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# Conducting Literature Reviews Hermeneutically

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## Abstract

It is well understood that conducting high quality literature reviews provides an important and solid foundation for research studies. While there is an abundance of resources available about how to conduct literature reviews for quantitative research, there are fewer publications available about how to conduct literature reviews for qualitative research, particularly research that is guided by hermeneutic philosophy. Rather than detailing how to conduct a hermeneutic literature review, in this paper we make the subtle, yet necessary, distinction that literature reviews included in research studies that are guided by hermeneutics should be conducted *hermeneutically*. We begin by reviewing the few resources that are currently available about conducting literature reviews for hermeneutic research and detail three different literature review processes for three hermeneutic studies. We then discuss how researchers, who are using hermeneutics to guide their research, might determine what literature should be included in their literature reviews. We close the paper by addressing the significance of rigour in literature reviews that are conducted hermeneutically.

## Keywords

Hermeneutics, hermeneutically, literature review, Gadamer

A high-quality literature review is foundational to a thorough and sound research study. However, it can be difficult to know where to begin when conducting literature reviews for research guided by hermeneutics. Further, there is not a stepwise approach or widely accepted criteria to evaluate the quality of hermeneutic literature reviews. Perhaps this is because there is some disagreement, when conducting hermeneutic research, about how to approach the literature review process. Some might argue that, regardless of the methodology of the research, a literature review should follow a standardized approach to best demonstrate rigour. However, others have suggested that

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the literature review should be consistent with the methodological and philosophical foundations of the study being conducted (Greenhalgh et al., 2018). We would agree with the latter.

The authors of this paper have each chosen to conduct research guided by hermeneutics for our doctoral theses. In each of our doctoral candidacy exams, we were asked a version of these two questions: How did we evaluate the quality of the research that was included in our literature reviews? What makes our literature review rigorous enough to stand up to the academic requirements of a doctoral thesis? Despite our best attempts, each of us felt that our responses might have lacked the depth that we had aimed to demonstrate. In the following paper, we are returning to, rearguing, and perhaps even reclaiming our responses to these questions.

### **Prequel: A Brief Discussion about Grammatical Significance**

Before we begin, we would like to offer that, rather than doing hermeneutic literature reviews, literature reviews that are conducted for hermeneutic research studies should be conducted *hermeneutically*. There is a subtle, but arguably necessary, distinction here. *Hermeneutic*, as used in a *hermeneutic literature review* is an adjective—a word that describes the noun, which in this case is: literature review. However, *hermeneutically*, as used in *conducting a literature review hermeneutically*, is an adverb—a word that describes a verb. While it is not our intention to get bogged down in very elementary grammatical differences, we would like to suggest that hermeneutics, as an adverb, has a much more active “way in which we pursue a matter” (Caputo, 1987, p. 213) that we suggest is a better fit with the work of hermeneutics.

### **Reviewing the Literature about Conducting Literature Reviews Hermeneutically**

Despite a disproportionate bias for the superiority of systematic literature reviews, there is evidence that suggests that literature reviews should be reflective of the chosen research methodology (Boell & Cecez-Keckmanovic, 2014; Greenhalgh et al., 2017; Greenhalgh et al., 2018; McCaffrey et al., 2022; Smythe & Spence, 2012). It has been argued that a growing body of leading academic journals are starting to view expert-led narrative reviews as “a ‘state-of-the-art’ review” (Greenhalgh et al., 2018, p. 1). While the availability of resources that address how to conduct literature reviews hermeneutically is limited, there are a few worth mentioning. Reviewing these articles can be a helpful starting point when conducting literature reviews for research guided by hermeneutics.

There can be a marked dissonance when the literature reviews in hermeneutic studies are incongruent with the hermeneutic philosophy that guides the remainder of the research study. In an article detailing a hermeneutic approach to conducting literature reviews, Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014), argued that “highly structured approaches downplay the importance of reading and dialogical interaction between the literature and researcher; continuing interpretation and questioning; critical assessment and imagination; argument development and writing—all highly intellectual and creative activities, seeking originality and replicability” (p. 258). Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic further suggested that, in hermeneutics, the literature review should be about the “process of developing understanding” (Boell & Cecez-Keckmanovic, 2014, p. 259). Boell and Cecez-Keckmanovic proposed a hermeneutic framework for conducting literature reviews, which involves two hermeneutic circles: a search and acquisition circle and then a wider

analysis and interpretation circle. While we would argue that this framework might not fit for every hermeneutic study, it is a resource worth reviewing. Regarding Boell and Cecez-Keckmonovic's hermeneutic framework for the literature review process, McCaffrey et al. (2022), offered that it "embraces the interpretive efforts of the researcher in assessing literature for its quality and relevance, ... [which] requires recursive reading, critical engagement, writing, and more reading." (p. 4). To determine the strength of a literature review, Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic suggested that it should be "judged by the arguments and evidence provided" (p. 273). In other words, the richer the depth of understanding that is demonstrated in a literature review about the topic being studied, the more convincing and insightful the literature review will be.

Building on Boell's and Cecez-Kacmanovic's (2014) process for conducting literature reviews guided by hermeneutics, Greenhalgh et al. (2018) argued that hermeneutic literature reviews are not only possible, but necessary, for studies using hermeneutics as a philosophical and methodological framework. In their paper, Greenhalgh et al. compellingly challenged the spurious hierarchy of systematic reviews over narrative reviews. Greenhalgh et al. suggested that narrative reviews, and thus hermeneutic reviews as a form of narrative reviews, have been "frequently misunderstood, misapplied and unfairly dismissed" (p. 1). According to Greenhalgh et al., different problems require different solutions. In other words, while a problem that involves the collection of quantitative data might be better suited to a conventional systematic review, a problem that requires new insights or deeper clarification, requires "a more interpretive and discursive synthesis of the existing literature is needed" (p. 2). Further, Greenhalgh et al. offered that hermeneutic reviews are aimed at creating an interpretive understanding and may or may not use systematic search methods and inclusion/exclusion criteria. The primary focus of a hermeneutic review, according to Greenhalgh et al., is to advance understanding.

To exemplify an approach to the literature review process in research guided by hermeneutics, Greenhalgh et al. (2017) conducted, what they called, a hermeneutic systematic review. The topic of Greenhalgh et al.'s hermeneutic systematic review was about understanding the benefits and challenges associated with using telehealth to care for patients experiencing heart failure. After beginning with a generic PubMed search using key terms, the authors identified a sample of highly cited qualitative and quantitative articles. Greenhalgh et al. also detailed their search strategy and literature review results. One overriding question guided the selection of papers: "Is this paper likely to *add meaning* to our emerging overview of the field?" (Greenhalgh et al., 2017, p. 2). We would suggest that this simple, yet important, question might be a useful tool to use when conducting literature reviews in research guided by hermeneutics. Further, the detail that these authors provided about their process of conducting their hermeneutic systematic review, rather than just the product of their review, also demonstrated the strength of their approach to incorporating hermeneutics throughout the research study.

Finally, we identified an article written by Smythe and Spence (2012), in which the authors discussed the process of *re-viewing* the literature in hermeneutic research. Smythe and Spence suggested that "re-viewing is to bring words, meanings and the thoughts that arise into viewing-afresh. The process and outcome is a reflexively critical understanding of pertinent literature" (p. 14). This is consistent with the work of *aletheia* in hermeneutics, which is to reveal, conceal, and unconceal, and to bring to life (Moules et al., 2015). Rather than a step-by-step guide to

conducting literature reviews hermeneutically, Smythe and Spence offered hallmarks of using a hermeneutic approach to conducting literature reviews. According to Smythe and Spence (2012), these hallmarks include: discussing a broad range of relevant literature; an identification of the researchers' prejudices; demonstrating that the literature is a "dialogical partner to provoke thinking" (p. 23); the inclusion of philosophical literature in both the methodology and discussion; a focus on identifying meanings through traditional ways of thinking, but also through the use of images, similes, metaphors, or descriptions; language is viewed as a "carrier of hidden meaning" (p. 23); and that the literature is contextual and related to the topic of the study. These hallmarks could be particularly helpful when determining the strength, validity, and rigour of literature reviews that have been conducted hermeneutically.

### **Exemplars of Conducting Literature Reviews Hermeneutically**

One way to demonstrate the strength and rigour of the process of conducting qualitative research is to be able to clearly detail the process that was followed (Crawford, 2019). It is one thing to be able to offer a cohesive, rigorous, and thorough review of the literature on a topic, but it is arguably more significant if one can demonstrate, and defend, as we borrowed from Caputo (1987) earlier, the way in which the matter was pursued. Accordingly, the following are three approaches to conducting literature reviews for research studies guided by philosophical hermeneutics. While we did not have a systematic, stepwise approach to follow, nor do we have one to suggest, we would argue that our approaches were far from un-stepped. By detailing our various approaches, we hope to demonstrate a transparent view into different, yet thorough, approaches to the literature review process.

#### **Following the Lead of the Address of the Topic**

The goal of the literature review that I (Katie Webber) conducted for my doctoral thesis was to justify the inquiry, authentically and convincingly, into my thesis topic (Greenhalgh et al., 2018): relational complexity in nurse-parent relationships within pediatric oncology contexts. In addition to identifying gaps in the literature and demonstrating the need for my research, I wanted the literature review to, in both process and product, "provoke thinking" (Smythe & Spence, 2012, p. 14).

The review of the literature began when I was addressed by my research topic in the early months of graduate school. In hermeneutics, being addressed by a topic is "the feeling of being caught in some aspect of the world's regard, of being called or summoned" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 71). My address of the topic involved being called a friend by the mother of a dying child. Therefore, I was particularly interested in understanding what the literature had to say, and what it was not saying, as is the work of *aletheia*, about friendship within complex nurse-parent relationships. While the work of analyzing and synthesizing the literature did not follow a prescribed structure, the review of the literature was done with a critical intention aimed at deepening understanding about the topic. I consistently referred to the question: What does this article contribute to understanding the topic of relational complexity in pediatric oncology? A secondary question that also guided my process was: What might be missing here that is not being said about the topic?

I began by gathering available literature, in English, by searching the following databases: CINAHL, PsychINFO, Medline, and SocINDEX. I searched terms related to interpersonal relationships between nurses and parents, which included: *relational, relationship, nursing, nurse-parent, nurse-caregiver, complexity, pediatric oncology, professional, ethics, professional boundaries, friendship, and social media*. Literature from other related disciplines (e.g., psychology, social work, medicine, mental health, intensive care nursing) was included. As there is a paucity of research about the topic of relational complexity in nurse-parent relationships in the nursing literature, broadening the disciplinary scope of the literature review was beneficial. Further, broadening the disciplinary scope also offered an opportunity to engage with diverse perspectives (Smythe & Spence, 2012).

As “the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 317), I began the discussion in the literature review with a brief overview of the historical and philosophical foundations of nursing as a relational practice. According to Smythe and Spence (2012), the inclusion of philosophical literature throughout the research, including the literature review, is a hallmark of a hermeneutic approach. This discussion included Martin Buber’s (1923/1970) work on the I-Thou relationship, Emmanuel Levinas’ work on face-to-face encounters (Bergo, 2006/2019), and Gadamer’s (1960/2004) distinguishment of the three ways in which one relates to the other, or the Thou. To situate the conversation about relational complexity within nursing practice, Hildegard Peplau’s (1952/1991) work on interpersonal relations in nursing was also included. I then moved into a discussion of the relevant literature that related to complexity within care provider-care receiver relationships.

A prominent theme in Gadamer’s work is tension, which is evident even in the title of his (1960/2004) seminal work, *Truth and Method*. As I engaged with the literature, it became clear that there is significant tension within aspects of nurse-parent relationships that contribute to their complexity. Tensions surfaced about language (i.e., what to call relational complexity in nurse-parent relationships), communication (e.g., self-disclosure, social media), professional boundaries (i.e., what constitutes a boundary crossing versus a boundary violation), and conflict (i.e., how to navigate differences in nurse-parent relationships).

I closed the literature review with a discussion about tension. Despite being uncomfortable, and perhaps even stressful at times, tension may also offer opportunities to deepen understanding. The Latin root word for tension is *tendere*, which means “to be stretched” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). When something is stretched it becomes thinner, more vulnerable, and more malleable, revealing gaps in understanding and provoking ideas that may not have been as apparent without having been exposed. The aim of my literature review was to be attuned to uncovering what needed to be said (Smythe & Spence, 2012) about relational complexity in nurse-parent relationships. Identifying these tensions was necessary to expand my horizon of understanding about the topic, and guided and provoked my thinking for the next phase of the research–data collection.

### **Expanding The Vantage Point**

To situate my literature review in hermeneutic philosophy, I (Sandip Dhaliwal) took up the notion of the *fusion of horizons* as a guide. Gadamer (1960/2004) described a horizon as a “range

of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (p. 313). My vantage point, as an oncology nurse and doctoral student researcher, undoubtedly affected my engagement with literature scaffolding my topic of inquiry, which is aimed at understanding the complexity of family dynamics between emerging adults experiencing blood cancer and their parents and siblings. For Gadamer (1960/2004), the concept of the horizon

expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion (p. 316).

Accordingly, I started my literature review with the intention to expand my range of vision beyond that of my address of the topic and nursing experience, in hopes that I can view it in truer proportion. However, I struggled to know how to begin to engage with the existing scholarly literature and turned to hermeneutic philosophy for direction. Gadamer (1976/2004) articulated that the difference between methodological sterility and genuine understanding is “the capacity to see what is questionable in the subject matter and to formulate questions that question the subject matter further” (p. xi). Thus, I approached my literature review with a focus on interpretation, careful discernment of what might be important, and a dialogue of question and answer to open new possibilities for understanding. To help make this process tangible, I will offer examples of three leading questions that guided my literature review. For each question, I developed a search strategy to obtain relevant scholarly literature.

To start, the question that I felt I needed to answer to understand my topic better was: What makes emerging adulthood unique? Through exploring developmental psychology literature, I learned that the focus of this life stage is best understood not as what it *is*, but as what it affords young people, through exploration, experimentation, reorganization of relationships, and self-discovery (Nelson, 2021). However, given the focus on self and future, a further question was raised for me: How, then, does emerging adulthood affect familial relationships and how do emerging adults make sense of these relationships? The answer to this question was complex, due to societal and cultural contexts influencing emerging adults’ relational needs. The initial literature I found was grounded in Western contexts that focus on individuation during emerging adulthood. Having realized the importance of exploring what self-discovery looks like in familial or community-orientated contexts, I then actively sought out literature outside of Western contexts. Lastly, I explored the question: How does a diagnosis of blood cancer add to the existing complexity of emerging adulthood and family-of-origin relationships? The literature I found that responded to this question led me closer to what is known, and unknown, about my topic of inquiry. Questioning allowed for my taken-for-granted assumptions to surface, as I often needed to revisit questions that I had already asked with a new outlook from subsequent literature I found. For example, once I understood the developmental psychology of emerging adulthood, I realized the importance of neurodevelopmental theory, which informs the future-orientated thinking and the relationship choices of emerging adults. This neurodevelopmental groundwork became important in my work to understand the disruption that a diagnosis of cancer serves to an emerging adults’ imagined future that is independent of their familial unit.

Evidently, a difficulty that arises with this dialogical nature of conducting a literature review is knowing when to stop searching for new literature. For me, this occurred when my search was no longer bringing up new knowledge, and I felt that I had fulsome answers to my questions at that point in time. My goal was not to accumulate a treasure chest of facts entailing every study ever done, but to start forming the horizon of the topic. The dialogical process of question and answer informed a new vantage point from which I understood my topic anew, with more depth, complexity, and fullness. As a doctoral student moving towards data collection, I recognize this vantage point informs my preunderstandings, or what Gadamer (1960/2004) referred to as prejudices, which will serve to shape my future engagement with participants, data collection, and data analysis. Furthermore, as Gadamer (1970/2007), drawing on Aristotle, stated “what we expect depends on how much insight we have into the context” (p. 93). The context that I established through my literature review will allow me to go beyond the bounds of the taken-for-granted discourse and understanding of my topic in healthcare lifeworlds. Research interviewing will allow for a *fusion of horizons*. That is not a literal “fusion” of two horizons into one, or reaching a consensus, but expanding understanding of the topic so it can be understood differently.

### **A Foundation for Understanding Differently**

My (Katherine Wong) thesis topic explores the experiences of children who are dying, or may die, due to serious illness through their artistic forms of expression. My interest in children’s experiences of having a serious illness developed over 10 years of clinical practice as a registered nurse in pediatric hospice and palliative care. Research and practice in pediatric palliative care are heavily informed by adult perspectives, parents or healthcare providers, of what children with serious illness experience (Ghirotto et al., 2008; Rahimzadeh et al., 2015). Examples of research that included children with serious illness as participants were virtually absent, with few exceptions (e.g., Bluebond-Langner, 1978; Sourkes, 1995). I began to question if the evidence-based nursing care that I had been delivering for the entirety of my career was potentially misinformed by implicit beliefs about children and their capacity for understanding complex topics and experiences.

As I came to this topic with nearly a decade of experience, I felt that my practical knowledge and insight into children’s experiences of serious illness, which I had developed through conversing with children in my care, would be valuable in the research process. As I was aiming to study a topic in an area where I had practical expertise, I approached my literature review with the hermeneutic concept of *prejudice* in mind. Gadamer (1960/2004) avoided the commonly understood negative connotations of prejudice by defining it as simply the preunderstanding that informs what we understand, which is neither negative nor positive. Prejudices provide one with the foundation for understanding but are subject to revision when we are presented with a new way of thinking about a topic (Gadamer, 1970/2007). My prejudices, informed by my practical experience, provided me with a unique insight into the topic of children’s experiences of serious illness from the standpoint of an adult caregiver.

Recognizing that the literature was lacking children’s voices, but having some insight into what children with serious illness may experience, I began to explore how I might conduct research with children in a way that positioned children as the experts in their own illness experiences.

Liben et al. (2014) identified several research barriers to including children with serious illnesses as participants, such as communication difficulties, children's understanding of death and dying, and the perception of vulnerability in children resulting in a reluctance to subject them to research during their illness experience. However, in my practice, I often noted that children knew more about their illness and imminent death than many adults realized. Our palliative care team often uses art to help children express themselves, usually in the form of art therapy, which allows children who have difficulties communicating verbally to make themselves understood in profound ways. I wondered if using art during data collection might aid in communication or establishing a shared understanding between the participant and researcher.

As my research addresses a significant gap in the literature, my literature review encompassed several related topics, rather than keywords, that would further establish my foundation for research. These topics included: adult palliative care, pediatric palliative care origins, child development theory, children's understanding of death, art therapy, and arts-based research. Neighbouring topics added depth to my inquiry and helped to explain why the research question had to be asked in the first place. I began by exploring what is known about children's understanding of death, with a critical eye to how those theories were established. I then sought to address some of the identified developmental hurdles of conducting research in pediatric palliative care with children.

Next, I searched for literature on communicating with children in a research interview, including methods that used arts-based research to elicit the perspectives of children. These studies helped to inform how I might conduct research *with* children, rather than *on* them, and included multidisciplinary approaches to research with children in social work, childhood anthropology, education, nursing and healthcare research, and psychology. Finally, I needed to establish what philosophical hermeneutics offers in addition to what arts-based research can achieve. I often noted that arts-based research with children lets the art speak for itself, rather than using their art as a provocation for interpretation. Hermeneutical aesthetics, as described by Gadamer (1986) and expanded on by contemporary hermeneutic philosophers, such as Professors Nicholas Davey, Theodore George, and James Risser, provided the philosophical foundation for the interpretation of art and the claim that art "can help to make visible aspects of our life in common" (George, 2020, p. 150). The hermeneutic concept of prejudice served as an important guide to building a foundation to understand differently, allowing me to utilize my expertise while remaining open to the topic and what would be revealed to me during the literature review.

### **Evaluating the Quality of Research Studies for Inclusion**

Each of the authors were asked during their candidacy exams to describe how they evaluated the quality of the research that was included in their literature reviews. The difficulty of describing how one evaluates the quality of literature worthy of inclusion is, in part, because neither Gadamer nor Ricoeur applied their philosophy to healthcare research. However, rather than this absence of direction bringing researchers to a standstill, we suggest that it is an opportunity for *play*, in the hermeneutic sense.

Though Gadamer articulated his notion of play in relation to the ontology of the work of art (Gadamer, 1960/2004), we would suggest that it can also be applied to reviewing literature for

research. To elaborate, the purpose of a literature review is not to copy and paste subject-matter into a cohesive written whole, but rather to allow the subject-matter, or what is at play between the literature and the researchers, to emerge. For example, in their literature review, Greenhalgh et al. (2017) used the guiding question: “Is this paper likely to add meaning to our emerging overview of the field?” Similarly, both Dhaliwal and Webber mentioned the use of questions to facilitate a dialogue with the literature on their topics, exemplifying the back-and-forth character of play to expand their horizon of understanding.

Thus, the meaning-value of literature, and thoroughness of a literature review, is not attributed to a detached examination of research studies that a search engine brings up. Rather, reviewing the literature hermeneutically involves tactful discernment, to generate a more complex picture of the topic that is situated in healthcare contexts. Thus, play provides flexibility, and as McCaffrey et al. (2022) stated, a “plurality of possibilities, influenced by practice context and project goals, without striving to impose any one formula” (p. 8). However, this does not free researchers from the responsibility to conduct a good literature review. McCaffrey et al. (2022) articulated that the common elements that make good hermeneutic research include *participatory conversations*, *reflective spaces*, *paying attention to alterity*, and *close-up views* of the subject matter. We offer that these elements could also be applied to the process of conducting thorough and rigorous literature reviews conducted hermeneutically.

Participatory conversations and reflective spaces encompass an exchange of perspectives and juxtaposition of differing opinions within the field (McCaffrey et al., 2022). This sometimes requires consultation and dialogue with experts, such as supervisors and supervisory committees, about topic areas relating to the research. It might also require exploring literature from disciplines outside of one’s own. Paying attention to alterity includes special attention to points of differences at different levels of influence (McCaffrey et al., 2022). For example, to better understand emerging adulthood, Dhaliwal explored culturally diverse experiences of emerging adults that challenged Western contexts of developmental theory. The point of difference between Western culture, which focuses on *independence* of individuals, and family-orientated cultures, which allows for *interdependence* of individuals, became a source of new understanding. When emerging adults are expected to individuate from their family of origin in the process of self-discovery, tension can arise in the context of a diagnosis of cancer when parents or siblings may necessarily have a more involved role. Emerging adulthood theory contextualized outside of Western culture allows for better understanding of emerging adults’ simultaneous desire for the presence of parents and siblings and control over their own lives in the context of a cancer diagnosis. Lastly, close-up views of the subject matter include focused and fine-detailed descriptions of literature that may offer points of difference or new ideas (McCaffrey et al., 2022). In hermeneutics, non-traditional literature, such as philosophy, religious works, books, etc. can be utilized to provide a close-up view of complex phenomena. For example, as a way of understanding the philosophical and historical contributions to how nurse-parent relationships are understood within healthcare, in her literature review, Webber offered a discussion about one’s relation to an *other*. Similarly, Wong focused on the usefulness of art therapy in understanding children’s perspectives of their health to make a case for using artistic expression to understand children’s own experiences of life limiting illness in research contexts.

When ascertaining the quality of literature and determining what literature to include in a review, we suggest asking questions such as: Does this help establish context for the topic? Does this help the researchers, or the readers, understand something new or a different perspective? Does this help provoke thinking differently? These questions, rooted in expanding the horizon of understanding and, at times, challenging prejudices, can help incorporate elements of a good literature review. Discerning what literature to include in a review also requires, in the spirit of *aletheia*, knowing when to conceal something, not so it is obscured, but so something else can be unconcealed. In other words, it requires knowing when to exclude literature that might be redundant so that novel, or more expansive, subject matter can be explored in a close-up view. An example we found useful in actualizing this idea is McCaffrey's (2012) doctoral dissertation. In his literature review, McCaffrey introduced Zen Buddhist sources and ideas that were widely disseminated and applied in Western societies since the 1960s and worked out their connection to nursing. Particularly, he discussed the notion of *interconnection* as shared between the Buddhist tradition and nursing theories on interrelationship. McCaffrey's close-up view on Buddhist concepts provided the context for his data analysis and allowed for a generative understanding of relational care in mental health contexts beyond what knowledge already existed about this topic.

### **Rigour and Validity**

Postpositivist appreciation for procedure has resulted in methods for literature reviews that are systematic and replicable, aiming to identify gaps in knowledge and critically appraise literature for inclusion. Such an approach to literature in hermeneutic research would be a significant departure from hermeneutics. Hermeneutics deemphasizes the importance of method and procedure as the cornerstones of knowledge generation (Gadamer, 1960/2004), favouring different concepts (e.g., the address of the topic, fusion of horizons, or prejudice) that are relevant to conducting literature reviews and hermeneutic research in a manner that is consistent with its philosophical underpinnings. Gadamer (1960/2004) was adamant that understanding occurs through language—in conversation with another person, with a work of art, or with a text. If understanding is realized through language, then all understanding is an act of interpretation (Zimmerman, 2015). Further, Gadamer (1960/2004) maintained that “understanding and interpretation are indissolubly bound together” (p. 400). Interpretation, however, is more than something that humans do; humans *are* interpretive beings (Gadamer, 1970/2007; Zimmerman, 2015), and the practice of interpretation extends to literature reviews. Interpretation is present in hermeneutic research from the formation of the research question to data analysis, and the interpretations of research consumers (Moules et al., 2015). This also means that replication in literature reviews conducted hermeneutically will likely be impossible, as the reviewer is interpreting the included texts within their own horizons, prejudices, and questions in mind. As Caputo (2018) stated, “*some interpretations are better than others*” (p. 13, italics in original). It is important to recognize that the researcher's interpretations of literature reviewed for hermeneutic research require rigorous development and justification. The examples of the literature review processes that have been presented in this paper reflect a diversity of approaches, concepts, and considerations for the topics we are studying. Further, to demonstrate rigour in our work, each of us detailed our literature review process.

We suggest that detailing the process of the literature review is important, as it provides context for the research and explains choices and discernments made, while also demonstrating the fit of hermeneutics to respond to the chosen research topic. Accordingly, we would like to offer that literature reviews conducted hermeneutically need to be *traceable*, rather than replicable or beholden to procedure. *Trace*, in its 14th Century etymological roots, can mean to “follow a course” or “make an outline,” or to “look for,” “follow,” or “pursue” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Reviews where actions and decisions are traceable can be defended and justified to demonstrate rigour, perhaps similar to an audit trail in qualitative analysis, while remaining true to the philosophical tenets of hermeneutics. We do not seek to provide a new method for conducting literature reviews hermeneutically, however, we do wish to highlight the importance of maintaining a thoughtful, traceable process during literature reviews that demonstrates accountability, integrity, and rigour on the part of hermeneutic researchers.

The absence of procedure or method underscores the importance of philosophical adherence to establish rigour. Applying hermeneutic philosophy to the literature review process enables researchers to explore what is currently understood of the topic, with critical attention that is aimed at understanding what is known, unknown, overlooked, and under acknowledged. Researchers can then know their way around a topic, in its postulations and complexities, to conduct research that helps to understand the topic in new ways. Adhering to hermeneutic concepts throughout the literature review process maintains the openness of one who is in dialogue with the text, willing to consider what the text is telling them, and noticing that which is questionable in the literature (Gadamer, 1986; Moules et al., 2015). Recognizing that topics come already saturated, already lived out, and already interpreted (Moules, 2002; Moules et al., 2015), a rigorous review will not result in detailing *everything* that is currently known about a topic. Rather, it is up to the researchers to discern if the literature reviewed is relevant to the topic of inquiry, to justify those decisions, and provide an explanation of what was done. Importantly, the review should provide the researchers with a solid foundation for understanding the topic *differently*, leading into data collection and analysis. A well-established background of the topic will provide the basis for new interpretations, reinterpretations, and recognition of difference or unfamiliarity during the data collection and analysis phases of the research.

Angen (2000) suggested that the substance of the inquiry, or the complexity of the topic, is important for the evaluation of interpretive research, which would extend to literature reviews that are conducted hermeneutically. Kvale (1995) suggested that external measures of credibility and rigour (i.e., established methods for certain types of literature reviews) are secondary to well-crafted research, where the results or collected literature are convincing and powerful by their own standing, thus carrying validation with them. We would offer that a rigorous literature review, which is conducted hermeneutically, is crafted in such a way that does justice to the complexity of the phenomenon, and includes its history, the researchers’ own understanding of the topic, a critical eye to any taken-for-granted contemporary views of the topic, and an invitation for further inquiry. In hermeneutic research, including literature reviews, there is an element of practical wisdom and discernment that develops with experience, also known as *phronesis* (Gadamer, 1970/2007; Moules et al., 2015). As Moules et al. (2015) stated, “when something is not guided by a strict methodological procedure, its strength and credibility lies in good scholarly judgement, in being citatious, and accountable” (p. 179). Returning to our suggestion that literature reviews conducted hermeneutically should aim to be traceable, we offer

that this traceability serves to demonstrate the strength of the researchers and accountability of the researchers to the topic.

### Conclusion

Conducting a literature review hermeneutically requires the active participation of researchers, thus no two literature reviews will follow an identical process. However, the absence of a standardized method does not free hermeneutic researchers of a sound, rigorous, and traceable literature review process. Hermeneutic researchers are “guided by, and tethered to, the topics [they] are investigating and, because different topics call for different approaches, the research may show as methodologically different for different studies” (Moules et al., 2015, p. 4). While some might argue that this could be difficult to accept, particularly within academic contexts where strict methodological procedures are highly valued, we would suggest that different approaches to literature reviews conducted hermeneutically reflect attention to the topic. Further, we also appreciate Gadamer’s (1970/2007) perspective that the mastery of procedure does not necessarily guarantee that a researcher will produce anything new. Accordingly, we have found that using different approaches to literature reviews offer opportunities for new perspectives and understanding about topics to be uncovered. If there is any strictness involved in the approach to conducting literature reviews hermeneutically, we offer that it is a strict adherence to ensuring that the topic has a chance to speak. To do so, researchers should aim to engage with the philosophical foundations of hermeneutics. As demonstrated in this paper, this may involve being attentive to the address of the topic, engaging with the fusion of horizons at play, and responding to the prejudices inherent within the topic. Literature reviews conducted hermeneutically are expansive—moving beyond the limitations of exact procedure to allow for different understandings about the topic to be heard.

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