understandings to each situation. In social work research, the social work researcher's own prejudices (professional, experiential, and scholarly) facilitate understanding of how to apply an interpretation; in-depth knowledge of the social work field and social work education allow for suggestion of more specific and meaningful applications.

In the following section, I introduce hermeneutic phenomenology in its historical, methodological, and philosophical context. This description is intended for novice social work researchers considering interpretive approaches for their work.

## Hermeneutic Phenomenology in Context

### Phenomenology

Phenomenology, a philosophical approach to studying human experience, is oriented toward understanding the essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology has its roots in the Greek words *phaenesthai* and *logos* (Gearing, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). *Phaenesthai* means “to flare up, to show itself, to appear” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26); *logos* is reason. Thus, the phenomenon is what appears in consciousness (Gearing, 2004; Moran, 2000; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990), and phenomenology is the reasoned study of what appears (Gearing, 2004).

**Hermeneutic and transcendental phenomenology.** Hermeneutic phenomenology is epistemologically and methodologically distinct from transcendental phenomenology, a theme I will return to later in this paper. To categorize the two traditions at a very superficial level, hermeneutic phenomenology is used to *interpret* the *meaning* of lived experiences and communicate the interpretation textually or symbolically, while transcendental phenomenology is based on *discovering* the objective *universal essences* of lived experiences and communicating them through pure description (Beyer, 2011, Creswell, 2007; van Manen, 1990).

### Hermeneutic Phenomenology’s Forefathers: A Brief History From Augustine to Sartre

Hermeneutics is the tradition, theory, philosophy, and practice of interpretation (Moules, 2002; Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutic phenomenology, then, has its roots in both hermeneutics and phenomenology.

Therefore, to articulate hermeneutic phenomenology’s historical, philosophical, and methodological underpinnings, it is necessary to present the contributions of both hermeneutic and phenomenological thinkers. The hermeneutic and phenomenological projects have long and complex histories, making it difficult to identify their starting points. The word phenomenology first appeared in philosophical writing in the eighteenth century (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26), and hermeneutics was introduced in theology in the seventeenth century (Moules, 2002).

Given the scope of this paper and the need to balance breadth with depth, I have elected to start with Augustine and end with Sartre in the twentieth century. The inclusion of these founding influences relies on Moules’s (2002) presentation of the “ancestral” roots of hermeneutic inquiry; my decision to include Sartre is informed by Smith et al. (2009).

**Aurelius Augustine, 354-430.** The fourth/fifth-century Christian bishop, theologian, and philosopher Aurelius Augustine had a profound effect on both Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology and Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics (Grondin, 1991/1994). His work formed the theoretical basis for conceptions of the limits of language to express the inner world, the forgetfulness of language, and the relationship between language and tradition (Grondin, 1991/1994; Moules, 2002).

***The limits of language.*** According to Grondin’s (1991/1994) analysis of Augustine, the inner world, or “language of the heart” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 35) can never be fully expressed through language; “something more still to be said to in order to comprehend the matter fully” always remains (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 37). Grondin explained Augustine’s assertion that this is

because our means of communication have “something contingent or material about them” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 37). Therefore, our inner worlds of experience can only be expressed imperfectly. An excessive focus on the propositional component of language contributes to this incomplete expression; for Augustine, only through “embeddedness in dialogue” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 37) can language come closer to expressing our inner worlds. The power of the dialogical process is a concept developed further by Gadamer in the twentieth century.

Phenomenology’s primary focus is on subjective, first-person experience; therefore, it is not surprising that later proponents of the phenomenological project took up language’s limitations for revealing the inner world. Augustine’s work had a dual influence on later hermeneutic scholars - drawing upon Augustine, it became a “universal claim of hermeneutics that one can never say all that lies in inner speech” (Moules, 2002, p. 4), but it was also recognized that “language is an instrument that mediates our relation to the world and to other minds” (Mendelson, 2010, p. 33).

**Language and tradition.** Augustine’s deliberations on language included meditations on its nominalistic nature in the Greek tradition, whereby language, and propositional language in particular, has a singular and technical meaning and is therefore forgetful of itself (Grondin, 1991/1994). The relationship between language and tradition, and the tradition that is carried within language, is a hermeneutic theme later picked up by Gadamer, who credited Augustine’s theological reflections in shaping his understanding (Grondin, 1991/1994).

**Martin Luther, 1483-1546.** The development of hermeneutics occurred alongside

the rise of Protestantism (Grondin, 1991/1994; Moules, 2002). German theologian Martin Luther had significant influence on the history of Protestantism and the Christian church and on the history of ideas more generally (Grondin, 1991/1994). Although Luther’s initiatives to reform the church “laid the basis for a hermeneutic revolution . . . one might modestly inquire whether Luther himself really developed a hermeneutic *theory*” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 40). Luther’s sole professorial interest was scriptural exegesis, and he rejected philosophy as an empty scholastic pursuit (Grondin, 1991/1994; Moules, 2002). Luther adhered to the principle of *sola scriptura* - that is, the meaning of scripture, when read with faith and revealed through God’s grace, is self-evident - and “wielded [the principle of *sola scriptura*] against tradition and the Church’s magisterial establishment” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 40). Luther’s most significant contribution to hermeneutics may have been the rejection of authority and tradition as the sole arbiters of (scriptural) meaning; four centuries later, in the twentieth century, Gadamer returned to the idea of tradition and interpretation.

**Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, 1768-1834.** The German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher has been credited as “one of the first to write systematically about hermeneutics as a generic form” (Smith et. al, 2009, p. 22) and as “the father of contemporary hermeneutics” (Moules, 2002, p. 4). He advanced an understanding of interpretation that included: the goal of determining the meaning of a text through reconstructing the intention and perspective of the author (and the possibility of understanding the author’s meaning better than he understood it himself), methods of grammatical and technical interpretation, a distinction between laxer and stricter practices of interpretation and a belief in misun-

derstanding as the natural state from which interpretation proceeds, and clear identification of the relationship between the part and the whole (Grondin, 1991/1994; Moules, 2002; Smith et al., 2009).

**Reconstructed meaning.** Schleiermacher articulated the ideal outcome of interpretation of a text as a true reconstruction of the author's intended meaning - "what we are looking for is the very thought that the speaker wanted to express" (Schleiermacher, 1809-1810, as cited in Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 68). Therefore, the best interpretation of a text is not that text's meaning for the interpreter but rather the reconstructed meaning of the text from the perspective of the author - achieved in its ideal form in an understanding of the author's meaning that is superior to the author's own. Schleiermacher understood this to be an infinite task, as Grondin (1991/1994) described: "the goal of understanding better, conceived in terms of an unreachable telos and the impossibility of complete understanding, bears witness to the fact that the endeavor to interpret more deeply is always worthwhile" (p. 71).

**Grammatical and technical interpretation.** For Schleiermacher, grammatical interpretation involved finding the precise objective meaning of a text (as constituted by linguistic syntax), while technical (or psychological) interpretation addressed the special art employed by the author within the parameters of his linguistic tradition (Grondin, 1991/1994). Grammatical interpretation was therefore focused on the supra-individual linguistic patterns that shaped the text's meaning, while technical interpretation was focused on the individuality of the text's author (Smith et al., 2009).

**Stricter and laxer interpretation and misunderstanding as the natural state.** Schleiermacher differentiated between two

purposes and methods of interpretation - the laxer practice, which he associated with clarifying areas of textual misunderstanding (e.g., illuminating obscure scriptural passages), and the stricter practice, which assumed misunderstanding as the normal starting point against which a rigorous hermeneutics would guard at every turn (Grondin, 1991/1994). Schleiermacher's assertion of misunderstanding, rather than understanding, as the natural state was one of his greatest contributions to the hermeneutic project. Calling on the interpreter to question his own self-evident understandings at every stage to some degree foreshadowed Husserl's phenomenological attitude (although Husserl was concerned not with the author's intended meaning in a text but with letting objects and phenomena appear as they really are, untainted by the natural attitude).

**Wilhelm Dilthey, 1833-1911.** Wilhelm Dilthey, a German historian and philosopher, began his study of hermeneutics after Schleiermacher's student, August Bockh, introduced him to Schleiermacher's work (Moules, 2002). Dilthey's conception of the human sciences as epistemologically and methodically distinct from the natural sciences and his advancement of lived experience as the basis for all understanding set the groundwork for the emergence of phenomenology.

**The natural versus the human sciences.** Dilthey advanced an epistemological and methodological distinction between the natural and human sciences (Makkreel, 2012). The purpose of the natural sciences is *explanation* based on natural laws, Dilthey asserted, while the purpose of the human sciences (the social sciences and humanities) is to develop an *understanding* of the meaning of history and human life (Makkreel, 2012). The human sciences involve analysis of "the more complex networks of the historical

world and the actual givens of human beings” (Makkreel, 2012, p. 10) rather than the artificial abstraction of mechanistic reality undertaken in the natural sciences; therefore, the laws discovered in the human sciences will always be partial and situated - that is, the laws “will apply not to history in general, but to specific cultural systems or social organizations only” (Makkreel, 2012, p. 10). Dilthey sought to “conceptualize the human sciences as autonomous sciences and defend them from the encroachments of natural science and its methodology” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 84).

**Lived experiences.** Dilthey’s focus on lived experiences was a central element of his philosophy (Makkreel, 2012). In his view, lived experiences constituted self-given reality involving thinking, feeling, and willing (Makkreel, 2012), that is, the facts of consciousness (Grondin, 1991/1994). In order for the human sciences to extend knowledge beyond our own individual understandings, they “must be rooted in the original fullness and richness of our lived experience” (Makkreel, 2012, p. 12). Dilthey’s conceptualization of lived experience formed the basis for the later development of phenomenology.

### **Edmund Husserl, 1859-1938.**

**Transcendental phenomenology.** The German mathematician and philosopher Edmund Husserl has been credited as “the principal founder of phenomenology” (Beyer, 2011, p. 1). Husserl developed transcendental phenomenology, an approach to understanding human experience that “has us focus on the essential structures that allow the objects naively taken for granted in the ‘natural attitude’ (which is characteristic of both our everyday life and ordinary science) to ‘constitute themselves’ in consciousness” (Beyer, 2011, p. 3). Transcendental phe-

nomology, meant to be a “rigorous science,” was Husserl’s response to science’s neglect of the “specifically human questions” (Husserl, 1954/1970, p. 7). Understanding Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology requires an appreciation of his theories about the life-world, the intentionality of consciousness, the natural and phenomenological attitudes, eidetic reduction, phenomenological reduction, and intersubjectivity, each of which I will discuss briefly in turn.

Husserl, who converted to Protestantism in adulthood, was the son of non-Orthodox Jews. He was persecuted in Nazi Germany, losing his professorship and access to the university library (Zahavi, 2003). More than 40,000 pages of Husserl’s manuscripts were rescued and removed from Germany by Franciscan Herman Leo Van Breda after Husserl’s death in 1938 (Beyer, 2011; Zahavi, 2003). Unfortunately, almost the entire first printing of a posthumously published work was destroyed (Zahavi, 2003).

**The life-world.** The life-world, or *Lebenswelt*, as originally conceptualized by Husserl, is the pre-reflective, pre-theoretical world of everyday experience, and it is this world of immediate lived experience that is the focus of his transcendental phenomenology (van Manen, 1990). The life-world is prescientific, and therefore stands in contrast to the scientific world:

In our prescientific experience, the world is given concretely, sensuously, and intuitively. In contrast, the scientific world is a system of idealities that in principle transcend sensuous experience. Whereas the lifeworld is a world of situated, relative truths, science seeks to realize an idea about strict and objective knowledge that is freed from every relation to the subjective first-person perspective. Whereas the objects in the

lifeworld are characterized by their relative, approximate, and proximal givenness . . . the objects of science are characterized as relative, nonperspectival, univocal, and exact. (Zahavi, 2003, pp. 126–127)

The life-world, as the world of subjective human experience, forms the foundation for scientific ways of knowing (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2012). Husserl's transcendental phenomenology advanced the life-world as a legitimate focus for scientific inquiry.

***The intentional nature of consciousness.*** Husserl wrote that all consciousness is directed, whether to real or unreal objects in the world (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000; Zahavi, 2003), with the exception of non-intentional “units of consciousness” such as pain (Beyer, 2011). Intentional consciousness is always attached to an object in the world: “Perception, thought, judgment, fantasy, doubt, expectation, or recollection, all of these diverse forms of consciousness are characterized by intending objects . . . the perceived, doubted, expected object” (Zahavi, 2003, p. 14). Husserl therefore asserted that to understand the nature of consciousness we must also analyze the object to which consciousness is directed (Zahavi, 2003). For example, considering the fantasy of a unicorn, we cannot fully understand the form of consciousness that is “fantasy of a unicorn” without analyzing the intended object - that is, the essence (or the horizons) of the unicorn (i.e., a unicorn is an imaginary animal; the unicorn is like a horse while not being a horse, etc.). The objects to which consciousness is directed are transcendent - more than the “perspectival and horizontal givenness of the object” (Zahavi, 2003, p. 95) as perceived or imagined by the subject. Zahavi (2003) gives the chair as an example - one cannot view the chair from the front

and back simultaneously, but nonetheless the chair's horizons include all of the possible appearances of the chair. The idea of perspectival and transcendent horizons is important in the development of the hermeneutic phenomenological project and must be considered an important influence on Gadamer's later theory on the fusion of horizons.

***The natural and phenomenological attitudes.*** The natural attitude is associated with everyday experience (Smith et al., 2009). The natural attitude includes many features of our everyday internal worlds, such as our preconceptions, assumptions, constructions, internal beliefs, ego experiences, biases, culture, and judgments (Gearing, 2004); and our “practical concerns, folk assumptions, and smattering of scientific knowledge” (Zahavi, 2003, p. 11). Husserl's goal was to transcend the “naivety and fallacy of the natural attitude and to move, employing the classic Greek dichotomy, from a naive *doxa* to an *episteme*, to philosophy as a ‘rigorous science’” (Luft, 1998). The phenomenological attitude involves a disengagement from the natural attitude and a reflexive turn “as we turn our gaze from . . . objects in the world, and direct it inward, toward our perception of those objects” (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl asserted that in order to objectively analyze the structure and content of consciousness, we must suspend the natural attitude; he developed eidetic and phenomenological reduction to support this “alteration of viewpoint” (Zahavi, 2003, p. 11).

***Eidetic reduction.*** Eidetic reduction is an analysis aimed at elucidating the essential properties of an object or experience, those essences without which the object or experience would become something other than the object or experience it is (Zahavi, 2003). For example, what are the essential qualities

that make a tree a tree, rather than a different type of organism altogether? Eidetic reduction is intended to uncover the “invariant properties” that transcend the “subjective perception of individual manifestations of that type of object” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 14). As a case in point, if I see a white tree, does that mean that to be a tree means to be white? Or is whiteness a non-essential variant of being a tree - that is, a subjective perception of an individual manifestation of being a tree?

**Phenomenological reduction.** Phenomenological reduction involves the temporary suspension of preconceptions regarding the phenomena under study and is perhaps the most controversial facet of Husserl’s phenomenology. This suspension of presuppositions, called the phenomenological *epoche*, facilitates “seeing things as they appear . . . returning to the things themselves” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). Phenomenological reduction is achieved through “bracketing” the “taken-for-granted world” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 15) in order to study the essences of phenomena (Creswell, 2007). Bracketing is a mathematical idea, in which bracketed content within an equation is treated separately (Smith et al., 2009); bracketing in phenomenology means to treat the natural attitude towards an object or experience separately from the phenomenological analysis so that the phenomenon can reveal itself “free of prejudgments and preconceptions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). Subsequent philosophers such as Heidegger and Gadamer challenged the feasibility and desirability of bracketing in phenomenological inquiry.

**Intersubjectivity.** Husserl articulated a complex theoretical model of intersubjectivity. Husserl’s conceptualization of intersubjectivity was embodied, experiential, and constitutive (Zahavi, 2003). According to Husserl, it is through our own embodied

subjectivity that we are able to recognize another’s embodied subjectivity - as Zahavi stated in his analysis of Husserl, “it is exactly the unique subject-object status of my body that permits me to recognize another body as a foreign embodied subjectivity” (p. 113). Additionally, according to Zahavi’s interpretation of Husserl, we each understand the Other experientially and without access to the other person’s first-person subjectivity: “had I the same access to the consciousness of the Other as I have to my own, the Other would have ceased being an Other and instead have become a part of myself” (Zahavi, 2003, p. 114). This point is critical to Husserl’s theory of constituting intersubjectivity; the transcendent world (i.e., the objective world) is only made available through intersubjectivity - that is:

objects cannot be reduced to being merely my intentional correlates if they can be experienced by others as well. The intersubjective experienceability of the object guarantees its real transcendence, so my experience (constitution) of transcendent objects is necessarily mediated by my experience of its givenness for another transcendent subject, that is, by my experience of a foreign world-directed subject. (Grondin, 1991/1994, pp. 115–116)

Husserl’s student Heidegger also takes up intersubjectivity later in the phenomenological project.

**Martin Heidegger, 1889-1976.** German philosopher Martin Heidegger was a student of Husserl’s who aimed to extend the phenomenological project - “Heidegger’s approach to phenomenology is often taken to mark the move away from the transcendental project, and to set out the beginnings of the hermeneutic and existential emphases in phenomenological philosophy” (Smith et al.,

2009, p. 16). Heidegger acknowledged Husserl as a formative intellectual influence (Smith et al., 2009), while Husserl eventually publicly repudiated Heidegger's phenomenology, even referring to him as his antipode (Beyer, 2011). Key facets of Heidegger's phenomenology included an interpretive stance, a focus on being-in-the-world (*Dasein*), the hermeneutic circle, visible and hidden meanings, and, later in his philosophical career, the role of language—each of which I will discuss in turn. Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism cannot be overlooked in phenomenology's historical context, and so I will deal briefly with this significant shadow on the phenomenological project as well.

**Interpretive stance.** While Husserl envisioned a phenomenology that would transcend the natural attitude of everyday life, including our prejudgments about phenomena, Heidegger “questioned the possibility of any knowledge outside of an interpretive stance, whilst grounding this stance in the lived world—the world of things, people, relationships and language” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 16). For Heidegger, one's foreconceptions, consisting of “prior experiences, assumptions, [and] preconceptions” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 25) are brought to each new encounter. Simultaneously extending and challenging Husserl's advancement of intentional consciousness, Heidegger rejected the possibility of pure reflection because reflection, as a form of consciousness, is “intentional, and therefore never completely separated from the world” (LeVasseur, 2003, p. 414).

**Dasein.** Husserl's transcendental phenomenology was primarily focused on what can be:

broadly classified as individual psychological processes, such as perception,

awareness and consciousness. In contrast, Heidegger is more concerned with the ontological question of existence itself, and with the practical activities and relationships which we are caught up in, and through which the world appears to us, and is made meaningful. (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 16-17)

Therefore, Heidegger's philosophy revived “the ontology of the subject” (Moules, 2002, p. 7). The subject of Heidegger's life work, *Being and Time* (1962/1927) is “there-being” (*Dasein*), where *Dasein* is the “uniquely situated” quality of ‘human being’” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 16). Heidegger asserted that *Dasein* is fundamentally relational (intersubjective) - *Dasein* is being-with (Smith et al., 2009). Even being alone is being-with, albeit in a deficient way (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger viewed death, and the resulting finiteness and uncertainty of being, as giving *Dasein* a temporal dimension (Smith et al., 2009). Although *Dasein* is fundamentally being-with, death is significant in that it is faced alone (Smith et al., 2009).

The nature of *Dasein* presented a fundamental challenge to Husserl's presuppositionless phenomenological project—with *Dasein* involving “the inherently social being who already operates with a pre-theoretical grasp of the a priori structures that make possible particular modes of Being” (Wheeler, 2011, p. 7). In opposition to Husserl's conception of the phenomenological reduction and the phenomenological *epoché*, Heideggerian philosophy maintains that given the nature of our *Dasein*, “we are unable to completely bracket prior conceptions and knowledge - we are necessarily embedded in a historical context” (LeVasseur, 2003, p. 415). In Heideggerian phenomenology, bracketing is considered a specious project (LeVasseur, 2003). Heidegger further devel-

oped his theory on the role of pre-understanding (fore-conceptions) in his formulation of the hermeneutic circle.

***Hermeneutic circle.*** The idea of the hermeneutic circle did not originate with Heidegger, but it took on new meaning in his philosophy. Whereas the hermeneutic circle was previously conceptualized in terms of the relationship between the whole of a text and its parts, or between text and tradition, with Heidegger the hermeneutic circle becomes an “existential task with which each of us is confronted” (Ramberg & Gjesdal, 2009, p. 15). The hermeneutic circle involves an ever-increasing development of understanding as we revise our pre-understandings in light of new experiences:

In the hermeneutic circle, we make progress toward sense and meaning by questioning prior knowledge, thus expanding into new horizons of meanings. Yet, we never fully arrive, because to arrive would merely represent another stage of pre-understanding. Instead, each turn in the circle opens new horizons and possibilities yet resists dogmatic conclusions, because the ongoing project of reflective questions keeps the possibility of new experiences and possibilities alive. (LeVasseur, 2003, p. 418)

According to Heidegger, our fore-conceptions are necessary prerequisites to new understanding; all interpretations (and all understanding involves interpretation) flow from our presuppositions.

***Appearance-the visible and the hidden.*** Heidegger was interested in what it means for a phenomenon to appear-as explained by Smith et al. (2009): “to say something appears suggests that it is entering a new state, as it is coming forth, presenting itself to us -

and in contrast to a previous state, where it was not present” (p. 24). This is clearly connected to Heidegger’s interpretive stance and rejection of a presuppositionless phenomenology; this viewpoint on appearance suggests we cannot view phenomena objectively, because every time we view a phenomenon it appears anew. Heidegger was also interested in what is not made visible in the appearance of phenomena - what is hidden or concealed (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, for Heidegger, phenomenological investigation must consider both the manifest and the latent qualities of phenomena as they are revealed (Smith et al., 2009). This idea has had important implications for hermeneutic phenomenology, and suggests, for example, that phenomenologists studying accounts of human experience must be alert to both what is being said and what is not being said about an experience. This is in contrast to Husserl’s approach, in which the phenomenologist suspends the natural attitude and tries to see only what an object or phenomenon really is. A phenomenologist cannot identify what is not being revealed without recourse to his or her fore-conceptions - further differentiating Heidegger’s interest in the latent content of appearances from a Husserlian approach.

***Language.*** Grondin (1991/1994) observed a conscious movement in Heidegger’s work towards the importance of language in being. In his later work, Heidegger speaks more empathically of language as the “house of being,” yet his beliefs about the limits of language remain (Grondin, 1991/1994). Reminiscent of Augustine, Heidegger argued in the final words of the lecture considered to mark the end point of his thought:

it is inescapably necessary to overcome the obstacles which make such a saying [of experience] obviously inadequate.

Even the saying that occurs in the form of lecture remains an obstacle of this kind. Its saying has been only in propositions. (Heidegger, 1969, as cited in Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 102)

While Heidegger gives increasing credence to the role of language in being, he also echoes Augustine's assertion that language is always an inadequate interpretation of inner experience. The importance of language in the hermeneutic phenomenological project is developed more deeply in Gadamerian philosophy.

***Heidegger and National Socialism.*** Accounts of Heidegger's philosophical work sometimes make mention of his Nazi affiliations and sometimes do not. While some scholars present his philosophical ideas without reference to his Nazi involvement, others believe his political activities were intimately tied to his philosophical project:

Everyone-great thinkers included-is capable of errors of political judgment, even egregious ones. However, the more one learns about the Heidegger/National Socialism nexus, the more one is inevitably driven to conclude the philosopher himself perceived his Nazi involvements not as a random course of action, but as a logical outgrowth of his philosophical doctrines. . . . as a concrete exemplification of *eigentliches Dasein* or authentic existence." (Wolin, 1988, p. 136)

While Heidegger has been alternately held accountable and exonerated by scholars, the nature and meaning of his Nazi involvement remains controversial, especially as it relates to his philosophy. It is fairly well accepted that he was a member of the National Socialist Party during his rectorship at Freiburg University-during which time he gave pro-Nazi speeches, eliminated

democratic structures within the university, and initiated an end to financial aid for Jewish students (Peters, 2009). After the war, Heidegger was investigated by the denazification committee at Freiburg University and banned from teaching until 1949; in 1950 he was made professor emeritus (Wheeler, 2011). Scholarly attempts to exonerate Heidegger have been challenged by the absence of any clear and complete repudiation of National Socialism in his later works (Wheeler, 2011). Heidegger's Nazi involvement cast a shadow over more than Heideggerian phenomenology, tainting the phenomenological project more generally (c.f. Holmes, 1996). How are we to understand Heideggerian phenomenology in light of Heidegger's National Socialist activities? Wheeler (2011) suggested:

It would be irresponsible to ignore the relationship between Heidegger's philosophy and his politics. But it is surely possible to be critically engaged in a deep and intellectually stimulating way with his sustained investigation into Being, to find much of value in his capacity to think deeply about human life, to struggle fruitfully with what he says about our loss of dwelling, and to appreciate his massive and still unfolding contribution to thought and to thinking, without looking for evidence of Nazism in every twist and turn of the philosophical path he lays down. (pp. 91-92)

While the relationship between Heidegger's philosophy and National Socialism will likely remain controversial, his philosophical insights continue to influence the phenomenological project today.

**Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1900–2002.** The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer was a student of both Husserl and Heidegger (Moules, 2002). His work is

known as philosophical hermeneutics, which is focused on understanding and interpretation rather than methodology (Moules, 2002). Key themes in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics include methodology and the human sciences, language and conversation, understanding and application, history, and the restoration of prejudice (Grondin, 1991/1994, Moules, 2002).

***Methodology and the human sciences.***

Gadamer questioned whether acquisition of methods unique to the human sciences was a necessary prerequisite to the human sciences securing legitimate science status, and even whether methodology could be the sole arbiter of validity (Grondin, 1991/1994). The hermeneutic task in relation to the human sciences is therefore not to develop a methodology for correct interpretation, but to "demonstrate the untenability of the idea of universally valid knowledge" (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 107). The human sciences deal with a different type of truth than the natural sciences, and are better suited to a humanistic discourse than is the methodological, objectifying discourse of the natural sciences (Grondin, 1991/1994). Moules (2002) described Gadamer's interpretation of truth as "the event of meaning, rather than something of objectivity of repetition. To say that we uncover truth in understanding simply means that we have found a meaningful account that corresponds to experience" (p. 11).

***Language and dialogue.*** Language occupies a central place in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer asserted that understanding is not something possessed by the individual, but rather something that emerges through participation in "meaning, tradition, and ultimately a dialogue" (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 119). For Gadamer, language and interpretation in the human sciences are understood in a dialogi-

cal, question-and-response framework because "to understand a text or an event is to understand it as a reply to a question" (Grondin, 1999/2003, p. 125). Here Gadamer returns to Augustine's delimitations of propositional language, in comparison to the greater expressive potential of language embedded in the dialogical process.

Gadamer devoted significant space in his writing to reflecting on the nature of true conversation, both in form and purpose. Genuine conversation, to Gadamer, does not involve competing for the supremacy of one's opinion; likewise, it is not a summative process in which one viewpoint is added to another (Gadamer, 1970/2007). The focus of genuine conversation remains on the topic, and the conversational partners hold this topic in common (Gadamer 1970/2007). For Gadamer, "genuine conversation transforms the viewpoint of both. . . [and] involves the shared interpretation of the world which makes moral and social solidarity possible" (Gadamer, 1970/2007, p. 96). Exploring a topic with a conversational partner in order to come to a better understanding of that topic's meaning has been taken up as an interviewing strategy in hermeneutic phenomenology along with more traditional strategies aimed at soliciting experiential accounts (van Manen, 1990).

Gadamer's theory of fusion of horizons relates to both the expansion of understanding that emerges between dialogical partners in genuine conversation and the enlargement of knowledge that arises when an interpreter interacts with a text. In each case, each party (whether a person or a text) possesses its own horizon of understanding, and in a fusion of horizons, they merge to create a new, more expansive understanding of the topic (Gadamer, 1977/2007). Gadamer's fusion of horizons has important implications for interpretive interviewers, because it suggests

the greatest knowledge will be created when both parties in a conversation actively contribute to creating meaning, rather than when the interviewer assumes an objective stance so as not to “taint” the findings or influence the interviewee.

***Understanding and application.*** Rather than approaching interpretation as a purely epistemological or intellectual pursuit, and application of interpretation as occurring after the fact (e.g., jurisprudence), Gadamer conceptualized “understanding and application as indivisibly fused” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 115). Understanding always involves “applying a meaning to our situation, to the questions we want answered” (Grondin, 1991/1994, p. 115). Central to the act of interpretation is the application of a past text or event to the present (Grondin, 1999/2003), an application that is influenced by tradition, history, and custom—so that application becomes an extension of the dialogical search for meaning that precedes the interpreter (Grondin, 1991/1994).

***History.*** As human beings, Gadamer asserted, we are deeply rooted in history—or, as Grondin (1991/1994) explained, “we belong to history more than history belongs to us” (p. 116). This means that that our knowledge of history or even of our own historical determinism is always less than the actual workings of history in our lives (Grondin, 1999/2003). When writing about the role of history in interpretation, Gadamer used the German word *Wirkungsgeschichte*, a word that has proven difficult to translate into English (Grondin 1999/2003). Grondin (1999/2003) defended “the work of history” as the best translation—“the notion of work gives us a better idea that history is active in us, works in us or penetrates us, to a greater extent than knowledge can penetrate and suspect” (p. 92).

In the human sciences, one of Gadamer’s principles of the work of history involves the historiography of the topic (Grondin, 1999/2003). Every topic or research question, no matter how seemingly novel, is part of a larger history of interpretation—“a subject, a problematic, an interrogation will always be inscribed in a tradition, in a debate, of which we must take note” (Grondin, 1999/2003, p. 93). The presentation of the historiography of a topic is common practice in the human sciences, usually taking the form of a review of literature leading to the research question (Grondin, 1999/2003).

***Prejudice.*** Gadamer argued for the idea of prejudice to be restored to its pre-Enlightenment meaning, before it acquired the negative associations it carries today—that of erroneous, unjustified beliefs (Gadamer, 1965/2007). In Gadamer’s view, “prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us” (Gadamer, 1965/2007, p. 82). Gadamer captured the importance of this concept by saying, “it is not so much our judgments as it is our prejudices that constitute our being” (Gadamer, 1965/2007, p. 82). This insight is fertile for understanding hermeneutic phenomenology—the researcher’s ability to attend to a phenomenon and draw conclusions about it will necessarily be mediated by his or her prejudices (or pre-judgments). Consider, for example, a hermeneutic phenomenologist studying anxiety—how would he or she know to inquire about the embodied experience of anxiety unless he or she had prior knowledge (prejudices) concerning anxiety and physical symptoms? In this way, our prejudices will always shape our judgments.

**Jean-Paul Sartre, 1905-1980.** The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre contin-

ued Heidegger's project of existential phenomenology, emphasizing our self-consciousness and drive for meaning, which is expressed actively in the world through our projects (Smith et al., 2009); Sartre's persistent concern with our being-in-the world (*Dasein*) as mediated through our practical concerns (i.e., our projects) continued Heidegger's pragmatic philosophical approach to human experience (Flynn, 2011). A few key components of Sartre's philosophy are particularly informative for the hermeneutic phenomenological project: human concern for becoming over being, nothingness, the direction of perception, and freedom (Smith et al., 2009).

**Concern for becoming over being.** For Sartre, human beings are preoccupied with our potential future selves, what Smith et al. (2009) describe as "concern with what we will be, rather than what we are" (p. 19). Human beings are constantly in process, and "the self is not a pre-existing unity to be discovered, but an ongoing project to be unfurled" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 19). The hermeneutic phenomenologist is concerned with the projects taken on by human actors - projects that are "embodied, interpersonal, affective and moral" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 21).

**Nothingness.** Sartre, reminiscent of Heidegger's visible and invisible in the appearance of phenomena, was concerned with what he called nothingness, that is, the equal importance of what is absent with what is present in "defining who we are and how we see the world" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 19). If we are equally defined by the absent in existential phenomenology, the phenomenologist must consider what might be missing from any account of experience. For example, is belongingness what is absent in an account of loneliness?

**The direction of perception.** We do not pursue our projects in a world that belongs only to us, and our relatedness to others shapes our perceptions of the world (Smith et al., 2009). The direction of perception is a dual process encompassing both how the world changes as we perceive others in it, and how it changes us as we perceive ourselves being perceived within the world (Smith et al., 2009). Sartre's extension of Heidegger's concept of worldliness to include personal and social relationships, and of experience as "contingent upon the presence - and absence - of our relationships to other people . . . is perhaps the clearest glimpse of what a phenomenological analysis of the human condition can look like" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 20).

**Freedom.** Existentialism emphasizes the freedom and responsibility of human beings to choose what they will become, but this freedom is situated in the complex biographical and social content of individual action (Smith et al., 2009). Sartre's freedom is a salient reminder that human beings are subjects who actively interpret and construct the world (see also Mead, 1962).

### **Social Work and Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

I encourage social work researchers to consider hermeneutic phenomenology as an appropriate methodology for knowledge building in the discipline. Several features of hermeneutic phenomenology seem especially suited to social work research, including its focus on inquiry as application, emphasis on the situated nature of human experiences, concept of attention to the unspoken or undisclosed, idea of the hermeneutic circle as a link between individual experiences and larger structures, fusion of horizons, and inclusion of the practitioner identity in research activities.

Social work is an applied discipline with a focus on social justice, the pursuit of which is an obligation included in the Code of Ethics for Canadian social workers (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005). According to Davey (2006), “understanding does not merely interpret the world but changes it” (p. xiv). Therefore, it is appropriate to include a focus on praxis in interpretation in social work research. Madison (1990) stated “a good understanding will be “suggestive” or fertile in that it raises questions that stimulate further research and interpretation” (p. 30).

Heidegger used the term *Dasein* (there-being) to emphasize the profoundly situated nature of human experience and the relationships and activities from which experience and meaning emerge (Smith et al., 2009). Social work is a highly situated endeavor, composed of a complex web of relational, structural, practical, and axiological concerns; Heidegger’s *Dasein* is therefore a much more generative image for social work researchers than Husserl’s pre-reflective *Lebenswelt*. Additionally, a hermeneutic approach allows engagement with participants in a meaningful way - clarifying, wondering, and trying out interpretations in a way that creates a broader horizon of understanding than a strictly objective approach.

Utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach allows the social work researcher to attend to what is unspoken, as well as what is spoken, and in doing so to invite the shadow side of social work back into the interpretation. Many experiences where social work is situated involve pain and shame, and are not easily talked about in the larger societal discourse - experiences such as trauma, mental health challenges, and abuse. Most social workers are skilled in listening for both what is not said about these experiences as well as what is said - an

approach that can be extended into research activities.

Like social work, hermeneutic inquiry requires researchers to operate from a position of closeness to, and great sympathy with, their research participants and, at a deeper level, their human conditions of which the (social worker) researcher is an acknowledged part. Detachment from clients may be a marker of burnout in social workers, and a willingness to enter into clients’ life worlds in a way that eases pain and facilitates positive change is required of social workers. Entering with clients this way, often acting as a witness to both the darkest and most life-giving experiences of human life, changes the social worker in some very fundamental way. The committed social worker will enter again, and again, and again into these places, coming out each time as someone at least slightly changed. As social workers and clients bring their personal and practice experiences to each encounter, so too are they changed by each other - a hermeneutic circle. Social workers bring all of their humanness to their work with clients. The social worker’s own humanity is the foundation of all he or she will achieve as a helper, advocate, and witness.

Social constructionist perspectives, which are consistent with hermeneutic inquiry, recognize the socially constructed nature of reality and the inter-subjectivity of knowledge. The inter-subjectivity of the social worker and client is mirrored in the inter-subjectivity of researcher and participant. This “fusion of horizons,” as expressed by Gadamer, refers to the fluid meanings, ideas, and experiences of participants, which are situated in a changing historical context (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Much of social work practice, whether in a clinical, community, or educational contexts, is concerned with making sense of, and often

transforming, painful social experiences (i.e., disrupting oppressive discourses). The hermeneutic approach extends these sense-making activities to the research realm. Co-creation of meaning is central to this approach. Action is at the heart of social work - social work is an applied discipline focused on change. In order for real change to happen, we must first create a different set of meanings about the situations we find ourselves in, and then take action to transform those situations. Some narratives are more limiting than others, and social workers work with clients and the public to question limiting narratives and co-create new ways of understanding private troubles and public issues. As clients may be changed by their work with social workers, so too are social workers changed, often irrevocably, by their work with clients.

The social worker, forging yet another professional identity as a researcher, cannot and should not shed the earlier practitioner self. The emergence of the novice social work researcher is another interpretative process in the web of self and profession, in which it is not enough to acquire technical competence. Rather, the novice researcher is called to explore the values of their work and the values of the research endeavor to arrive at a beginning place of congruence and commitment. Once again, a new self emerges from the old.

### Note

The Joseph-Armand Bombardier Doctoral Scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council provides support for the author's research and scholarship.

### References

Beyer, C. (2011). Edmund Husserl. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of*

*philosophy* (Winter 2011 ed.). Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/husserl/>

Canadian Association of Social Workers. (2005). *Code of Ethics*. Retrieved from Canadian Association of Social Workers website: <http://www.casw-acts.ca/>

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Davey, N. (2006). *Unquiet understanding: Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Flynn, T. (2011). Jean-Paul Sartre. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Spring 2012 ed.). Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sartre/>

Gadamer, H. G. (1960/1989). *Truth and method* (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed.). (J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). New York, NY: Continuum.

Gadamer, H. G. (1965/2007). The universality of the hermeneutical problem. (D. E. Linge, Trans.). In *The Gadamer reader: A bouquet of the later writings* (R. E. Palmer, Ed.) (pp. 72-88). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Gadamer, H. G. (1970/2007). Language and understanding. (R. E. Palmer, Trans.). In *The Gadamer reader: A bouquet of the later writings* (R. E. Palmer, Ed.) (pp. 89-107). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Gadamer, H. G. (1977/2007). Classical and philosophical hermeneutics. (R. E. Palmer, Trans.). In *The Gadamer reader: A bouquet of the later writings* (R. E. Palmer, Ed.) (pp.

41-71). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Gearing, R. E. (2004). Bracketing in research: A typology. *Qualitative Health Research*, *14*(1), 1429–1452. doi: 10.1177/1049732304270394

Grondin, J. (1991/1994). *Introduction to philosophical hermeneutics*. (J. Weinsheimer, Trans.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Grondin, J. (1999/2003). *The philosophy of Gadamer*. (K. Plant, Trans.). Montreal, QC, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (2000). Analyzing interpretive practice. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (pp. 487–508). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Holmes, C. A. (1996). The politics of phenomenological concepts in nursing. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *24*(3), 579–587. doi: 10.1046/j.1365-2648.1996.22719.x

Husserl, E. (1954/1970). *The crisis of the European sciences and transcendental phenomenology*. (D. Carr, Trans.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Laverty, S. M. (2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology: A comparison of historical and methodological considerations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *2*(3), 21–35. Retrieved from: <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/index>

LeVasseur, J. J. (2003). The problem of bracketing in phenomenology. *Qualitative Health Research*, *13*(3), 408–420. doi: 10.1177/1049732302250337

Life-world. (2012). In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/340330/life-world>

Lopez, K. A., & Willis, D. G. (2004). Descriptive versus interpretative phenomenology: Their contributions to nursing knowledge. *Qualitative Health Research*, *14*(5), 726–735. doi: 10.1177/1049732304263638.

Luft, S. (1998). Husserl's phenomenological discovery of the natural attitude. *Continental philosophy review*, *31*(2), 153–170. doi: 10.1023/A:1010034512821

Madison, G. B. (1990). *The hermeneutics of post-modernity: Figures and themes*. Indiana, IL: University of Indiana Press.

Makkreel, R. (2012). Wilhelm Dilthey. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Summer 2012 ed.). Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dilthey/>

Mead, G. H. (1962). *Mind, self, and society from the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Mendelson, M. (2010). Saint Augustine. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Winter 2010 ed.). Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/augustine/>

Moran, D. (2000). *Introduction to phenomenology*. London, England: Routledge.

Moules, N. J. (2002). Hermeneutic inquiry: Paying heed to history and Hermes. An ancestral, substantive, and methodological tale. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *1*(3), 1–40. Retrieved from

<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/index>

Zahavi, D. (2003). *Husserl's phenomenology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mullaly, B. (1997). *Structural social work* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Don Mills, Ontario, Canada: Oxford University Press.

Payne, M. (2005). *Modern social work theory* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books.

Peters, M. A. (2009). Editorial: Heidegger, Phenomenology, Education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 41(1), 1–6. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2008.00516.x

Ramberg, B., & Gjesdal, K. (2009). Hermeneutics. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Summer 2009 ed.). Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/>

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. London, ON, Canada: Sage.

van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. London, England: The Athlone Press.

Wheeler, M. (2011). Martin Heidegger. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Summer 2009 ed.). Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/>

Wolin, R. (1988). The French Heidegger debate. *New German Critique*, 45, 135–161. Retrieved from <http://ngc.dukejournals.org>