

---

## Invited Paper:

Journal of Applied Hermeneutics  
ISSN: 1927-4416  
November 24, 2023  
©The Author(s) 2023  
DOI: 10.55016/ojs/jah.v2023i2023.78439

# The Hermeneutic Wager: Building Community in Pediatric Neuro-Oncology

**Richard B. Hovey, Angela C. Morck, & Marie Vigouroux**

## Abstract

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Hovey was contacted by the lead of a pan-Canadian working group on pediatric brain tumours (PBTWG). While all stakeholders (researchers, clinicians, regulators, patient advocates, ethicists, and industry experts) were highly motivated to address barriers through innovative strategies in collaboration, clinical research, regulation, and business models, advancement has been challenging on multiple levels. Hovey and his team were tasked to facilitate and successfully engage this diverse divisive group of stakeholders to achieve their goals. Inspired by Richard Kearney's anatheistic wager, the hermeneutic wager acts simultaneously as a team building and research approach, as it serves to gain insight into the perspectives of members of a purposeful community. Through its five conversations, namely imagination, humility, commitment, discernment, and hospitality, the hermeneutic wager elicits responses from the participants that are based on meaningful participation in a relational approach of community co-creation. We individually interviewed the PBTWG facilitators (5). With informed consent, our research team also recorded all five of the PBTWG work group meetings (20 participants from 6 stakeholder groups) and break-out room meetings and took notes which consist of rich and extensive narrative data. This data was analyzed alongside the individual PBTWG interviews. The audio and visual data collected via a secure Zoom platform was then transcribed verbatim and analyzed interpretively according to the applied philosophical hermeneutic tradition. Findings centered around six points: "The Work of Stories," "Changing Landscapes: Community / Communication not Consensus," "Let the Words Lead You," "Those Words Matter," "Metaphors as a Bridge to Understanding," and "A Road Map to be Inspired By." Through these findings, we contend that the hermeneutic wager is an invitation for conversation that builds a path to the generation of new and

---

## Corresponding Author:

Richard B. Hovey  
Faculty of Dental Medicine & Oral health  
Sciences, McGill University  
Email: richard.hovey@mcgill.ca

creative understandings that transcend previous ways of knowing. The efficacy of the hermeneutic wager resides in its ability to help build a community of people who work together through and across difference to arrive at a shared understanding and collective outcome.

## Keywords

Hermeneutic wager, hermeneutics, community-building, Kearney, qualitative research

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Hovey was contacted by the lead of a pan-Canadian working group on pediatric brain tumours (PBTWG). The group consisting of researchers, clinicians, regulators, patient advocates, ethicists, and industry experts was struggling to work together effectively across the seeming divides to advance the development and implementation of targeted therapies. Advancing research and treatment for rare pediatric diseases such as pediatric brain tumours is especially complex. The PBTWG was tasked with addressing the believed lack of progress for these rare tumour treatments. While all stakeholders in this area are highly motivated to address barriers through innovative strategies in collaboration, clinical research, regulation, and business models, advancement has been challenging on multiple levels (Tolwinski et al., unpublished).

Pediatric brain tumors are the leading cause of cancer-related death in children and youth under the age of 20. Current treatments are often ineffective, and in the case of the most aggressive forms of the disease, barely 10% of children and young adults survive three years after diagnosis. Not only are these treatments costly to the health care system, pharmaceutical companies, and governmental bodies, but they are also devastating to patients and their families (Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada, 2023). The PBTWG was endeavouring to develop constructive recommendations to affect meaningful, long-term, and sustainable changes for children with brain tumours in Canada and beyond. Hovey and his team were tasked to facilitate and successfully engage this diverse divisive group of stakeholders to achieve their goals. With Hovey's background in applied philosophical hermeneutics and team building, Kearney's (2010) atheistic wager was adapted into a practical approach to provide a philosophical-relational foundation from which a community can be built to explore sensitive, complex topics such as pediatric cancer on a national scale.

The hermeneutic wager works simultaneously as a team building and research approach inasmuch as it seeks to gain insight into the perspectives of people who are also part of a purposeful community. The researcher asks the participants to respond to the five hermeneutic wager reflections through conversation that elicit a unique response from the participants. As such, the research team learns from others who have different backgrounds, interests, and perspectives about a topic. This is novel because it is not about a specific research question but rather an open-ended invitation to explore their ways of understanding and knowing regarding a particular topic. This research offers insight into the ways of thinking and knowing of other perspectives which may not have been previously revealed or understood. Given that, for the most part, we read and engage in research which is in line with our encultured ways of knowing, this allows access and awareness of other perspectives outside of our day-to-day understanding. The hermeneutic wager as a research approach generates data both in real time for all the participants as well as for further analysis for a deeper engagement with the data.

Typically, this process would occur in person. The Covid-19 pandemic altered this ability and processes of the approach had to be changed. During the pandemic when in-person meetings became impossible, Hovey and his team facilitated the PBTWG via a series of Zoom meetings, prefacing them with the conversations of the hermeneutic wager (imagination, humility, commitment, discernment, and hospitality) to build a community. The informal consensus from the PBTWG was the Zoom version of the hermeneutic wager was highly efficacious in achieving the depth and significance of community to begin their important work together. However, there is a paucity of literature in this area, and little is known about how the hermeneutic wager works on a day-to-day functional level.

### **Background to the Hermeneutic Wager**

My (Hovey) introduction to the anatheistic wager began in 2011 at the Canadian Hermeneutic Institute when Professor Richard Kearney was the guest philosopher (Canadian Hermeneutic Institute, 2023). I listened intently to Professor Kearney as he masterfully described the five reflections / conversations of imagination, humour, commitment, discernment, and hospitality. I was particularly intrigued by his stories of working with divided groups of individuals such as his involvement in working for peace in Northern Ireland and in his newly launched Guestbook project (Guestbook Project, 2023). With my own background in working in diverse and often conflictual academic, healthcare, and research teams, I found myself drawn to his description of the five conversations. I began to imagine how I might re-interpret his words and ideas into an approach to help these diverse groups of people work together across often seemingly expansive divides. I wished to further move away from the current prevalent “business” or transactional models I was encountering and towards one that offered meaningful participation. Kearney’s (2010) work was just that - - a relational approach toward considering a creation of community where the topic was central.

Steeped in the work of Kearney (2010), the resultant hermeneutic wager is a reflective pragmatic process for researchers that endeavour to bring diverse groups of people together to work toward a common goal, outcome, or topic area. This approach invites openness, authenticity, and a focus on the relational aspects of working together while addressing various degrees of risk. However, our encultured ways of knowing and understanding one’s role may provide hidden barriers to interdisciplinary research, a privileging of certain kinds of research methods or one’s perceived status within the research team (Hovey & Craig, 2011). Within the hermeneutic wager, we offer that we co-develop a community of interested participants as a means of striving for inclusion (needing multiple perspectives), equality (a community consisting of a variety of people to complete a task) and diversity (all possible stakeholders are brought to the community to have a voice and engage in this relational process). Inspired by Kearney’s (2010) work, we offer five conversations as topics that are foundational to this relational process to co-create a community of research participants that is stronger, more creative, and has greater potential to understand complex health concerns. These reflective conversations consist of imagination, humility, commitment, discernment, and hospitality.

The intention of the *imagining* conversations is to begin to creatively explore potential options without restrictions, limitations, or only discipline-specific encultured thinking. Imagination is where ideas flourish, are discussed, and considered for their potential to exceed individual or siloed

understandings. The next conversation, *humility*, entails reflection, both personal and professional, to see beyond encultured perceptions, personal/professional identity, wants, and needs and move toward what has been imagined through the previous conversation. *Commitment* challenges participants to make explicit their intention to follow through with the process and is an essential condition for the building of highly effective community of researchers and contributors. *Discernment* refers to the reality of this community-building and research endeavour. This is the conversation where practical judgment and understandings are confronted, and risks are discussed and weighed out. *Hospitality* means welcoming the research community-building process with the participants respecting and honouring their diversity and an unconditional openness with all others with a desire to achieve something extraordinary (Hovey et al., 2016; Hovey, 2021, 2023).

### **The Hermeneutic Wager and the Pediatric Brain Tumour Working Group**

The application of the hermeneutic wager, for the purpose of assisting the PBTWG, began with a series of meetings between the two groups of facilitators (the PBTWG facilitators and those from Hovey's research team) to outline the background of the hermeneutic wager, its premise, and how it would be used in the upcoming five PBTWG meetings. The PBTWG meetings were subsequently facilitated by both groups jointly, with the PBTWG facilitators taking lead for group content, while Hovey's group attended to process aspects of the hermeneutic wager. Each meeting was focussed on one of the five conversations of the hermeneutic wager with guiding questions for the group participants. In the first group meeting, rather than a formal/professional introduction, participants were asked to tell their story in response to 1) what motivated them to be part of the PBTWG and 2) what brought them into the field of pediatric oncology and pediatric brain tumours. These questions then lead into the low-risk reflections/conversations of *imagination*. During the imagination phase, the working group participants were asked to think and dream big with the question: "Can you imagine what this project could look like without any limitations or barriers?" In this way, the conversation opened up beyond what would not work to envision what could work to enhance the advancement of pediatric brain tumour treatment. Imagination was tempered with personal reflections of humility in the second meeting. *Humility* offered to the group the need to listen to others even, or especially if, what was heard differed from their own held beliefs or understandings. When both imagination and humility were considered, the hope was that the conversation among all the PBTWG participants opened up new understandings and knowledge for consideration. Humility was a group and self-check-in about how each person participates in this process, how they listen and respond, and how thinking may be transformed on an individual and group level. This process again offered little risk in the wager but potentially opened up conversations that may not have occurred otherwise.

The third meeting was centred on *commitment*. PBTWG participants were asked to reflect upon and consider how committed, willing, and able they were to move forward with the process and information learned from the previous discussion. Commitment provoked participants' willingness to assume the risk associated with the team-building process and the focus of the work. The fourth meeting involved *discernment*. Discernment was a checking of the group that the process (commitment) was possible. This was the time where the group may decide to re-imagine the process, add to it, or remove aspects while deciding to carry on, or to reconsider the process. This conversation focused on the practicalities of the envisioned endeavours and asked the participants to consider if what they have been discussing makes sense and can it be operationalized. *Discernment*

challenges *imagination* as it recognizes that not all possibilities are equal, valid, or realistic. This discernment conversation tempers *commitment* with the reminder that some wagers are ill advised, impractical, or that some participants may not be ready for the changes to personal/professional selves that the work requires. Practical judgment and understandings were confronted, and risks were discussed and weighed in the discernment phase.

After discernment, the group moved to the final aspect of the hermeneutic wager - - that of *hospitality*. Hospitality asked the group members to consider if they were willing to accept the outcomes of the group even if they differ from their own held beliefs. Hospitality can also be understood as the relational foundation of the team. It asks members to be open to differences in ideas, beliefs, and working styles. Hospitality works to keep the process open and acknowledges that there will always be a need for ongoing and further conversations, research, practice, and engagement.

These five conversations cycled back and forth as new considerations, issues, success, or concerns arose. Thus, the hermeneutic wager should not be considered a linear or sequential structure but rather as five interconnected reflective conversations that serve to keep the process productive and moving. The above description is brief. For more details, please see Hovey et al. (2016) where the hermeneutic wager was used for interdisciplinary research team building.

## Research Process

### Purpose and Significance

The hermeneutic wager has not been researched to gain insight into how it works as a research approach and team-building processes that exist concurrently. Our intent was to examine the PBTWG's experiences with the hermeneutic wager to gain further understanding of how this powerful innovative approach operates at a personal, team, and research level. The significance of this understanding will allow the hermeneutic wager to be utilized across diverse groups of researchers, working groups, and topics as a potentially effective new qualitative research and team building approach.

### Methodological Approach

This research into the hermeneutic wager was guided by the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. In this context, Gadamerian hermeneutics was chosen because it specifically looks to uncover and extend our understandings of the often taken for granted, unexplainable, and incomprehensible human experience of community (Gadamer, 1996). The hermeneutic wager takes its roots in philosophical hermeneutics, whose work, as Gadamer stated, is to clarify concepts related to pre-understandings and preconceptions (Gadamer, 2004; Kearney, 2010 ). Hence, the intentionality of the research team becomes a component of the research process. In other words, the background and knowledge of the research team itself becomes a component of the research data. Applied philosophical hermeneutics is, in brief, a means to gain a deep understanding of a topic, human experience, or event. It does so through conversation with others, who can add other crucial perspectives and understanding to complex shared topics or experiences of interest (Moules et al., 2015 ). Thus, applied philosophical hermeneutics allowed a means to uncover the deep

meanings and understandings of how the hermeneutic wager influences and operates at a personal, team, and research level.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Applied philosophical hermeneutic research generates data through engaging in conversation with participants. The aim of such dialogue is to bring the topic forward, to enliven it, and extend our understanding of it. With this as the intent, applied philosophical hermeneutics is less concerned with the number of participants than with the selection of those who are able to speak to the topic and enrich our understanding of it (Moules et al., 2015). Thus, we individually interviewed the PBTWG facilitators (5) who had experienced the hermeneutic wager and were able to speak to how it influenced their work individually, as a team, and as a research methodology. With informed consent, our research team also recorded all five of the PBTWG work group meetings (20 participants from 6 stakeholder groups) and break out room meetings and took notes which consist of rich and extensive narrative data. These data were analyzed alongside the individual PBTWG interviews. The collected audio and visual data collected via a secure Zoom platform was then transcribed verbatim and analyzed interpretively according to the applied philosophical hermeneutic tradition (Moules et al., 2015).

### Interpretations

#### The Work of Stories

Stories animate human life; that is their work.

Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work *on* people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing.

(Frank, 2010, p. 3)

Rather than have the participants of the PBTWG introduce themselves in their professional capacities to one another, the lead facilitator asked the participants: “Please tell me the story of 1) how you became involved in the field of pediatric brain tumours and 2) what motivated you to be part of this working group.” The intent was to change the narrative from one which focuses on their professional designation and credentials to one of shared storytelling that offers the possibility of humanizing experiences and perspectives about the shared topic of pediatric neuro-oncology.

*I think especially the intro and the storytelling and lived experience was a really nice way to remind everyone that we are all here for the same goal. It's not just said as a mission statement with catchy words like the HR way. It was done in a way that is much more personal and meaningful. People went into pediatric oncology because of what they had seen and it created that personal connection to their profession and also therefore to all the people around the table who didn't go into pediatric oncology for the same reasons but all had a very personal connection to the topic or that profession. (Facilitator 5)*

What was intended was to humanize the discussions about pediatric brain tumour work by each participant sharing how they came to find themselves in this area. In doing so, each story found its

place in the overall narrative as relevant and valuable. It also shifted the focus from one's professional designation in the group to one that shared a vulnerability and created an openness.

*It started with - - tell me your story about how you got into this area. And they told really heartfelt stories about why they were there. And that opened up kind of level of vulnerability for all of them. (Facilitator 3)*

These stories setup the foundation for the way the PBTWG would function as a relational model. Each participant's background, role, and the value of their perspective was brought into the conversation and into the topic area. For one of the participants this sharing of stories allowed her to feel part of the group.

*It is an honour to be part of this group and to meet all of you. It was so incredibly wonderful to hear about all of your amazing stories and the journeys of how you all ended up here. (Participant 2)*

The intent was to set up a process of conversation across conflictual divides or misperceptions of each other's perspectives. The introduction to the website of Richard Kearney's Guestbook Project shares the view on storytelling as a means to promote peacebuilding.

We believe that exchanging stories is at the heart of conflict resolution. The key to mutual understanding and reconciliation between opposed people and peoples is communication, which is sometimes overlooked, but it still is a valid approach that provides a necessary supplement to the standard models of law, economics and politics. Narrative exchange calls for imagination, empathy and invention in emerging generations. If stories divide people, they can also be a powerful force of unity and mutual understanding. (Guestbook Project, 2023, para 1)

Complex situations, such as the Guestbook project describes, forwards communication and stories at the heart of meaningful reconciliation. Stories, while seemingly simple in their telling have a powerful directional pull towards creating paths to pragmatic and practical solutions.

*I was told the day before the first group meeting that it wouldn't be accepted. That it would be perceived as philosophical fluff. They (PBTWG) wanted something practical and pragmatic. They did not understand that these relatively short conversations and storytelling introduction actually set things up so everything else that followed became easier in the content of this complex situation (Facilitator 2)*

The introductory meetings between the facilitators included a voicing of trepidation about the often divisive nature of the interactions of involved stakeholder groups. Having interviewed many of the stakeholders prior to the creation of the working group, the facilitators had discovered that conflicting strong opinions and misconceptions of each other's work and how best to solve challenges prevailed. While not unexpected in such a large, diverse group of individuals on a national scale, it made for concern in planning and facilitating a working group that might yield positive and forward-moving outcomes. The introduction of the hermeneutic wager was met with equal uncertainty but a willingness to try its process.

## Changing Landscapes: Community / Communication not Consensus

The sharing of voices does not lead to community understood as mutuality.

Risser (1996-97, p. 90)

The hermeneutic wager is not striving for consensus. Although consensus can be achieved, the focus is on how participants, through stories and conversation, produce something together that meets the goals and objectives of the community.

*When they tell those stories at the beginning you can't help but be reminded oh yeah the stakes are huge. That brings passion, but it also brings a level of understanding that we are all in this together. And so that relates to collaboration and community. (Facilitator 3)*

The telling and sharing of stories as a bridge to community reminds everyone that they are all “in this” together. There is a recognition that the stakes for the children and their families in pediatric neuro-oncology and brain tumours are huge. Stories have the power to change the landscape and provide lessened barricades, silos, and egos.

*It completely changed the landscape of what they were used to when they were having a meeting. I think that it made it so that they were more themselves, fewer barricades, less ego. It brought down the ego quite a bit because they didn't know what they were doing. It makes you maybe more likely to participate in good faith. (Facilitator 5)*

This community was tasked with addressing the advancement of innovative strategies for this area. The sharing of stories began a cascade of genuine communication that allowed persons to hear and see each other in an altered landscape. This allowed participants to be brought together in the topic and to participate in a new and unknown process rather than barriers, gatekeeping, and egos keeping them separated.

*I think reminding people at the beginning of each session, and especially at the beginning of the first session, of these principles of openness and collegiality that we were hoping for, created a very positive space where people were expressing very conflicting opinions. (Facilitator 4)*

The relational process of the hermeneutic wager offered new and different perspectives to old conflictual relationships and allowed new understandings. This did not mean that they began to agree with one another but rather that they were enabled to hear each other and create a positive space of participation.

Participation is a strange word... participation is not taking parts, but in a way taking the whole. Everyone who participates in something does not take something away, so that others cannot have it. The opposite is true: by sharing, by our participating in the thing in which we are participating, we enrich them, they do not become smaller, but larger. (Gadamer 1984, p. 64)



This participation added to the whole of the topic area and the enrichment of the understanding and knowledge. It allowed for a changing of the conversation in tone but also in content. According to one of the participants:

*I want to say at the outset today that I attend a lot of these meetings and the last one I found to be both constructive and productive. And that this is not very often the case. (Participant 1)*

In Gadamerian terms, it enriched the meetings and made the understandings larger. There were not take-aways but an expansion of knowledge. It also speaks to the importance of sharing in conversation with persons who do not necessarily share your viewpoint or who you might not otherwise encounter. There is an opening in this space for communication across difference.

*We came away with the idea that we were never going to get complete consensus on how to develop new treatments for children, for pediatric patients... but that everyone shared the same goal... We actually got a lot of feedback telling us how valuable it was to have these conversations with people who they otherwise never would have encountered in their day-to-day work. It reinforced the importance of bringing together these differing groups that otherwise would have never encountered each other. That was something that seemed to us to be very important in terms of getting people out their individual silos. (Facilitator 4)*

The conversations of the hermeneutic wager assisted in developing a community where-in everyone involved had a role, a voice, and shared in a common goal. We accentuate that there is a common goal, not a common voice, perspective, or consensus. The participants do not all speak with the same voice but share a common interest in improving the treatment for children with brain tumours. Difference is important. This equates with Gadamer's underlying assumption that participation is not based on reproducing or maintaining sameness but rather on opening understanding, expanding, overturning, and transforming it through an encounter with differentiation or difference. In other words, revelatory expansions of understanding happen when the other does not think the same as I do, or when I no longer think the same about a person, idea, or text (Davey, 2006). Difference awakens us to the possibility of some new answer. It may cause negation of, or a challenge to, our held beliefs about a topic. It may also invoke curiosity to know more and to make our field of knowledge expand.

### **Let the Words Lead You**

Letting the words lead you was offered by one of the interviewed facilitators. This helped to identify the utility of the hermeneutic wager approach where the five words initiate and then lead participants toward meaningful reflective conversations.

*There is something very valuable in there. You have to give it time. Let the words lead you. Let it take you over a little bit. (Facilitator 1)*

Giving into the hermeneutic wager was necessary for the conversations to engage and “work” on the participants. In other words, sitting in the discomfort of a new and unfamiliar process requires

time. While valuable in retrospect there was some uncertainty that they would find themselves in a space of rehashing the same issues and not creating something constructive.

*I think my biggest concern was that you are just rehashing the same thing in every meeting. That it would get repetitive because people have their soap boxes or their things. People just want to talk about what's wrong and provide their critiques. It's so easy... I think there are ways in which in the hermeneutic wager framework helped us get to a more constructive place. (Facilitator 1)*

In deference to the biggest concern, the words of the five hermeneutic wager conversations brought the participants to a constructive place. This idea of building and construction was situated against the feared opposition of tearing something apart.

*I think there is something in that process, it's built into it, that gets it to something that is trying to construct something together as a group rather than just blah blah blah and rather than tearing something apart. (Facilitator 1)*

Letting the words lead you represents a process where all participate in the conversations prefaced by the five guiding words of the hermeneutic wager leading to the creation of a greater more expansive whole. The focus is not consensus, representation, or inclusion but on building something positive and moving somewhere together.

*The thing about the HW that helped us was thinking about how it's going to move through to get somewhere. To get somewhere at the end. Whereas focus group you talk about this and then this and then that, make sure everybody is represented and less on moving towards a goal moving towards developing something together. (Facilitator 1)*

This process may be abstract, as one facilitator outlined, and can create uncertainty. However, its application was viewed as helpful in shaping and guiding conversations and their subsequent work.

*For a very abstract approach it did have a lot of application value that I was initially I was unsure of. And it really, really helped to shape our conversations. (Facilitator 4)*

*It's a means of guiding conversations amongst groups of discordant stakeholders of participants. And I really didn't know what the alternative was for us... to kind of wing it ourselves. We knew that we were going to have these conversations that would get heated and we didn't know how we would kind of moderate the tone of those conversations. (Facilitator 4)*

The hermeneutic wager shaped and guided the conversations' content but also the tone of how participants interacted with one another. For one facilitator, this punctuated that for the participants and the facilitators alike, it was a journey together into the unknown. Or in the words of the Kearney (2010) - - a leap of faith together.

*People decided all together to go on that journey not really knowing where they were going to end up but just taking that leap of faith altogether. (Facilitator 5)*

The words lead the participants on an unknown journey. It required of them to allow the words to lead them through an uncertain abstract process and a willingness to engage together in the process.

### **Those Words Matter**

Language is not a supplement of understanding.  
Understanding and interpretation are always intertwined with each other.  
(Gadamer, 2001, p. 51)

One of the key elements of the hermeneutic wager was the introduction of humility at the beginning of the second meeting. The intent of the humility conversations was to offer the participants an opportunity to reflect on their behaviour within a group dynamic and the importance of listening to others, particularly if what was heard was different from their own understandings or beliefs. The words of the hermeneutic wager were introduced at the beginning of each session, but they were also called back to throughout the meeting as a guiding framework.

*Rather than just introducing the hermeneutic wager like at the beginning of every session we reminded people why we were using it. We called back to it. (Facilitator 3)*

The hermeneutic wager worked to establish a generalized way of being with each other that was respectful, open, and collegial. Nevertheless, it is not unexpected that these conversations brought out heated discussions. The stakeholders within these meetings were and are passionate about the work involved in changing the landscape of care for children with rare forms of brain tumours. The words seemed to form a reflective guide that kept the conversation on track and enabled the working group participants to have a voice while meaningfully participating in the discussion.

*I remember in almost every session there were instances where the conversation would start getting heated and then we would tie it back to what we had initially brought up at the start of the session and I do think that helped to kind of keep everyone on track and keep everyone level-headed. I do think it was very valuable. (Facilitator 4)*

The tie back of the hermeneutic wager words did not dampen the passion and commitment of the conversation but seems to have had a means to reinforce the need to be mindful and open to others' opinions across difference. The hermeneutic wager played its role to mediate these conversations to a more respectful and inclusive tone.

*There might be different approaches amongst all of our participants on how to meet that end goal but they were all working towards the same thing. That reinforced the importance of being open to new opinions, being open to new information outside of what they encounter in their day-to-day work. (Facilitator 4)*

The hermeneutic wager as a philosophical relational approach was observed to be valuable to open up the reception of new and different ideas.

*It gave us a way of articulating how important these ideas of openness, acceptance were that I never would have thought to apply to something as technical as pharmaceutical development for pediatric brain tumours. In retrospect, it seems very obvious...of course, of course you need people to be open and inviting of new approaches and new ideas because clearly what they are doing right now is not working because we don't have drugs for these patients.*

*People were so siloed within their fields, they were stuck working in this very narrow frame and pointing fingers. We didn't really know how to articulate what was needed. We were saying people need to be less siloed. But what does that look like? How do you encourage people to be less siloed (Facilitator 4)*

This resulted in the facilitators finding there was a breaking down of encultured silos and a creation of a more open and inviting conversational forum.

*I genuinely believe that it was critical for us in terms of pulling off this working group with all of these people all over Canada, all over the US and coming away with something that was actually useful. It was important to have this structure and this guidance because I can't imagine how much of a mess it would have been if we had tried to do it without this theoretical foundation to build on. (Facilitator 4)*

The words of the hermeneutic wager offered a new and different way of gathering information and guiding this group of diverse participants to remove themselves from their individual silos and work together in a more open and accepting community.

*I think it was in that moment some of those words can be intimidating for science people or non-experts, non-philosophers. I think humility, imagination, those can be intuitive for people and they hear those 5 words... ah - ok ok I get it. I think those words matter. And we got them in the introduction to those words and what they meant and how we would go forward. (Facilitator 3)*

It is of interest to acknowledge that the words and approach of the hermeneutic wager may cause a disruption or be perceived as intimidating. The words however matter. The words build a framework to move forward.

### **Metaphors as a Bridge to Understanding**

Experience is not really meaningful until it has found a home in language.  
(Madison, 1988, p. 165)

Metaphors are figures of speech which are intended to break the *rule of language* from its habitual contextual representation (Caputo, 2010). They do so by disrupting the topic of conversation in such a way as to help self and other re-interpret understandings. Metaphors provide opportunities to stop and reflect on their meaning within which we appreciate, think and act in relation to an issue of interest and other possible solutions (McCrickerd, 2000).

Metaphors replace one object or idea with another and in doing so, they reframe complex issues and help to provide meaning (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Several of the PBTWG facilitators used different metaphors to describe what the hermeneutic wager meant to them or how they saw it work within the group.

*It was like a string through each session that tied us back to this common goal for that particular discussion. (Facilitator 4)*

*I felt you need that kind of a lifeboat, life raft. And that's in a way that's also the framework too. It's giving you something to hold onto in terms of stability. (Facilitator 3)*

*I think it created a theme for conversation or maybe a lens for which to view the conversation with the content. It framed and gave people a lens through which to see. It helped people change their perspective, like their standpoint. (Facilitator 5)*

Each struggled to understand or describe the process and found a place to rest in metaphor. The language of strings, a lifeboat or life raft, and a framing lens may be different and unique to each facilitator but together signify a need to explain something through an alternate form of language. Metaphors invite reflection and can become a bridge to extend our understanding of something where words are not readily available to explain or interpret life challenges or new situations. This transfer of meaning is different but approximating it or comparable to help create an understanding of the participants interaction with the words and framework of the hermeneutic wager. The metaphors they chose helped them to consider that which is similar and that which is different while transferring meaning. This ontological significance of metaphor is relevant in moments when people struggle to find words to express a reality that seems to evade more literal language (Moules et al., 2004). According to Ricoeur, they are a “means by which our deepest insights into reality can and must be expressed” (1977, p. 35).

### **A Road Map to be Inspired By**

In the end...hermeneutics does not lead us back to safe shores and terra firma;  
it leaves us twisting slowly in the wind.  
It leaves us exposed and without grounds, exposed to the groundlessness of the mystery...  
this intractable mystery is the final difficulty that hermeneutics is bent on restoring.  
(Caputo, 1987, p. 267)

There is often a tendency to wish to convert processes like the hermeneutic wager into an exact reproducible model which become templated and then applied. There is a caution here in that it is the very engagement with the philosophy that is foundational to the hermeneutic wager that makes it unique. It is in having a good understanding of hermeneutics in general as a philosophy and research approach that makes it effective. This is well explained in the participant quote below, as not being a method but a road map to inspire.

*Caution about the urge to make this a method. These are not steps to be followed but a road map to be inspired from. (Facilitator 5)*

An attempt to restructure a relational process such as the hermeneutic wager and its grounding in philosophical hermeneutics into a structured step-by-step method was described by Hovey et al. (2022) as akin to the endeavour of nailing Jell-O to a tree: a somewhat easy task on first perusal but one fraught with complexity.

The approach might be methodological as we do need a hammer, a nail of suitable length, a bowl of somewhat firm Jell-O, and of course, a tree. However, the variables within this context are not the method, which is tried, true, and practical with the placement of the object against the tree with one hand (while pressing the nail inwards with that same hand into the object), followed by striking the nail repeatedly until the object becomes attached and suspended. After completing this, we might step back to assess the success of this task. Unfortunately, it is most likely that the Jell-O will now have slipped off the nail and tree, becoming bespattered on the ground. (Hovey et al., 2022, p. 2)

With the Jello-O now fallen to the ground, our perspective has changed both literally (looking downwards) and perceptually as our view of a task we thought somewhat easy and reproducible has shifted. In deference, the discomfort of unlearning and relearning through the open un-method of the hermeneutic wager may be taxing but is a preparation for the widening horizons of understanding. In a colloquial sense, the Jell-O metaphor helps to bridge our understanding of the way in which the hermeneutic wager needs to be used to maximize its potential. It provides an orientation to lean on or into.

*It gives you an orientation, not ground rules because that sounds too restrictive but a framework for getting productive respectful conversation going. It's effective. People have in-depth conversations about what you were hoping they would discuss. (Facilitator 3)*

This however is not a step-by-step neat method. One of the facilitators explored the disorderliness but productivity of the hermeneutic wager for messy topics such as pediatric cancer.

*I think that it's not as neat. There's not a perfect pin in it. As qualitative researchers it's never neat. Life isn't neat. If you try to make it too neat it's not nuanced. Nuanced, it's messy. In my mind you know cancer is messy. (Facilitator 3)*

The nuances and messiness of the hermeneutic wager resists methodological restraints. There is a reminder that the work of the hermeneutic wager efficacy is in the struggle to come to new places of understanding.

*I was always worried that they would scoff at the hermeneutic wager because it wasn't practical enough. But it was very practical. They also wanted to turn it into a method where everything was reduced to a much shorter version of it. They were trying to quantify a qualitative approach and it wouldn't work. Part of the work is in struggling to understand for new learning to occur. (Facilitator 2)*

This open un-method may require work, diligence, and attention to the hermeneutic wager process. Rather than a template, this concept of the un-method has been viewed as an exploratory and un-defined process.

*Exploratory and undefined outcomes are good words to explain the process. Not knowing what is going to come up is what actually makes it so that we are open to those things because we don't know what we are going to find. It's kind of like when you're on the beach and you are looking for specific kinds of rocks you don't really know what you're going to find but when you find something that you like you know and you put it in your pocket or your basket. If you went in specially looking for a red rock then you would be missing out on all of these other things that might actually have more value or be prettier.*

*That is the hermeneutic wager for me you never really know what you are going to find but you're for sure going to find some cool stuff. (Facilitator 5)*

This sense of being open to the value that might be found within the process of the hermeneutic wager is also echoed in the words of one of the participants at the first introductory sharing of personal stories.

*I believe there is an opportunity here for us to work together in a unique way such that no child in Canada falls behind. We have a real opportunity to make a difference for kids with brain cancer but also for kids with all forms of cancer. (Participant 3)*

It stands as a reminder of why this group was brought together over a messy topic and brought through an equally messy albeit value-filled process.

## Discussion

Through examination of the research data, we have explored six findings that stood out for us regarding the “work” of the hermeneutic wager. One of the initial interpretations was that of the significance of stories. During the initial working group meeting, the participants were asked to introduce themselves by way of the story of how they became connected to the area of pediatric neuro-oncology and brain cancer. In this sharing of stories, something significant happened. These stories, in their telling and listening, shifted the tone of the conversation to one that was inclusive, respectful, and different. It reminded participants that they were all in this together as a community focused on helping change treatment options for children with brain cancer. This initial change in landscape followed a continued noticeable change in how the participants listened to and engaged with one another as the meetings progressed. The participants found the five guiding words and language of the hermeneutic wager influenced moving the group to a more positive and productive space in their ensuing conversations. This contrasted with what was described as a rehashing or circular nature of gatekeeping, finger-pointing, and silos that had previously transpired. It was the belief of the facilitators that there is something inherently built into the framework of the hermeneutic wager and the five conversations that enabled these meetings to be positive and productive. Metaphors arose in the language of several of the facilitators as they attempted to express their interactions with the hermeneutic wager. While each metaphor was different, their use seemed to show a need to help make personal sense of what and how the hermeneutic wager was understood and utilized. The request and risks of positioning the hermeneutic wager as step-by-step method arose. For several of the facilitators, the need for the hermeneutic wager to remain an un-method was discussed. This was explored in examining its uniqueness and effectiveness as both a community builder and research approach as positioned in its connection to its philosophical roots.

Through these findings, we contend that the hermeneutic wager is an invitation for conversation in which the words and five reflective conversations build a path to the generation of new and creative understandings that transcend previous ways of knowing. This philosophical process may not result in a consensus but rather an agreement of that which constitutes the appropriate product for that given topic. The efficacy of the hermeneutic wager resides in its ability to help build a community of people who work together through and across difference to arrive at a shared understanding and collective outcome.

### Summary

The hermeneutic wager situated in the work of Kearney and grounded in philosophical hermeneutics is a pragmatic way to make explicit the need to first build quality relationships as an integral process for a research community's success while simultaneously forwarding its utilization as an efficacious research methodology. It has applications in multiple contexts, whether you bring a diverse divisive group of people together to co-create community, or research a particular topic. It offers an innovative opportunity to engage a topic and community in a flexible and novel manner.

Appreciating the complexity of community and research is particularly important when attempting to manage change during times such as Covid-19. We believe that knowledge translation and the development of impactful research are revealed and situated within human relationships and inherently encompass the development of a shared understanding of the topic being developed. Together, this ongoing process of shared understandings works to advance the quality of healthcare and expand knowledge such as that required for this community of pediatric neuro-oncology. We contend that the hermeneutic wager has the potential to provide innovative opportunities across multiple topics.

### References

- Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada (2023). *Facts about brain tumours*. Retrieved from <https://www.braintumour.ca/facing-a-brain-tumour/facts-about-brain-tumours>.
- Canadian Hermeneutic Institute (2023). Past institutes. Retrieved from <https://www.chian-nual.com/past-institutes>.
- Caputo, J.D. (1987). *Radical hermeneutics: Repetition, deconstruction, and the hermeneutic project*. Indiana University Press.
- Davey, N. (2006). *Unquiet understanding: Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics*. State University of New York Press.
- Frank, A.W. (2010). *Letting stories breathe. A Socio-narratology*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & D.G. Marshall, Trans.; 3rd ed.). Continuum. (Original work published 1960)



Gadamer, H.-G. (2001). *Gadamer in conversation: Reflections and commentary* (R.E. Palmer, Ed. & Trans). Yale University Press.

Gadamer, H.-G. (1996). *The enigma of health: The art of healing in a scientific age* (J. Gaiger & N. Walker, Trans.). Stanford University Press.

Gadamer, H.-G. (1984). The hermeneutics of suspicion. In G. Shapiro & A. Sica (Eds.) *Hermeneutics: Questions and prospects* (pp. 54-65). University of Massachusetts Press.

Guestbook Project (2023). We are Guestbook project. Retrieved from <http://guestbookproject.org/who-we-are>.

Hovey, R.B. (2023). Encountering chemotherapy 2.0. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 195(30), E1014-E1015. <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.230445>

Hovey, R.B. (2021). Experiencing cancer during a pandemic: Reflections, perspectives and wagers with a leap of faith and belief. *Ars Medica*, 16(1), special issue: covid 19. <https://ars-medica.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1477>

Hovey, R.B., Vigouroux, M., Noushi, N., Pavate, V., & Amja, K. (2002). Applied philosophical hermeneutic research: The unmethod. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21(1), 1–9. DOI: 10.1177/16094069221101237

Hovey, R.B., Rodriguez, C., Jordan, S., & Morek, A. (2016). Synergistic research in medical education: Some philosophical reflections. *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*. <https://doi.org/10.11575/JAH.V0I0.53285>

Hovey, R., Craig, R. (2011). Understanding the relational aspects of learning with, from, and about the other: Learning with, from, and about the other. *Nursing Philosophy*, 12(4), 262–70. <https://10.1111/j.1466-769X.2011.00491.x>

Kearney, R. (2010). *Anatheism: Returning to god after god*. Columbia University Press.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (2003). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.

Madison, G.B. (1988). *The hermeneutics of postmodernity: Figures and themes*. Indiana University Press.

McCrickerd, J. (2000). Metaphors, models and organizational ethics in health care. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 26(5), 340–345. <https://10.1136/jme.26.5.340>

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

Moules, N.J., Simonson, K., Prins, M., Angus, P., & Bell, J.M. (2004). Making room for grief: Walking backwards and living forward. *Nursing Inquiry*, 11(2), 99-107.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1800.2004.00204.x>

Ricoeur, P. (1977). *The rule of metaphor* (R. Czerny, Trans.). University of Buffalo Press.

Risser, J. (1996-1997). Philosophical hermeneutics and the question of community. *Existentia*, 5-7(1-4), 89-100.

Tolwinski, K., Chiappetta, M., & Fishman, J.R.(unpublished). *Obstacles and opportunities to innovation in pediatric oncology: A collaborative community approach to solving system-level problems. A White paper.*

### **Acknowledgements**

We wish to extend our sincere gratitude to Professor Richard Kearney. Without his 2010 work on the anatheistic wager this current work would not be possible.

### **Funding**

This research was made possible with funding from the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada New Frontiers in Research Fund – Rapid Response.