

# Conducting Interviews in Hermeneutic Research: An Example

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## Abstract

In this paper, we discuss the conduct of an interview that was done as a demonstration of the character of interviews in hermeneutic research. This interview was conducted within the context of a graduate course on hermeneutics and involved one of the course professors and a volunteer doctoral student in the class. Although the interview did not occur within a research study, the content of the interview is genuine and not fabricated or acted. Offering the course in an online platform of Zoom allowed for the opportunity to record it and, as a result, we are able to discuss it as well as offer a link to the viewing of the actual interview.

## Keywords

Hermeneutic research, interviewing, Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics

In the book, *Conducting Hermeneutic Research: From Philosophy to Practice*, Moules et al. (2015) dedicated Chapter 6 (pp. 87-116) to a discussion on the conduct of research interviews in hermeneutic research. They specify clearly that, although there is not particularly such an entity as a hermeneutic interview as some others have claimed (see Geanellos, 1999 or Vandermause, 2011 as examples), there is a difference in the character and conduct of interviews in hermeneutic research from other types of qualitative interviews. Although the hermeneutic research defined by Moules et al. is guided by Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, not all of the components of the research adhere to the philosophy explicated by Gadamer. One example of this is the notion of genuine conversation. Moules et al. argued that,

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when Gadamer identified this concept, he was not describing either therapeutic conversations or research interviews, so therefore, unlike a genuine conversation, the interview is “conducted” by the interviewer. “The research interview is not a conversation between equal partners, because the researcher defines and controls the situation” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 3). As Moules et al. claimed “(g)ood research interviews *are* conducted and conducted well...” (p. 88).

The reason that we demonstrate an interview in this graduate research class is that many novice researchers frequently ask the question about how to obtain useful data through the execution of a well-conducted interview. Teaching students or novice researchers how to conduct meaningful, productive, and rich interviews is something that is very difficult to describe in theory or to write in instruction. Even in the Moules et al. (2015) book chapter, struggling with how to describe the nature of the interview, the authors instead offer the transcript of an interview accompanied by commentary from the interviewer as to choices made in determining the direction and the discernments made in the interview. In a classroom, this can be powerfully demonstrated through the in-person conduct of an interview, particularly with one of the members of the class as the interviewee. The class observes the interview, and a discussion follows where they can question the interviewer on strategic choices and why particular directions were taken or assessed as having the greatest leverage to deepen the interview. They can also interview the interviewee on the impact of the interview on them and the effect of particular questions and directions. Because the spring 2020 class was offered in an online platform due to the current pandemic, we were able to use the capacity of Zoom to record the class, and more specifically, the interview. There have been some unexpected ramifications of having this interview recorded, and in discussion about this, the two authors Moules (one of the course professors) and Taylor (the doctoral student who participated in the interview) decided that this was an important conversation to explore and to share with others. In this paper, we discuss the context and content of the interview, the internal decision making that was involved, and the resultant impact of the interview on both the interviewee and the interviewer. A link to an Mp4 file of the video recording of the interview is provided with thanks to Dr. Amber Porter, the Learning and Instructional Design Specialist of the Technology Integrated Learning Team in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Calgary. The video is hosted on Yuja with the following link.

<https://yuja.ucalgary.ca/V/Video?v=244868&a=130699778>

### Context

The hermeneutic course described here was led by course professors, Drs. Graham McCaffrey and Nancy Moules. The intensive course consists of six all day classes, with two classes per week. The first three days/classes are focused on examining the history of the development of hermeneutics as a philosophy with a cumulative focus specifically on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. The final three days/classes are attuned to the pragmatics of undergoing hermeneutic research: being addressed by a topic, developing a research question, seeking participants, conducting interviews, interpreting the data obtained in those interviews, and developing interpretive writing to best communicate these interpretations. Issues of rigor and ethics are explored in relation to hermeneutic research.

In this particular course, Moules conducted the interview and approached one of the class participants about the topic of the “study” and to inquire into her willingness to be interviewed. Moules happened to know that Taylor had intimate relationships with both music and with recent grief, so she explored the sensitivity of the topic and discussed how comfortable Taylor was with being interviewed around it. The selection of Taylor was a deliberate choice by Moules, recognizing that Taylor would be someone who had the insight, capacity, experience, and reflexivity that might create the context for a meaningful conversation. The hypothetical research question in this case was “How might we understand the relationship between music and grief?”

### **Process**

Prior to beginning the interview, Moules and McCaffrey engaged the class in a discussion about what they might pursue or be interested in finding out during the interview, and as a group (a pseudo research team), the class generated questions that they thought might be useful in eliciting a deep and illuminating understanding of the topic. These questions did not formulate a research guide or protocol; they were simply a means to focus the inquiry on possible explorations that might be (or might not be) pursued. Moules also speculated on some internal thoughts she had prior to starting so that the class might have insight into the directions she might take during the interview and rationale or motivations behind these directions. At that point, the class members all entered “mute” and turned off video and the Zoom recording was focused on speaker view, alternating between the interviewer and the interviewee. In order to imitate how a typical interview would begin, Moules offered some context, discussed the topic of the study, and set up the beginning of the relationship required to elicit a good interview. In this particular example, the interview began with a demonstration of a YouTube song written and performed by Taylor. Following the viewing of the performance, Moules began tentatively, with a hesitancy of entering into the depth of the interview, needing to test out the relationship (or establish it) between the two and their relationship to the topic and their place within it. The gentle approach to inquiry allowed for an easing into the topic with respect and genuine curiosity. This tentative approach seems to be a condition of making space and room for the topic while trusting that the context could hold it up and do it justice. Taylor then began telling the narrative of her recent profound loss and for a while the interview paid respect to the story that needed to be told and understood prior to turning directly to the topic.

Noted is the transparency of the interviewer in presenting the topic and offering questions. There are times Moules openly stumbles around the question with no need to disguise the stumble with feigned confidence and knowingness. She is open around her “reach” for the right question, even engaging Taylor in helping her articulate what she was looking for. This kind of transparency serves not only to flatten the inherent hierarchy of the interviewer and interviewee positions but to create space for a mutual working out of what is meaningful and important and the beginnings of emerging interpretations. There are times when it is apparent that humor is used as a means to engage as well as relax both partners, recognizing it as something that often reflects humanness and resonance. Humor has the capacity to bridge gaps and find commonness and recognizability and, in that sense, is a hermeneutic encounter. Sometimes hermeneutic research tackles painful and difficult topics, and, with tact, skill, and sensitivity, there is a time and place where humor can serve as a useful, engaging, diffusing, and modulating moment. It does, however, need to be

employed with tact and taste, acknowledging appropriate timing and placement. It is sometimes even a tether that serves to keep things grounded when they want to drift away.

What is very apparent in the interview presented here is that there is much flexibility around what is asked, a reciprocal response to the conversation – they are not the questions generated in the class specifically, but they are, in some regards, versions of them. Those initial wonderings and curiosities seemed to fuel the flexible responses of the interviewer to the comments and responses of the interviewee. If a script had been followed, the spontaneity and flexibility would have been lost to script and not given the leverage that nimbleness provides. It also allows for a deep listening to what is said and what is left unsaid — a deep listening to the topic that also has a voice.

Moules et al. (2015) discussed the place of deep listening, being open to the other in difference as well as sameness, and listening to the truth in the other even if it differs from what the interviewers expected or believed. Interviewing also involves developing the skill of knowing good questions and learning timing, as well as a willingness to take risks and cross boundaries. As mentioned, the chapter in their book also offers the transcript of an actual blinded research interview. All of these aspects of an interview are demonstrated to various degrees in the example given here in the video recorded interview.

### **The Interviewee**

As mentioned, one of the unexpected outcomes of this online and recorded interview involved the impact of the interview on Taylor, and the delayed impact that resulted from repeated viewing of the recording. Taylor reflects on this in the first-person voice.

As a first-year doctoral student, having no knowledge regarding philosophical hermeneutics prior to the course that offered a place for this interview, I was eager to find learning in every moment and around every corner during the condensed spring class. When Moules offered for me to take part in an interview with her in class, I was eager to participate, recognizing the unique opportunity to explore the position of an interviewee as part of my learning in the course. Additionally, I was eager to discuss the interview topic as I felt I personally benefited and continued my grief experience with each opportunity to talk about my experience, helping me to work things out for myself. Considering my somewhat recent experience with grief, Moules' expertise with the topic, as well as her sincerity and genuineness communicated through emails regarding the interview opportunity, I trusted her to handle the topic and interview with care.

As a student, being interviewed in front of the class was a unique situation. I was eager to bring awareness to the topic discussed in the interview, however I was also aware that I was sharing and detailing quite a personal piece of myself with my colleagues and my professors, both through music and with my story, which was cause for some nervousness during the interview. As the interview evolved, I was aware my colleagues were listening and observing, however I did not feel this took away from the interview or affected my responses. The Zoom platform offered a space where my colleagues could mute themselves and, in speaker view, offered Moules and me a space that felt much like a one-on-one opportunity. I felt as though I genuinely engaged in the class interview as an interviewee, as a participant in a hypothetical study. I

answered questions as though my account was of interest, and to some degree I consciously disregarded the student in me who wanted to analyze how Moules approached questions and conducted the interview, in order to authentically engage.

In the evening, days, and months that followed the interview, I spent hours reviewing the recording of the interview that Moules provided to the class via email. With each viewing, I slowly transitioned from an interviewee, sharing my story with music and grief, back into the student who was eager to learn from the in-class interview.

As the interviewee, I reflected on how I benefited personally from the interview, my feelings of being listened to and heard, which were contributed to by the validating and compassionate comments Moules made following my answers to her questions. I reflected on my description of grief through music, which Moules provided time and space for me to further consider and articulate with this interview. As a student, I reflected on the interview recording, with my role as the interviewee in mind, but focused on how Moules conducted the interview, with her “careful and mindful listening and skilled questioning” (Moules et al., 2015, p. 89). While not intending to derive a protocol or guide from the interview, as Moules identified as unhelpful in the previous section of this paper, I was inspired by what I interpreted as tools used to conduct the interview. Moules described a number of the following tools in the paragraphs previous to this section of the paper; my hope here is to further elaborate with my interpretations, using specific examples from the interview.

### **Easing In**

The first tool that I recognized was touched on above by Moules regarding an easing into the conversation with genuine curiosity at heart. When Moules asked, “Can you maybe start by telling me about the song?” it offered me a fresh canvas to paint on, and not within a paint by numbers grid. With this question, I was given some freedom to explore the thoughts I was eager to share regarding my experience, details that felt important to me; this also helped to ease some of the nervousness I felt.

### **Offering Validation**

Throughout the interview, a number of compassionate and empathetic comments were made which created an encouraging environment for me to share. Following my description of the inspiration for my song, Moules expressed, “First of all I have to say, that’s a tragic and horrible loss for you to have experienced and it’s really heartbreaking to hear about, much less to live and I just want to say I’m sorry about that.” While I felt that my experience was difficult, it was reassuring to hear that it was perceived that way, perhaps, in a way, communicating to me that I was *heard* and understood - that I was able to articulate my experience in a way that made sense to her. Leading into another question, Moules stated, “You’re going through a tremendous, like a huge, like...it’s an unfathomable loss to me,” and I felt a sense of validation for my deep feelings of grief. Where grief is such a uniquely individual experience and process, at times I wondered whether or not I was right in my path, if my path made any sense; the validation I was offered was very encouraging to me as the interviewee. Words of validation were also offered by Moules with her statement, “It’s a beautiful song too [...] there’s something about it that had a huge

resonance for me, there was just something recognizable in it.” I felt appreciated and encouraged by Moules’ considerate and validating offerings throughout the interview.

### **Humor**

As noted in the previous section of this manuscript, Moules detailed the hermeneutic use of humor within an interview. While perhaps impossibly planned for, and with a taste that understands and recognizes the opportunity for its use within a moment, Moules offered humor to lift some of the heaviness that exists within the topic we discussed. Following my answer in response to whether or not I had received any troubling comments on YouTube, Moules added, “Well there’s stupid people, right? You can’t fix stupid.” The humor offered an opportunity to share a smile, a commonness as Moules identified, and I felt as though it helped to lighten the load of the topic at hand.

### **Neutral Transparency**

The transparent reach to grasp ahold of the right question, as Moules identified above, as well as her apparent search for meaning making, could be identified as a tool as well. One example of this is when Moules stated, “Oh gosh, what is it about? That’s what I’m looking for. Is it about comfort? I don’t think it’s about comfort...there’s something that I just can’t put my finger on. Can you help me with that?” Her genuine search for understanding that offered me a hand in that discovery, allowed me to feel more like a partner to construct understanding with, rather than an individual to be studied. This helped to neutralize or breakdown the inherent power dynamic between interviewer and interviewee, and unique to this scenario, between instructor and student. This was felt in other statements in the interview as well, including, “You and I know enough about grief...” which was a small adjustment to a statement that included me as one who holds knowledge. Again, I felt validation, that my opinion and perspectives were of value, encouraging my contributions to the interview.

### **Flexible Inquiry**

Throughout the interview Moules creatively and responsively molded together inspiration from preconceived and pre-discussed questions regarding the topic of the interview, with information received from the perspectives I provided in my answers during the interview. For example, Moules asked, “When you listen to music that isn’t of your own [...] does [it] have the same effect on you as writing your own and expressing it?” This question was informed by responses I shared prior to the question, where I detailed the expressive avenue music offered me in dealing with grief. With careful listening and a true presence in the moment, Moules used an informed, flexible approach to foster meaningful inquiry regarding the topic.

### **Gratitude**

At the end of the interview, Moules shared, “As tragic as this has been to hear, and as moved as I have felt with your song and with my conversation with you, there’s a part of me that feels really energized ‘cause I want to go and I want to write because you just have given me so much insight around... my way of thinking about this topic and I’m really grateful for that. Thank you.”

With this, Moules indicated inspiration from the interview and did so with sincerity and gratitude. As the interviewee, I felt as though my account was meaningful and that our time was put to good use by engaging in the interview together.

Reflecting on how I felt in the interview as an interviewee, with my student hat on, I also pondered a possible future avenue for research which might involve exploring research participants' perspectives of having access to video recorded interviews in studies around the topic of grief. This notion addressed me while reflecting on my repeated viewing of our interview recording as an interviewee, prior to making the transition back into viewing it as a student. I appreciated being able to view how I worked through questions that Moules asked. There were also feelings of justification, contentment, and gratification that I felt. It was as though I offered my account and myself, vulnerably, in my most raw and intimately detailed form, and was *heard*, genuinely embraced, accepted, and appreciated. Following the interview and the course, I went on to write more songs, in part because I felt so encouraged by Moules in our interview, which helped me along my grieving path well after the day the interview took place.

I continued to review the interview recording intermittently, months following the completion of the course. As identified above, my viewing was motivated as an interviewee who shared their story, as well as a student who was eager to learn. With upcoming doctoral research that embraces Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics and uses unstructured one-on-one interviews, I worked to envision how I might conduct the interviews and looked to Moules' demonstration in the video for inspiration. As a student of education, former K-12 teacher, and current post-secondary instructor, I also viewed the interview pedagogically. It was with this lens that I was addressed regarding the educational opportunity this interview recording might provide if published and shared publicly. I saw opportunity for students who are eager to learn and perhaps gain a more comprehensive understanding or view of an example of an interview conducted using hermeneutic methodology. I saw opportunity for instructors who might like to offer their students a resource to supplement their instruction regarding interviews using hermeneutic methodology. I also saw opportunity for instructors who might be inspired by Moules' approach to interviewing a student, as a way of embracing and living hermeneutically through pedagogy — perhaps a way of talking the talk and walking the walk.

### **Extending the Interview**

Not shown in this video is the lengthy discussion that happened with the class prior to the interview in generating curiosities and questions, but also not shown is the long conversation that followed the interview. The class members seemed first to need to offer their gratitude to Taylor for her openness to share her experience for their learning and then they began to ask their own questions and wonderings about Taylor's experience. For the most part, this focused on the content of the interview, but it eventually evolved into a discussion of the process — the choices made by the interviewee, a wondering about the impact on the interviewee, the pacing, timing, directions, and complexities of the interview. This is where the exercise grew in its pedagogical purpose and the interview became both a place of reverence as well as learning.

## Conclusion

In this manuscript, we offer an exploration of an interview shared between an instructor and student in a graduate level hermeneutic course. The framing and pedagogical approach to the interview within the course was described by Moules, as were decisions made regarding her exploration as the interviewer. The interpretations of Taylor, from the perspectives of interviewee and student were shared, which included a list of tools that were understood as an effective approach to this interview.

In offering this particular interview, or the transcription of the interview offered in the Moules et al. (2015) book, one might be invited to think there is *one* way to interview in hermeneutic research. We offer a completely different argument: Every interview in hermeneutics is an individual “case,” a special case, if you will. Each one will develop out of the context and timing, the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, the topic at hand, and most importantly, out of the *conversa* (Latin word meaning turning around together) that happens in the holding of the moment of recognizing what is at stake in the conversation. No interview will follow the same path (which is why protocols and guides are not helpful); and nor does someone in search of the topic want them to adhere to a preset protocol or path. The portal to understanding that interviews bring must open up something and openings only arrive with being open to the newness and difference that is ready to greet us if we have the commitment, curiosity, and skill to enter the door.

## References

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