

Defending Hermeneutics

Emily P. Williams¹, Catherine M. Laing², & Isabel Brun¹

Abstract

This article offers several perspectives on the challenges of defending Gadamerian hermeneutics in applied research settings, specifically counselling psychology and nursing. Given the lack of methodological steps associated with the method, researchers employing hermeneutics can be vulnerable to scrutiny from others. We discuss the uncertainty that is inevitable when embarking on hermeneutic inquiry and provide personal accounts of how we have encountered the uncertain nature of hermeneutics.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, qualitative research, counselling psychology, nursing

Part I: Post-Candidacy

The day of my doctoral candidacy exam had finally come. I found myself sitting at the head of a large table in a boardroom, surrounded by five academics. They had general queries about my research proposal (“What inspired this line of inquiry? What is your intended sample?”), and then they narrowed in on the how questions: “How will you analyze your data?,” “How will you manage the unstructured interview?,” and “How will you incorporate your prejudice into your interpretation?” In the moment, I felt like I knew nothing. I said to myself: “Wow, and you thought that you were prepared!” I answered as best I could by saying: “Interpretation is not always clear until you actually begin the interviews, and until you see the data in front of you.” Gauging that my ambiguous answers did not satisfy the examiners sitting across from me, I felt the need to offer more information, trying to fill the holes that I had left open in my previous

¹ Counselling Psychology, Werklund
School of Education, University of Calgary
² Faculty of Nursing, University of Calgary

Corresponding Author:

Emily P Williams, PhD candidate
Email: Emily.williams@ucalgary.ca

response. I felt like these types of questions dominated my exam, and ironically, they were the exact sort of question I felt least prepared to answer.

In the days after my exam (and yes, I passed), I (Williams) put my thoughts to the keyboard, with the intention of describing my candidacy experience in order to help those who use hermeneutic inquiry in the future. With this objective, I contacted others who have used, and will use, hermeneutic inquiry for various research endeavours. Joining me in this paper are the perspectives of an associate professor in a nursing faculty (Laing), who used hermeneutics for her doctoral dissertation and has developed a program of research using hermeneutics, and a doctoral student (Brun) who is considering the applicability of hermeneutics for her research. Together, we provide our experiences and insights of defending hermeneutic inquiry before the interpretation has begun. Defending any type of research method has its challenges, however this is especially true of applied Gadamerian hermeneutic inquiry.

Embracing Uncertainty

There is an attraction to certainty. Lay people and researchers alike are drawn to choices or actions that are clearly this way or that way. In this sense, philosophic hermeneutics, as explicated by the German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, stands out as different. Hermeneutic inquiry is a way of interpreting the world, taking into account that the world is always changing, and our understanding of a phenomenon is rooted in language and history. As such, since the world and our topic of inquiry is bound to change, so too do our interpretations. This practice requires a tolerance of uncertainty, both of the topic and interpretation (Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015). Thus, it is fitting that Gadamer (1960/2013) noted, “the true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between” (p. 306).

Researchers using hermeneutic inquiry must exist in this in between and resist blindly following a pre-determined method that assumes all cases within the inquiry are the same (Caputo, 2015). Applying method and rules universally implies that every encounter the researcher has will be similar to its last and resemble the ones to come. “Hermeneutics is not a neutral enterprise; we do not simply select a method and aim it at the world to accomplish something we want to do” (Moules et al., 2015, p. 58). Thus, when conducting hermeneutic research, researchers must navigate their topics while applying foundational pillars of hermeneutics to guide their understanding.

Essential to philosophical hermeneutic practice is acknowledging that, as researchers, we do not, and cannot, know everything. We welcome our participants’ ability to teach us something new, something that makes our understanding of the topic change (Moules et al., 2015). Since this is the goal, it does not make sense to use pre-determined steps and apply them to all cases. Perhaps this resistance to using a standard system across all cases perplexes researchers not familiar with hermeneutic inquiry, as this is how it seemed during my examination.

Guidelines Versus Method

While learning about the history and philosophy that has shaped applied hermeneutic practice, I considered the difference between rules and guidelines. “Guidelines are not methodological

imperatives. They are in the service of steady, dependable motion” (Moules et al., 2015, p. 61). Researchers employing hermeneutic inquiry are encouraged to apply their knowledge of how philosophical hermeneutics evolved to applied practice disciplines and to use that understanding to guide them in making responsible, reliable, and defensible decisions. While learning to think like this, it made sense; however, when faced with examiners who required me to demonstrate my thorough understanding of the method I would be using for my dissertation, it was hard to convincingly demonstrate.

During my exam, I found myself clinging to a particular page in the book from which I had learned hermeneutics:

This is hard work. Balancing a description of how to conduct something without offering a map... is challenging. In many ways, the work of hermeneutics as a research approach is somewhat intuitive... We know what we do when we are into the deep work of interpretation and we so often talk with students about how to begin this deep and involved work... To find language, though, to describe this practice was very difficult. (Moules et al., 2015, p. 201)

During my exam, I tried to relay the idea that hermeneutic work unfolds as it happens. I shared that hermeneutic inquiry is a learned practice, a way of applying theory to the topic, which often feels more comprehensible once one is in the depth of one’s analysis. According to the philosophy and tradition of hermeneutics, my answers aligned with the applied practice; however, when defending hermeneutic work to an audience not familiar with its foundational pillars, I became overwhelmed when tasked with explaining in detail how analysis would occur. In angst, I offered how my interviews and interpretation might proceed. I spoke about implications that my research might yield. Ultimately, however, by trying to satisfy someone’s need for certainty, I was answering against the tradition of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics embraces uncertainty. Being comfortable with ever changing interpretations is essential to the practice. For hermeneutic inquiry, this ambiguity and openness to possibilities is not considered problematic, but rather is thought to be an asset of the approach (Moules et al., 2015).

Ultimately, as a researcher beginning my journey with applied hermeneutics, I struggled to defend the approach’s *how* questions. I believe that as my interviews commence, and analysis begins, I will appreciate the ambiguity involved with the process, but until then, I will continue to wonder what this process will look like.

Part II: Academic

It is almost unfair to ask a hermeneutic researcher to describe, in detail, how he/she will analyze data not yet collected, yet herein lies the crux of the problem of how hermeneutics exists within the realities of academia, practice, and research. Not having an answer to such questions opens students up to vulnerability during exams, and subjects researchers to criticism as their grants are compared to others with “standard” qualitative methodologies, or worse, quantitative studies. As a hermeneutic researcher, I (Laing) constantly walk the line between methodological rigor and situating my projects in such a way that they will be funded. Too much detail and you are accused of “sounding defensive” or not being “true” to your method; too little detail and you

have not provided enough evidence as to how your project will proceed, methodologically. There is, quite simply, no winning this game. As an academic, there is an irrefutable reality that one needs their research funded and findings published in order to succeed and satisfy the overwhelmingly foregrounded arm of the tripartite mandate: research. It does not take many rejections from funding agencies to start to change your approach with hermeneutics for the realistic reason of getting grants and future publications.

We talk about hermeneutics as an art, practice, philosophy, and research approach, however it is much more than these: it is a sensibility and comportment that positions us such that hermeneutics is *within us*, within our way of being and our ways of thinking. You can recognize a hermeneutic thinker quickly even though they themselves may never have heard the word before. Said more simply, people either “get” the gestalt of hermeneutics or they do not. It becomes quickly evident with different lines of questioning who is genuinely curious to understand hermeneutics and who is “on the attack,” trying to discredit this approach. It is a daunting task, when one starts out with philosophical hermeneutics as a research method, to defend one’s work, or more accurately, one’s approach. This, however, is the never-ending responsibility of the hermeneutic researcher, and like all things, one becomes more practiced with it over time. Davey (2015) stated that the notion of practice, though not well discussed by Gadamer, is a form of “sense-making” (p. 9).

Practice involves repetition, memory, adjustment, failure and success: upon these rhythms the confidence to perform is built. Participatory engagement with a range of practices enables the capacity and confidence to engage and develop. Tradition and cultural horizons are the pre-conditions of practice but they do not build the certainties Gadamer speaks of. It is the engagement with practice and the self-insight it affords that grounds the certainties and confidence of the practiced performer, whether artist, doctor or scientist. (Davey, 2015, pp. 5-6)

As we “practice” with hermeneutics, both in the applied sense but also in the sense of making it fit into places it is not well understood, we are better able to “make sense” of this task. We become more practiced and skilled, and the task becomes less onerous because we search less for the “right words” or struggle less with how to articulate something “just right.” Over time, with practice, this comes easier.

We do ourselves a disservice in many ways, as hermeneutic researchers and scholars, by speaking about applied hermeneutics in sometimes poetic, sometimes overly philosophic, and sometimes even unintelligible ways to anyone who is *not* practiced with this methodology. We forget one of the foremost rules of communication: know your audience (Ricci, 2012). Sometimes hermeneutics needs to be discussed plainly, in ways that are understandable *for others*. While we bemoan the injustice of this (should others not just *know* and *get it?*), hermeneutics lives within a world where it is the underdog with respect to research methodologies. In many ways, hermeneutics defies the essentialist nature of a definition (Moules et al., 2015), yet herein lies our conundrum as students and practitioners of this methodology – we must continue to find ways to understand, explain, describe, and even force-fit ourselves into the research community. We need a seat at the table, and we need not assume a “poor cousin” stance against the natural sciences or other more easily articulated research methodologies.

When I used to try to negotiate with my children when they were younger it was a futile exercise. They did not understand that in a negotiation, neither party gets exactly what they want, and the whole point of negotiation is to reach an agreement. It is a useless endeavor to engage in this behaviour with a young child who does not yet possess the cognitive ability for this understanding. Similarly, when disagreements occur between adults and it sometimes becomes evident that one party is unwilling to move, even slightly, from their position, it quickly becomes apparent that no understanding will occur between them. No one is willing to consider the possibility that the other person may be right. No one is willing to *even try* to understand what the other is saying; both are invested in their own “rightness.” These two scenarios – negotiating with a child and futile disagreements – are not unlike our task as hermeneutic researchers. Sometimes it is evident that the person with whom you are engaging (e.g., an examiner, a grant reviewer) is unwilling to listen. They are not playing by the same rules as we are and, quite frankly, this can be a futile and frustrating experience. We want the ideas of hermeneutics to transcend all: I want Gadamer’s idea of a genuine conversation, for example, where the process of question and answer, listening and speaking, and seeing others’ points of view ultimately enabling us to reach new understandings (Spence, 2005) to be the norm. When in a genuine dialogue with another, we try to understand how what the other person is saying could be right (Gadamer, 1996). In a genuine conversation the concern is with the subject matter and with its possible truth (Warnke, 1987), and neither participant claims to know the truth, rather each is open to the other’s views. Different understanding – understanding differently – is a foundation upon which we stake a claim in hermeneutics. Yet, when the other party does not play by these rules or worse does not even know of their existence, in many ways we are engaging in the equivalent of negotiating with a toddler. Sometimes, it feels as though we are alone in this world where quantitative methodologies and natural sciences still reign supreme, as if we have gained no ground here at all. I prefer to think of applied hermeneutics as still in high school – it has not yet peaked – but it will. We are working our way through the awkward years, gaining ground slowly, and trying our best. In the end, that is all we can do.

PART III: Pre-Candidacy

As a first year PhD student, I (Brun) was tasked with finding a dissertation research topic that appealed to me, as well as a method that would fit my dissertation research aims. Throughout my entire adult life, I have been passionate about learning about parenting practices that would aid in the development of positive body image for children; however, I was disappointed when I discovered that little work had been done to explore this topic. I was so captivated by the idea of researching parenting practices that encourage the development of positive body image in children that it almost felt like a calling: I *needed* to do this research not only for myself, but for parents who may be struggling to find ways to not only diminish the chances that their children develop negative body image, but also encourage the development of positive body image for their children.

Given this strong inclination towards conducting such research, I decided to propose this topic to my supervisor. After a passionate pitch on my behalf, my supervisor suggested that I consider hermeneutic inquiry as my dissertation research method, as it appeared to her that I had been called to this topic, which is often the jumping off point for hermeneutic research (Moules et al.,

2015). I was slightly put off by my supervisor's suggestion as I thought to myself: "How do you even do hermeneutic research?" and "Isn't it a philosophy and not a research method?" Given my look of contemplation, my supervisor advised that I read about hermeneutic inquiry and decide whether or not it would be a fit for my research. During this time, I felt as though I had to be certain of hermeneutic inquiry's merit and validity before I could commit to using it for my dissertation. Through my readings, I was convinced that hermeneutic inquiry would be the perfect fit for my dissertation research. Furthermore, I looked forward to using hermeneutic research to gain a better understanding of my research topic as well as, ultimately, bringing about change in my field of study.

Defending the How and Why of Hermeneutic Inquiry

In my experience, individuals who conduct research are often concerned with the "hows"; they want a step by step guide to follow so that they can conduct research that is "valid" and "rigorous." I used to be one of those people who relied on predetermined research steps so that I could confidently defend my work ("See, my research is valid: I followed all the steps!"), which is why the thought of conducting hermeneutic research was so daunting. In my understanding, hermeneutic inquiry is not a research method that outlines steps for a researcher to follow; instead, it guides the researcher to adopt a new philosophy or frame of mind (i.e., a genuine interest in considering others' perspectives related to a specific topic or phenomenon) that leaves them open to gaining a new understanding of their topic (Moules et al., 2015).

This different perspective may be difficult for researchers who are statistically minded to embrace, and I have personally experienced their skepticism when describing my proposed dissertation. Given the reluctance I have encountered while explaining my dissertation plans to "non-hermeneuts," I have developed the following analogy to explain hermeneutic research:

Most individuals have participated in a conversation, with another person in which they have experienced a significant shift in their understanding of a particular topic. I can only describe these shifts in understanding as Oprah's "aha moments." Throughout my childhood, I would sit in front of the television on a nightly basis to watch my favourite television show, Oprah. I watched Oprah experience many "aha moments" where you could actually see her experiencing a shift of perspective as a result of dialoguing with an interviewee; it was like a light bulb had turned on in her mind which illuminated a new understanding of the subject matter at hand. During these "aha moments" an individual's perspective suddenly changes, they begin to understand the topic differently, and this new understanding cannot be unlearned (i.e., they cannot go back to the way they previously understood the topic).

As I understand the process of conducting hermeneutic research, researchers take on a mindset that opens them up to experiencing "aha moments." In addition to adopting a frame of mind that is conducive to these experiences, they conduct interviews in a manner that makes it more likely for their participants to share experiences or information that will prompt such shifts in understanding (i.e., by creating conditions akin to Gadamer's genuine conversation; Spence, 2005). Through practice, hermeneutic researchers become more apt at interviewing participants which enables them to gather rich data. Furthermore, once a shift in understanding has been

experienced by the researcher, it is up to him or her to recreate the “aha moment,” through the writing of their findings, for others. The resulting hermeneutic work will, hopefully, produce a similar shift in understanding for those who read it.

Another feature of hermeneutic research that convinced me of its merit was its focus on developing *phronesis*, which translates to practical wisdom (i.e., knowledge and skills that can be applied to practice; Moules et al., 2015). While conducting hermeneutic research, researchers are concerned with coming to a new understanding of the studied topic and disseminating this new understanding in a way that will have practical implications. Overall, hermeneutic research is not only about gaining a new understanding of the world, it is also about changing it (Moules et al., 2015). One could say that hermeneutic inquiry’s catch phrase is: “When you know differently, you do differently.” Given the focus on *phronesis*, hermeneutic researchers take on the mindset that when we acquire insight that has practical implications for the world, we are ethically obligated to act on it (Moules et al., 2015). Thus, as a hermeneutic researcher, I commit myself to conducting research that will have practical implications for my field of study, and I will disseminate this knowledge in a way that may bring about change. In sum, I want to make a difference in this world, and hermeneutic inquiry offers the framework that will aid in the realization of this aim.

Conclusion

As these three accounts suggest, defending the process of hermeneutic research can come as a challenge. Given the lack of methodological steps associated with hermeneutic inquiry, it leaves hermeneutic researchers vulnerable to scrutiny from others (e.g., exam or funding committees). For this reason, we decided to offer our experience and insights related to defending hermeneutic research in the hopes that it would help others, who use this method, to articulate its value, despite the lack of procedural steps. As such, we present our experiences in Parts I, II, and III to argue that hermeneutic research involves embracing uncertainty, as it is in uncertainty that we open ourselves to experiencing “aha moments” or profound shifts in understanding. Furthermore, we suggest that hermeneutic researchers be guided by *phronesis*, which involves gaining new understandings of certain topic or phenomenon and acting upon them to create change. Overall, although a difficult methodology to defend, it is important to stay faithful to the philosophy that guides hermeneutic inquiry by remaining open to interpretation, wherever it may lead us.

References

- Caputo, J.D. (2015). Foreword: The wisdom of hermeneutics. In N.J. Moules, G. McCaffrey, J.C. Field, & C.M. Laing, *Conducting hermeneutic research: From philosophy to practice* (pp. ix-xiii). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Davey, N. (2015). A hermeneutics of practice: Philosophical hermeneutics and the epistemology of participation. *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics, Article 7*. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10515/sy5707x51>
- Gadamer, H.G. (1996). *The enigma of health*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Gadamer, H.G. (1960/2013). *Truth and method* (Bloomsbury revelations; J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). London, UK: Bloomsbury.

Moules, N.J., McCaffrey, G., Field, J.C., & Laing, C.M. (2015). *Conducting hermeneutic research: From philosophy to practice*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Ricci, T. (2012). *Public speaking: Know your audience*. Retrieved from <https://www.asme.org>

Spence, D.G. (2001). Hermeneutic notions illuminate cross-cultural nursing experiences. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 35(4), 624-30. doi: 10.1046/j.1365-2648.2001.01879.x

Warnke, G. (1987). *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, tradition and reason*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.