Hermeneutics and the Project for a Human Science

The hallmark of the “linguistic revolution” of the twentieth century, from Saussure and Wittgenstein to contemporary literary theory, is the recognition that meaning is not simply something “expressed” or “reflected” in language: it is actually produced by it.

Eagleton, 1983, p. 60

If we are to rethink the use of the interview as a tool in qualitative research, we must ask some fundamental questions. What does it mean to understand what someone says? What does it mean to understand a text? What is the “meaning” of a text? What is the relationship between a text and its author’s subjective experience? The coding approach to analysis assumes that the answers to these questions can be found in the conduit metaphor for language. This metaphor implies that words or short phrases “represent” objects and events, that experience is “put into” words, that to understand is to “unpack” this content from the form, and that this “meaning” can be repackaged in language that avoids indexicality. We have seen how unsatisfactory these answers are.

But these answers are not the only ones possible. These questions have been asked for hundreds of years, and a variety of answers have been proposed. For 200 years, they have been topics of scholarly debate in philosophy, literary theory, and religion, in the field known as hermeneutics. Ironically, research with qualitative materials today more closely resembles the way people thought about these matters in the 18th century than it does contemporary views. The objective study of subjectivity has much in common with what is known as “Romanticist” hermeneutics. Yet the Romanticist view of interpretation, although very influential in the 1700s and for a considerable period afterward, searched for something unreachable. It required an endless circle of interpretation, or empathic leaps of identification with an author, or the appeal to a metaphysical notion of a universal life-force unfolding toward an objective end point.

The belief that there can be an objective science of subjectivity can be traced back to Wilhelm Dilthey, who in the 19th century made one of the earliest attempts to define a human science distinct from the natural sciences. His
Geisteswissenschaften (science of the mind or soul) had the two central elements that we can see today in the standard practice of qualitative research. It was to be a reconstruction of the subjectivity underlying or expressed in a text or other artifact, and it was to accomplish this reconstruction in an objective manner. To see both how this project arose and how it crashed, we need to learn a little about the history of hermeneutics and in particular the work not only of Dilthey but of Schleiermacher before him and Gadamer after him.

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation, named for Hermes, messenger of the Greek gods and interpreter of their messages for confused mortals. The Romans called him Mercury. Aristotle titled one of his books De hermeneúia [On Interpretation], but explicit reflection on the character of interpretation blossomed in the 17th century when problems were encountered interpreting the Bible and other ancient texts. As the medieval epoch ended, these texts were now far from the circumstances of their original production, and understanding “the word of God” was becoming increasingly difficult. Hermeneutics became the term for the systematic study and interpretation of these religious texts. But in time it expanded to deal also with secular texts, cultural phenomena, and indeed all forms of human action (Ferraris, 1988/1996; Palmer, 1969). From its starting point in biblical exegesis, hermeneutics has become seen by some as a strong candidate to be the unifying basis for the social sciences and even for a new conceptualization of what it is to be human. There have also been attacks on hermeneutics from both the traditional empirical-analytic side and postmodernists (as we will see in Part III). But we can’t understand their objections without first examining what they are objecting to (see Ormiston & Schrift, 1990a, 1990b). Hermeneutics has certainly been at the forefront of a 20th-century revolution in our understanding of language. Literary critic Terry Eagleton pointed to the key element in this revolution: “the recognition that meaning is not simply something ‘expressed’ or ‘reflected’ in language: it is actually produced by it” (Eagleton, 1983, p. 60).

RECONSTRUCTING THE AUTHOR’S INTENTION: FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER

We begin with Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who, although he was a Protestant theologian, was one of the first people to appreciate the need for a secular “general” or “universalized” hermeneutics, a methodology that would deal with the interpretation of all types of discourse – religious, legal, and literary – both written and spoken. Schleiermacher envisioned this general hermeneutics as a systematic, lawful approach to textual interpretation, based on an analysis of the processes of human understanding. After all, he reasoned, the kinds of questions and issues that arise when we are reading a text also exist in everyday conversation or when we are listening to someone making a
speech. He wrote that “the artfully correct exposition has no other goal than that which we have in hearing every common spoken discourse” (Schleiermacher, 1819/1990, p. 92). Hermeneutics, as Schleiermacher intended to define it, would systematically employ the skills of interpretation that operate within all occasions of understanding. This was the first attempt to define hermeneutics as the study of interpretation in general, outside the bounds of specific disciplines such as law, theology, or aesthetics. It was the first time hermeneutics was seen as providing a methodological grounding for the humanities and social inquiry. “Hermeneutics as the art of understanding does not yet exist in general, only various specialized hermeneutics exist. . . . [Hermeneutics is] the art of relating discourse [Reden] and understanding [Verstehen]” (Schleiermacher, 1819/1990, pp. 85–86).

What was needed to build such a hermeneutics was an exploration of the conditions for understanding in general. Just like many qualitative researchers today, Schleiermacher considered speech and writing to be an expression of the individual’s thoughts and feelings – the external, objective manifestation of something private, inner, and subjective. He saw discourse as an activity in which the author’s talent is a creative force that gives shape to the plastic, flexible medium of language. Just as a potter has the form of the pot in mind when she places her hands on a piece of clay, a speaker shapes language to give expression to his original thoughts. “The author sets a verbal object in motion as communication” (p. 96). This vision of the author as an inspired genius, the source of personal acts of creativity, was typical of 18th-century Romanticism: artists were believed to have godlike powers. Schleiermacher was unusual for his time in seeing this creative production at work everywhere, in everyday conversation and not only in classical texts.

Discourse, then, has twin origins: the author’s personal creativity and the public medium of language. Thought without language would lack clear form; language without thought would have nothing to say. Understanding, in Schleiermacher’s view, is the attempt to recapture or reconstruct the inner creative process, to grasp the author’s thoughts. “[E]very act of understanding is the obverse of an act of discourse, in that one must come to grasp the thought which was at the base of the discourse” (Schleiermacher, 1819/1990, p. 87). Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation that will accomplish this reconstruction.

These two components of discourse – language and thought – provide its “objective” and “subjective” elements. The former is the relationship between discourse and the language as a whole, the latter its relation to the mind of the author. “[E]very discourse has a two-part reference, to the whole language and to the entire thought of its creator” (Schleiermacher, 1810/1990, p. 64). Consequently, although the goal of understanding is to reconstruct the author’s inner creative processes, this cannot be achieved without understanding the language. Understanding involves “two elements – understanding the speech as
it derives from the language and as it derives from the mind of the speaker” (Schleiermacher, 1819/1990, p. 86). “One cannot understand something spoken without having the most general knowledge of the language, and at the same time, an understanding of what is personally intended and uniquely expressed” (Schleiermacher, 1810/1990, p. 64).

And so the art of hermeneutics involves two dimensions, corresponding to these two components. Schleiermacher (see Table 4.1) called them “grammatical interpretation” and “psychological interpretation.” They interrelate and are of equal importance:

Both stand completely equal, and one could only with injustice claim that the grammatical interpretation is the inferior and the psychological superior. (1) The psychological is the superior only if one views language as the means by which the individual communicates his thoughts; the grammatical is then merely a cleaning away of temporary difficulties. (2) The grammatical is the superior if one views language as stipulating the thinking of all individuals and the individual’s discourse only as a locus at which the language manifests itself. (3) Only by means of such a reciprocity could one find both to be completely similar. (Schleiermacher, 1819/1990, p. 87)

Grammatical interpretation begins with the fact that in order to understand discourse one must know the language, with its grammar, components and rules, metaphors, and turns of phrase. When we express our personal thoughts and feelings in verbal form, the product is both enabled by and constrained by language. The “objective reconstruction” by means of grammatical interpretation “considers how the discourse behaves in the totality of the language, and considers a text’s self-contained knowledge as a product of the language” (p. 93). Here “one seeks to understand a work as a characteristic type, viewing the work, in other words, in light of others like it” (p. 98). Schleiermacher
believed that the whole of literature has significance for a single work. He recommended that “[o]ne must attempt to become the general reader for whom the work was intended, in order to understand allusions and to catch the precise drift of similes” (Schleiermacher, 1810/1990, p. 59). One needs to know not just a single text but all of the author’s writing. One needs to know the vocabulary and syntax of the author’s time and place.

The process of “psychological interpretation,” on the other hand, studies the links between discourse and its author’s subjectivity, experience, and life. It tries to explicate what has been uniquely expressed. Psychological interpretation involves what Schleiermacher called “subjective reconstruction,” which seeks “to understand the discourse just as well and even better than its creator. Since we have no unmediated knowledge of that which is within him, we must first seek to become conscious of much which he could have remained unconscious of, unless he had become self-reflectingly his own reader” (Schleiermacher, 1819/1990, p. 93).

Schleiermacher did not think that we can achieve understanding either automatically or effortlessly. Previous theorists of hermeneutics had considered misunderstanding to be merely an occasional problem, so that explicit work at interpretation is needed only rarely. Schleiermacher considered misunderstanding to be the norm, and he believed that we must work constantly to overcome it. “[M]isunderstanding follows automatically and understanding must be desired and sought at every point” (cited in Gadamer, 1960/1986, p. 163). Indeed, he defined hermeneutics as “the act of avoiding misunderstanding.” He was well aware, for example, that we encounter texts in circumstances very different from those in which they were produced, and we are not the people to whom they were originally addressed. To overcome these barriers to understanding, the interpreter needs to discover how the author related to the original audience: “One must keep in mind that what was written was often written in a different day and age from the one in which the interpreter lives; it is the primary task of interpretation not to understand an ancient text in view of modern thinking, but to rediscover the original relationship between the writer and his audience” (Schleiermacher, 1819/1990, pp. 89–90).

Consequently interpretation usually involves considerable work. Because one needs to know the author’s inner and outer lives, “the vocabulary and the history of the period,” and also read “all of an author’s works” (Schleiermacher, 1819/1990, p. 94), the task of interpretation is certainly arduous. Schleiermacher acknowledged that there is “an apparent circle” to all this information, “so that every extraordinary thing can only be understood in the context of the general of which it is a part, and vice versa” (p. 94). Indeed, “Understanding appears to go in endless circles, for a preliminary understanding of even the individuals themselves comes from a general knowledge of the language” (p. 95) (see Box 4.1). Put this way, the task seems endless. But Schleiermacher dodged the question of how to bring interpretation to a successful conclusion:
Posed in this manner, the task is an infinite one, because there is an infinity of the past and the future that we wish to see in the moment of discourse. . . . However, the decision on how far one wishes to pursue an approach must be, in any case, determined practically, and actually is a question for a specialized hermeneutics and not for a general one. (Schleiermacher, 1819/1990, pp. 94–95)

The difficulty of actually achieving the goal of reconstructing an author’s inner creativity becomes even more apparent when we dig deeper into what Schleiermacher believed was required. Both the objective and the subjective components of interpretation involve “two methods, the divinatory and the comparative” (Schleiermacher, 1819/1990, p. 98). The comparative moment is uncontroversial; it involves comparing the discourse with other examples from the same author and from others: “one seeks to understand a work as a characteristic type, viewing the work, in other words, in light of others like it” (p. 98). But because interpretation seeks to grasp the author’s unique, individual spark of creativity, it also requires creativity on the part of the interpreter, and

---

**Box 4.1. The Hermeneutic Circle**

Although Schleiermacher’s conception of hermeneutics seemed to lead to an endless cycle of interpretation, it also involved a more benevolent circularity. Schleiermacher drew on a long-standing notion of the hermeneutic circle.

There are several related conceptions of the hermeneutic circle. One is that understanding a text as a whole requires considering its individual parts, but at the same time understanding each part requires a sense of the whole. This important notion of the mutual conditioning of part and whole is found in every formulation of hermeneutics. A circular relationship can also be said to exist between a text and its context, and more broadly between the text and the culture and historical tradition in which it is encountered. The relationship between reader and text is also a hermeneutic circle, a dialogue between present and past that never reaches a final conclusion.

Heidegger (1927/1962) proposed that a hermeneutic circle operates between understanding and interpretation. Understanding is the tacit, pre-reflective comprehension one has of a text or a situation. Interpretation is the “working out,” that is to say, the articulation, of this understanding. In the process of articulating understanding, inconsistencies and confusion become evident, so interpretation can lead to a modified understanding. This hermeneutic circle is a dynamic relationship between the person and the world; humans are fundamentally embedded in the world and we can only understand ourselves in terms of our surroundings. But equally, the world only has sense in terms of our human concerns and cares.

Heidegger (1927/1962) proposed that a hermeneutic circle operates between understanding and interpretation. Understanding is the tacit, pre-reflective comprehension one has of a text or a situation. Interpretation is the “working out,” that is to say, the articulation, of this understanding. In the process of articulating understanding, inconsistencies and confusion become evident, so interpretation can lead to a modified understanding. This hermeneutic circle is a dynamic relationship between the person and the world; humans are fundamentally embedded in the world and we can only understand ourselves in terms of our surroundings. But equally, the world only has sense in terms of our human concerns and cares.

Heidegger (1927/1962) proposed that a hermeneutic circle operates between understanding and interpretation. Understanding is the tacit, pre-reflective comprehension one has of a text or a situation. Interpretation is the “working out,” that is to say, the articulation, of this understanding. In the process of articulating understanding, inconsistencies and confusion become evident, so interpretation can lead to a modified understanding. This hermeneutic circle is a dynamic relationship between the person and the world; humans are fundamentally embedded in the world and we can only understand ourselves in terms of our surroundings. But equally, the world only has sense in terms of our human concerns and cares.

Heidegger (1927/1962) proposed that a hermeneutic circle operates between understanding and interpretation. Understanding is the tacit, pre-reflective comprehension one has of a text or a situation. Interpretation is the “working out,” that is to say, the articulation, of this understanding. In the process of articulating understanding, inconsistencies and confusion become evident, so interpretation can lead to a modified understanding. This hermeneutic circle is a dynamic relationship between the person and the world; humans are fundamentally embedded in the world and we can only understand ourselves in terms of our surroundings. But equally, the world only has sense in terms of our human concerns and cares.

---
this is what Schleiermacher called the divinatory moment. Because all discourse is the expression of its author’s thinking, and individual creative thought is a free construction, unconstrained by rules and norms, understanding and interpreting must be equally creative and unconstrained. “Using the divinatory [method], one seeks to understand the writer intimately to the point that one transforms oneself into the other” (p. 98). This is “the feminine force in the knowledge of human nature” (p. 98), and it requires an empathic act: “An important prerequisite for interpretation is that one must be willing to leave one’s own consciousness [Gesinnung] and to enter the author’s” (Schleiermacher, 1810/1990, p. 58). “By combining the objective and subjective elements one projects oneself into the author” (p. 81). For Schleiermacher, the goal of interpretation was not only to understand a text better than its author had but to know the author better than the author did. This projection into the mind of the author was possible, Schleiermacher believed, because there is a preexisting connection among all people: “Everyone carries a little bit of everyone else within himself, so that divinatio is stimulated by comparison with oneself” (cited in Gadamer, 1960/1986, p. 166).

In several ways, Schleiermacher’s views resemble those of contemporary qualitative researchers. His view that discourse is an expression of the author’s inner processes resembles the assumption that what is said in an interview is an expression of the interviewee’s thoughts and feelings. His belief that interpretation reconstructs this subjectivity parallels the overall aim of much analysis of qualitative material.

But in other respects Schleiermacher’s thinking was much more sophisticated. He recognized that understanding requires careful work of interpretation and, equally important, that interpretation requires detailed attention to language. He would never have studied a single sample of discourse. He would never have tried to understand an author by looking only at what is common to a selection of texts or studying only what is common to several authors. Schleiermacher’s insistence that we must study the structure of the language in which a text is written is undoubtedly good advice. But the bottom line is that his goal for the interpretation of a text, to know the author “better than he knew himself,” was impossible to achieve.

RECONSTRUCTING A SHARED FORM OF LIFE: WILHELM DILTHEY

Schleiermacher had a powerful influence on a better-known scholar, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911). Like Schleiermacher (of whom he wrote a biography), Dilthey saw hermeneutics as a general methodology. But he broadened the scope of its application: in Dilthey’s view, not only written texts and discourse but also cultural events and artifacts call for interpretation. Hermeneutics is the “methodology of the understanding of recorded expressions” (Dilthey,
As a systematic theory of interpretation, it is “an essential component in the foundation of the human studies themselves” (p. 114). Dilthey has been an inspiration for many qualitative researchers.

Dilthey believed that the humanities and social sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) are equal in status to the natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften) but are distinct and autonomous (see Table 4.2). He was opposed to any program for a “unified science.” Dilthey considered these human sciences to be founded on everyday understanding and what he called “lived experience” (Erlebnis). They have their own logic and method. Whereas the natural sciences seek explanation (eklaren), usually in terms of causal connections, the human sciences, as Dilthey conceived of them, offer something quite different: understanding (verstehen). The natural sciences can offer only reductionist and mechanistic analyses when they are applied to human phenomena, Dilthey argued. He pointed out that when we try to understand society, culture, history, art, and literature, we are part of these phenomena. We are already involved in the human world. This direct access should facilitate our inquiry, if we know how to make use of it.

Like Schleiermacher, Dilthey based his conception of hermeneutics on an analysis of understanding. “Action everywhere presupposes our understanding of other people,” he wrote (Dilthey 1964/1990, p. 101). Understanding is a process we draw on not just with discourse and texts but with “the babblings of children ... stones and marble, musical notes, gestures, words and letters ... actions, economic decrees and constitutions” (p. 102). In all these, “the same human spirit addresses us and demands interpretation.” And in every case, in Dilthey’s view, we use the same process of understanding, “determined by common conditions and epistemological instruments ... unified in its essential features” (p. 102).

The key question was whether the basis of this understanding could be articulated systematically and whether its validity could be established to a point where we would feel comfortable and confident calling interpretation a science. How do we go from practical understanding to a scientific knowledge of discourse and artifacts? Dilthey agreed with Schleiermacher that: “All exegesis of written works is only the systematic working out of that general process of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Natural Science (Naturwissenschaften)</th>
<th>Human Science (Geisteswissenschaften)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provides explanation (Eklaren)</td>
<td>Provides understanding (Verstehen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitting observed facts under general causal laws</td>
<td>Empathic attunement with another person’s experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study of nature</td>
<td>Study of mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires study of the regularities of nature</td>
<td>Requires interpretation of the expressions of mind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Understanding which stretches throughout our lives and is exercised upon every type of speech or writing. The analysis of Understanding is therefore the groundwork for the codification of exegesis” (Dilthey, 1964/1990, p. 112).

Dilthey considered this process of understanding to be essentially historical. Our lived experience is always temporal, shaped by the context of the past and by the horizon of the future. Past and future form a structural unity, a temporal setting for our experience of the present. Dilthey proposed that our experience, always concrete and historical, is the basis for all understanding. As we shall see in Chapter 7, the philosopher Immanuel Kant had made the hugely influential proposal that the conditions for scientific knowledge are provided by innate and universal categories or concepts. Dilthey insisted that lived experience is made up not of static and atemporal cognitive categories, such as those Kant described, but of meaningful unities in which emotion and willing mingle with knowing: “That which in the stream of time forms a unity in the present because it has a unitary meaning is the smallest entity which we can designate as an experience” (Dilthey cited in Palmer, 1969, p. 107).

Lived experience is a direct, immediate, prereflective contact with life, an act of perceiving in which one is unified with the object one understands: “[T]he experience does not stand like an object over against its experiencer, but rather its very existence for me is undifferentiated from the whatness which is present for me in it” (Dilthey cited in Palmer, 1969, p. 109).

Lived experience, then, is a kind of understanding that is prior to any separation between subject and object, between person and world. It contains within it the temporality of living and of life itself. Dilthey considered the basis for a science of human phenomena to be reflection on lived experience and description of the structural relationships that are implicit in it. Such a human science would itself be historical, building on the fact that we understand the present in terms of the past and the future. It would grasp the ways in which discourse, texts, artifacts, and people are products of history. Our historicality means that we understand ourselves indirectly through “objectification,” through cultural artifacts (both our own and those of others) that are scattered through time. Humans have, in Dilthey’s view, no fixed and ahistorical essence. We make ourselves in history. “The totality of man’s nature is only history” (Dilthey, 1914/1960, p. 166). “The type ‘man’ dissolves and changes in the process of history” (p. 6). We humans define ourselves in history, and we cannot escape from history. It is fair to say that “Dilthey gave the real impetus to the modern interest in historicality” (Palmer, 1969, p. 117), an interest that we will explore further in Part III: “[M]an is the ‘hermeneutical animal,’ who understands himself in terms of interpreting a heritage and shared world bequeathed him from the past, a heritage constantly present and active in all his actions and decisions. In historicality, modern hermeneutics finds its theoretical foundations” (p. 118).

Like Schleiermacher, Dilthey viewed the objects of the human sciences as “expressions of inner life.” But he considered Schleiermacher’s conception of
understanding as a contact between subjectivities – the mind of the author and the mind of the interpreter – to be too limited. Understanding is not merely a contact between individual minds or a reconstruction of an author’s mental state but a reconstruction of the historical process that has shaped a cultural product. To Dilthey there is an inner creativity to life itself. To interpret is to fulfill the highest needs of this creative process. This unified and creative power, unconscious of its own shaping force, is seen as receiving the first impulses towards the creation of the work and as forming them. . . . Such a power is individualized to the very fingertips, to the separate words themselves. Its highest expression is the outer and inner form of the literary work. And now this work carries an insatiable need to complete its own individuality through contemplation by other individualities. Understanding and interpretation are thus instinct and active in life itself, and they reach their fulfillment in the systematic exegesis of vital works interanimated in the spirit of their creator. (Dilthey, 1964/1990, pp. 110–111)

Interpretation is not simply penetrating an individual’s mind but contact with a manifestation of the life process. Dilthey believed that what makes it possible for an interpreter to understand a cultural work is the fact that “both have been formed upon the substratum of a general human nature” (p. 112), a nature both formed by and informing the process of history, and indeed the unfolding of life itself.

What is expressed in a work of art, then, is not an idiosyncratic individual subjectivity but the life that is common to all of us. When individuals differ, Dilthey proposed, this is not a truly qualitative difference but a difference in their degree of development. When an interpreter “tentatively projects his own sense of life into another historical milieu,” he is able “to strengthen and emphasize certain spiritual processes in himself and to minimize others, thus making possible within himself a re-experiencing of an alien life form” (Dilthey, 1964/1990, p. 112). Understanding is not merely a meeting of minds but a historical event. Understanding is a rediscovery of the I in the Thou: the mind rediscovers itself at ever higher levels of complex involvement: this identity of the mind in the I and the Thou, in every subject of a community, in every system of a culture and finally, in the totality of mind and universal history, makes successful cooperation between different processes in the human studies possible. (Dilthey cited in Ormiston & Schrift, 1990a, p. 15)

So hermeneutics, for Dilthey, is the theory of how life discloses and expresses itself in cultural works (Palmer, 1969, p. 114). Interpretation aims to go beyond subjectivity to the “thought-constituting work” of life itself. For Dilthey, understanding is not a purely cognitive matter but life grasping life in and through a full and rich contact that escapes rational theorizing.
How adequate is this romantic conception of “life” as something we all share, regardless of our cultural and historical differences? Although life is undoubtedly a universal and unitary process, Dilthey glossed over the fact that there are important differences in people’s ways of life. The notion that there is a universal process of which all humans and all cultures are part was, for Dilthey, the only way to guarantee that an objective interpretation could ever be reached, and this was something he cared about deeply (Bauman, 1981). Although Dilthey insisted that the human sciences are distinct from the natural sciences, he believed that they have the same goal: objective knowledge about their respective domains. He insisted that the human sciences, too, must provide objective knowledge, knowledge that is and remains true for all times and places. He recognized that the objects of inquiry in the human sciences are historical phenomena, but he could not fully accept the implications of his own belief that the inquirer, the interpreter, is also always historically situated. It is ironic that someone who emphasized the historical character of our experience wanted to provide interpretations that would transcend history (but cf. Harrington, 1999). If we are thoroughly involved in history, it is difficult to see how we can achieve an objective viewpoint on human phenomena, yet this was the goal that Dilthey struggled all his life to achieve. He had accepted the dominant ideology of science as an activity that provides objective knowledge, but he could not identify a solid foundation for objective knowledge in the human sciences, whose legitimacy he sought to define.

**APPLICATION AND MEANING AS AN EFFECT**: 
**HANS-GEORG GADAMER**

The problems with Romanticist hermeneutics were clear to Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002). His solution was not to discard hermeneutics but to rethink its aim (Gadamer, 1960/1976, 1960/1986) (see Table 4.3). Gadamer was critical of Schleiermacher and Dilthey for thinking that interpretation could reconstruct the creative act that originally produced a text, discourse, or cultural artifact. Such a view makes hermeneutics “a second creation, the reproduction of an original production,” and this, he argued, is like thinking that if we take a work of art out of the museum and return it to its original setting we can reconstruct its original meaning. On the contrary, it just becomes a tourist attraction!

Ultimately, this view of hermeneutics is as foolish as all restitution and restoration of past life. The reconstruction of the original circumstances, like all restoration, is a pointless undertaking in view of the historicity of our being. What is reconstructed, a life brought back from the lost past, is not the original. In its continuance in an estranged state it acquires only a secondary, cultural, existence. The recent tendency to take works of art out of a museum and put them back in the place for which they
were originally intended, or to restore architectural monuments to their original form, merely confirms this judgment. Even the painting taken from the museum and replaced in the church, or the building restored to its original condition, are not what they once were – they become simply tourist attractions. Similarly, a hermeneutics that regarded understanding as the reconstruction of the original would be no more than the recovery of a dead meaning. (Gadamer, 1960/1986, p. 149)

An interpreter can never get inside the mind – or the life – of the author. Understanding is not reproduction or reconstruction; it can never be a “repetition or duplication” of an experience “expressed” in the text. On the contrary, Gadamer (building on the work of Martin Heidegger, which we shall examine in Chapter 8) suggested that understanding is a productive process, a mediation between text and interpreter, a dialogue between past and present. Interpretation is an interaction in which neither interpreter nor text can step out of their historical context.

Like Schleiermacher and Dilthey, Gadamer viewed interpretation as grounded in understanding. His conception of understanding was based on Aristotle’s notion of phronesis – a practical grasp of how to act well in specific concrete circumstances (Aristotle, 1980). Gadamer proposed that understanding is the skilled practical grasp of a specific situation, and interpretation, too, is always practical. When we read, understand, and interpret a text, we do it for its relevance to our present situation. Gadamer called this “application”: to interpret a text is always to apply it to our contemporary circumstances and put what we learn from it to practical use. A text has relevance when it helps us better understand our situation and the challenges we face.

Interpretation, then, is a process of interrogating a text, asking it questions that arise from our own time. What we find in a text will depend on the questions we ask of it. For Gadamer, what a text means is not a matter of the author’s thoughts or intentions but the experience that someone has when reading it, so that “understanding is an event” (Gadamer, 1960/1986, p. 441). Reading a text is a matter not of understanding the person who wrote it but understanding what
they wrote about. As Gadamer put it, “understanding is not based on ‘getting inside’ another person, on the immediate fusing of one person in another. To understand what a person says is . . . to agree about the object [spoken of], not to get inside another person and relive his experiences” (p. 345).

It follows that there can be no single correct interpretation of a text, as Dilthey and Schleiermacher had believed. There is no final objective meaning that corresponds to the author’s intention or to life’s intrinsic purpose. The “openness” of every text makes it inevitable that each reader will find a different meaning. Gadamer wrote, “we understand in a different way, if we understand at all” (Gadamer, 1960/1986, p. 264).

He was surely correct. We all know, from our everyday experience, that a text will be read in different ways by different people. Who can claim to have found the one true interpretation? Why should we believe that some kind of technique of analysis – coding – will guarantee an objective reading? With deliberate irony, Gadamer titled his best-known book Truth and Method (1960) because in it he argued that the search for a foolproof method for interpretation can never lead to truth. But he did not believe that there is no truth. Instead, we need to think differently about truth: a true interpretation is one that points out something relevant in our present situation that we had not noticed. Meaning is not something placed inside the text to be extracted or uncovered by the interpreter. Because a text is, of course, something linguistic, its meaning depends on language, and language is first of all something cultural and historical, not private and subjective. Meaning is always an experience, an event, a moment of application: “to understand a text always means to apply it to ourselves and to know that, even if it must always be understood in different ways, it is still the same text presenting itself to us in these different ways” (Gadamer, 1960/1986, p. 359). The meaning of a text is changing and multiple, and an interpretation is true when it applies the text to successfully answer contemporary questions.

Gadamer argued that if being objective means being free from all preconceptions, then interpretation is never objective. Every interpreter has preconceptions or “prejudices” because he or she is the product of a particular time and place, and Gadamer insisted that these preconceptions play a positive role:

Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. The historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us. (Gadamer, 1960/1976, p. 9)

It is precisely our cultural-historical position that makes it possible for us to understand and interpret the human world and the cultural works that
constitute human history. Gadamer was strongly opposed to the view that we should, or could, rid ourselves of all preconceptions. The receptivity to something unfamiliar “is not acquired with an objectivist ‘neutrality’: it is neither possible, necessary, nor desirable that we put ourselves within brackets” (p. 152). He challenged the belief (perhaps he would say the prejudice) that to be scientific we must be disinterested, neutral, and detached. This is impossible to achieve in practice, and it is a dangerous myth because those who believe they have achieved it are the most dogmatic. “What is necessary is a fundamental rehabilitation of the concept of prejudice and a recognition of the fact that there are legitimate prejudices, if we want to do justice to man’s finite, historical, mode of being” (Gadamer, 1960/1986, p. 246).

Gadamer did not deny that there are prejudices that need to be changed. Some preconceptions may be inappropriate for a particular task of interpretation. There are forms of prejudice that we must have the courage to confront – such as racism or sexism. But our preconceptions are our involvement in history, our participation in traditional cultural practices. They “have a threefold temporal character: they are handed down to us through tradition; they are constitutive of what we are now (and are in the process of becoming); and they are anticipatory – always open to future testing and transformation” (Bernstein, 1983, pp. 140–141). Our preconceptions set limits beyond which we do not see, but they are not fixed and we are constantly testing them. One important way in which we test our preconceptions is through encounters with other people, such as occur in research.

Like Dilthey, then, Gadamer emphasized that an interpreter is always located in history: “In fact, history does not belong to us, but we belong to it” (Gadamer, 1960/1986, p. 245). Gadamer called this location in history a “horizon.” Our horizon is all that we can see around us, and none of us can see everything. “The horizon is that range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. . . . To exist historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete” (p. 269). It is defined by our preconceptions: what “constitutes . . . the horizon of a particular present [is] the prejudices that we bring with us” (p. 272).

Unlike Dilthey, Gadamer didn’t shy away from the implications of historicity. He drew the obvious conclusions: we cannot step outside history, we cannot leap back in time, and we cannot walk in the shoes of a dead author. But this doesn’t mean that we cannot understand a text written long ago. The distance that separates us from the past, which Dilthey and Schleiermacher had considered a problem to be overcome, is for Gadamer something productive. It enables us to filter the faddish from the classical. Distance in time “is not a yawning abyss, but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which all that is handed down presents itself” (Gadamer, 1960/1986, pp. 264–266). For Gadamer, tradition is a living continuity that links the present with the past and enables us to span the distance
between our time and that of a text. “[W]e stand always within tradition. . . . It is always part of us, a model or exemplar, a recognition of ourselves” (p. 250).

This tradition makes possible a dialogue between present and past in what Gadamer called a “fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves” (Gadamer, 1960/1986, p. 273). Fusion is not the interpreter going back in time, nor is it the text leaving the past and moving forward in time. There is always a “tension between the text and the present” (p. 273), and interpretation must “bring out” this tension rather than ignore it. But this dialogue, with both fusion and tension, is the way a tradition operates: “In a tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new continually grow together to make something of living value” (p. 273).

So our location in history does not mean we cannot change and learn, for our horizon is flexible and mobile. “The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never utterly bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us” (Gadamer, 1960/1986, p. 271). Understanding has an ongoing and open character, reflecting the historical character of human existence. Our preconceptions enable us to understand, and they change as our horizon changes and as the questions we ask change.

Serious questions have been raised about Gadamer’s conception of tradition. We will see in Part III that Jurgen Habermas argued that Gadamer appealed to the continuity and universality of tradition a little too quickly and easily. We need to be able to question and criticize any tradition. After all, bearers of tradition can act irrationally, and traditions do impose inequities. Gadamer’s reply was that there is not an “antithesis between tradition and reason” (Gadamer, 1960/1986, p. 250). We cannot step completely outside our tradition to critique it, as Habermas seemed to propose. But nor do we need to. If our tradition completely destroyed our critical judgment, this would be a problem, but tradition doesn’t often impose itself in this way. Often a tradition can foster openness and reflection. Sometimes a tradition is fragile and needs not to be criticized but actively preserved and cultivated. Tradition is the basis for our institutions and attitudes, the grounds for our ethical values. In Gadamer’s view, we interpret texts in order to study tradition and to preserve and transmit what is best about it. He emphasized that we cannot achieve a methodological “distance” from our cultural and historical situation; there is no place to stand that would provide an “overview.”

CONCLUSIONS

This brief exploration of the history of hermeneutics is enough to show that the attempt in much qualitative research today to objectively study the subjectivity of an interviewee faces insuperable difficulties. Like Dilthey and Schleiermacher, researchers believe they can escape from or overcome their
own historical situation and achieve a timeless reconstruction of the meaning expressed in the words.

Gadamer insisted that interpreting a text has a completely different goal. He was able to see the problems of Romantic hermeneutics and identify the source of these problems, and even though his version of hermeneutics is not itself without problems, it contributes to our analysis of contemporary qualitative research. Gadamer argued, first, that understanding a text is always an active process. Readers – in our case researchers – are actively engaged in making sense of what they read. Second, we can never be free from preconceptions. Every reader encounters a text within a specific horizon, a place in history, and has expectations and interests that cannot be eliminated and according to Gadamer shouldn’t be. The receptivity to something unfamiliar “is not acquired with an objectivist ‘neutrality’: it is neither possible, necessary, nor desirable that we put ourselves within brackets” (Gadamer, 1979, p. 152).

Third, understanding is always interested, not detached. Understanding a text always involves its “application” to our current situation. Our interpretation of a text is organized by its relevance to our current situation and our concerns, and guides our *phronesis*. Gadamer recognized that both social science (whether qualitative or quantitative) and natural science presuppose and depend on the prescientific activities of everyday life – on an unexamined moral paradigm.

Fourth, it follows that no text has a single correct interpretation. The meaning of a text is an effect of reading it, an effect that will be different for different people, in different situations, with different concerns, and with different preconceptions: “[T]he object of interpretation . . . is not a single meaning-in-itself but rather a source of possibilities of meaning which can be realized by future interpreters insofar as they investigate it from differing perspectives. In principle the object is continually open to new retrospections which depart from varied hermeneutical situations” (Mendelson, 1979, pp. 54–55).

Fifth, the encounter with a text can change the reader. It can enable us to become aware of at least some of our prejudgments, to test them, and to change them if necessary. “It is through the fusion of horizons that we risk and test our prejudices. In this sense, learning from other forms of life and horizons is at the very same time coming to an understanding of ourselves” (Bernstein, 1983, p. 144). We read, and we conduct research, to learn something.

These conclusions are deeply troubling for the coding approach to analysis that we considered in the last chapter. But if we take off the blinkers forced on us by a narrow conception of science and by the conduit metaphor of language, we will see that these conclusions open up important and exciting possibilities for qualitative research, our grasp of what an interview involves, and our theories of human understanding and even human being. Gadamer’s hermeneutics implies that research should involve a dialogue between researcher and participant in which the researcher draws on their preconceptions rather than trying to be rid
of them. The researcher is always a partner in dialogue. “The relation of observing subject and object is replaced here by that of participant subject and partner” (Habermas, 1968/1971, pp. 179ff, emphasis original).

We shall be returning in later chapters to the proposal, shared by Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Gadamer, that interpretation is grounded in a more fundamental participation in a process of history and even of life itself, a process that is far larger than the individual. The suggestion that we humans are historical, with no fixed, natural essence, is an important one. But in the chapter that follows we will first explore the implications of this kind of hermeneutics for the analysis of interviews, for the practice of interviewing, and for our understanding of the character of qualitative inquiry.