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HERMENEUTIC PHILOSOPHY AND DATA COLLECTION: A PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

A framework for data collection is proposed using principles of hermeneutic philosophy drawn from Heidegger (1976) and Gadamer (1975). Emphasis is placed on the ontological nature of Dasein as a means of re-assessing, even transcending the foundations of hermeneutic thought through the application of abstraction. The themes identified propose a set of criteria against which the coherence and validity of the proposed research design can be determined.

Introduction

In 1980 Bleicher made the observation that hermeneutics can be used both as an underlying philosophy and as a mode of analysis.

As an approach to human understanding, it provides the philosophical grounding for interpretivism. As a mode of analysis it provides methods for understanding textual data (whether written or verbal). By implication, hermeneutics can be used both as a means of informing research design (and data collection) and equally applied to data analysis.

Few researchers within the IS community have fully appreciated the opportunities Bleicher’s subtle distinction offers. The prevailing use of hermeneutic theory generally falls into one of two perspectives: epistemological or methodological. Responding to positivist criticisms of interpretive research, researchers such as Walsham (1995) and Klein and Myers (1999), have sought to explain hermeneutic principles from an epistemological perspective. Such discussions advocate the use of hermeneutic principles as criteria against which interpretive research can be evaluated. Other researchers, such as Boland (1989) and Orlikowski (1991), have primarily applied hermeneutic principles as a means of analysing textual data, produced using non-hermeneutic methods.

Taking the ontological arguments of Heidegger (1976) and Gadamer (1975), it is possible to present a comprehensive research approach to data collection. Focusing on the ontological nature of hermeneutic philosophy creates a powerful and timely approach to research. Not only does it allow researchers to look at old issues with new eyes, equally, it equips them with the means of investigating the increasingly complicated issues of human-computer interaction associated with the digital age.

This paper is organised as follows: the first section will define hermeneutics, describing its analytical purpose and outlining its associated problems. The second section outlines the key elements of hermeneutic philosophy proposed by Heidegger and subsequently extended by Gadamer, describing those principles that can be used as practical research. The final section of this paper will conclude by integrating the themes presented into a workable framework for research design and data collection.

What Is Hermeneutics?

Put simply, hermeneutics is a theory of interpreting texts. An ‘interpreter’ is one who renders words intelligible and meaningful. This may require some point of clarification or additional commentary, particularly when the original meaning of the text is in dispute or remains hidden because it is “unfamiliar and alien” (Boland, 1991, p.429). Hermeneutics is consequently engaged in two tasks: ascertaining the exact *meaning-content* of a word or phrase; and defining guidelines to facilitate interpretive explication.

The core analytical task of hermeneutics is to ascribe meaning via empathetic understanding (Dilthey, 1977). This approach is not aimed at uncovering causal laws but the practical understanding of meanings and actions. Referring to this as *Verstehen*, Gadamer (1975) argued that hermeneutic understanding was more than a re-constructed explanation of phenomena already

unconsciously known. Instead, hermeneutic understanding encompassed meaning, relevance and value contained in situational contexts.

As Bleicher (1980) notes, “Hermeneutic philosophy does not aim at objective knowledge through the use of methodical procedures but at the explication and phenomenological description of human *Dasein* in its temporality and historicity.” (p.2).

The Hermeneutic Problem

The 'hermeneutic problem' is the role of the researcher in the practical acquisition of knowledge: how can researchers render accounts of subjectively intended meaning objective given the fact that they are mediated by the interpreter's own subjectivity (Bleicher, 1980). Furthermore, how can we determine the validity of such inquires when the researcher uses his preconceptions in order to guide the process of inquiry, and the necessarily close interaction with his subjects to induce contextual meanings, changes the perceptions of both parties (Walsham, 1995).

Making interpretations of subjectively intended meaning credible and open to verification whilst critical, is clearly difficult. How can we state something as a 'fact' when it is acquired using personal filter systems of unique individual experiences?

The Ontological Basis of Hermeneutic Interpretation

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argued that phenomenology is the science of the ‘Being of entities’ and that ‘only through phenomenology is ontology possible’ (1976, p.60). Phenomenology for Heidegger however, does not refer to experiences that are visible and clearly defined. Of interest are those phenomena that remain hidden or somehow disguised. In attempting to uncover such ‘essences’ Heidegger’s phenomenology provides an ontological description of Being, where meaning is a function of ‘Being-in-the-world’ – a concept Heidegger called *Dasein*.

Dasein

By arguing that the first function of understanding is to orientate us (as ordinary people) to a situation, Heidegger fundamentally altered the ontological basis of knowledge for hermeneutic thought. Understanding was no longer concerned with grasping facts but with apprehending a possibility of being. In seeking to unfold the possibility of being, Heidegger developed the notion of *thrownness* where understanding is essentially projected empathy. The primary function of language is no longer communication, but rather a form of ‘pointing out’ and ‘showing’. For Heidegger, ‘discourse is the articulation of what understanding is’ which in turn is the “meaningful” articulation of the understandable structure of being-in-the-world’ (p.203-4).

The meanings of phenomenological description as a method according to Heidegger (1976) lie in interpretation. *Dasein* as a mode of living is essentially hermeneutic in character and interpretive in constitution. People constantly re-assess their understandings of the world in which they live through their social interactions and daily activities. The efficacy of shared meanings relies upon the abilities of social actors to fully appreciate the nuances of conveyed intent, situated as they are in a particular time and history.

Pre-understanding and Tradition

Heidegger argues that understanding of a situation requires some fore-knowledge accumulated from experience. Phenomena are perceived according to how they are encountered in the everyday routines and tasks, that is to say the world in which people live. Perception and apprehension move from self-conscious interpretation to *existential understanding*, a largely unreflective and automatic grasp of situations triggering pre-programmed responses or behaviour when *thrown* into situations of uncertainty. The actions of social actors in such circumstances are bootstrapped from their form of pre-existing knowledge.

Such pre-existing knowledge is a product of what Heidegger called historicity. Acceptable values and experiences supporting pre-understanding are transmitted through time and history via cultural mechanisms, providing reassurance in times of uncertainty.

Gadamer (1975) broadened the concept of Heideggerian ‘preunderstanding’ and historicity by introducing the concept of Tradition. “Lived experience” (*Erlebnis*) describes the relationship between actors and the tradition in which they are embedded providing the contexts for their understanding and contributes to the formation of their prejudices.

Zuhanden versus Vorhanden

In the everyday nature of a social actor's existence, the phenomena that constitute his or her 'life-world' are 'ready-to-hand' (Zuhanden) and as such not the object of reflection. This is because they possess a degree of familiarity that is perfectly understood in the actor's perspective, not requiring interpretation as to their ontological status. If an event occurs that effects a 'breakdown' in understanding, that is challenges an actor's conception of phenomena or uncovers its ontological status as a phenomena for the first time, then it will require interpretation to be comprehended.

As a consequence of breakdowns, phenomena become the object of 'theoretical' reasoning and acquire the ontological status of being 'present-at-hand' (i.e. Vorhanden). The 'pre-understanding' the actor has of the phenomena is the starting point from which he will begin his interpretation of the phenomenon. According to Heidegger, this pre-understanding, which is similar to the Gadamerian concept of prejudice, possesses historical and temporal dimensions; consequently as an anticipatory meaning, it will require 'working out' in terms of the phenomenon itself in order to determine its legitimacy, origin and validity. This 'working out' is intentional in that the actors will purposefully set about repairing the breakdown and adopt whatever available means to achieve this end.

Effective-Historical Consciousness and the Fusion of Horizons

Gadamer argues that a 'historical consciousness' is vital if prejudices are to be understood for what they are. "Effective-historical consciousness' is the acknowledgement of the fact that the effect of historical events through 'lived experience' influences our interpretation and hence understanding of phenomena (1975, p.65). In other words our cultural and historical environmental factors affect the way in which actors see, and make sense, of the world (and its associated phenomena) in which they live.

Experience of effective-historical understanding is achieved when, in questioning phenomena that are present-at-hand, a person opens up to tradition and what the phenomenon has to say, in order to allow its meaning to become evident. In attempting to understand a phenomenon that is 'present-at-hand', a social actor as Dasein is confronted with several possibilities of understanding.

Critically, an actor must enter into a dialectic with the phenomenon. Interpretation of social phenomena is never straight-forward activity; ambiguity and conflict characterise interpretations. Through his 'effective historical consciousness' s/he should be aware of the prejudices at work and will frame his questions accordingly. The 'question' is the mechanism that individuals use to open up and keep open the possibilities inherent in Being – possibilities that arise in the existential relationship between the individual and the phenomena that constitute his world. In this way s/he will become open to what the phenomenon has to say in order to properly comprehend its horizon.

A horizon for Gadamer (1975, p.269) is simply 'the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point'. Horizons have definite boundaries, and although definable they are not static. In working out of prejudices – interpreting and endeavouring to understand some social phenomenon – horizons are fused: the 'fusion of horizons' is therefore the culmination of the act of understanding between interpreter and interpreted, between researcher and researched.

A Practical Framework for Data Collection.

Butler (1998) suggests that the most fundamental tenet of hermeneutics is the circular structure of understanding. Spirals of understanding arise from interpretations of an executed action, confirming a theory by distinguishing between background knowledge and facts.

The Structure of Understanding

Understanding is thus structured by a hermeneutic triumvirate of time-meaning-Being which provide a methodologically relevant formulation of an ontological hermeneutic circle. The aim is not to avoid the circle, but to get into it properly since it contains the possibility of original insight.

For Heidegger and Gadamer this involves three phases. First, it involves the self-understanding of the interpreter (the meaning of Being), based upon a preunderstanding of 'objects' (Dasein as Understanding) leading to 'projection' (Understanding as Interpretation). Interpretation for Heidegger is not the acquisition of information about that which is already understood (Betti's

'objective' interpretation which Heidegger considered 'inauthentic understanding'). Rather interpretation is "the working-out of possibilities projected in Understanding" (p.148). Understanding does not become something different; it but becomes Itself. Hence, it is not about acquiring new knowledge but understanding existing knowledge better.

Understanding is structured beyond the confines of objectivity and directed outwards, towards the context of life. The 'life world' represents a form of preunderstanding or natural attitude (about something). Together self-understanding of the interpreter (Being-in-the-world) and natural attitude (preunderstanding) form the basis for the 'potentiality-for-Being'. The interpreter appropriates what is already understood creating an 'in-order-to' structure of projected understanding. Future behaviour is predicated on the present understanding of past actions.

Heidegger terms the context and anticipation of meaning *Vorhabe* (or forehaving). The explication of the implicit, the appropriation of understanding inherent within interpretation 'is always done under the guidance of a point of view, which fixes that with regard to which what is understood is to be interpreted.' Understanding is grounded in something that we see in advance (foresight or *Vorsicht*). The framework of interpretability and the intuition of interpretation (i.e. meaning) leads to a third possibility for interpretative understanding; fore-conception (*Vorgriff*) in which we grasp something in advance. Anything we understand is interpreted using concepts either derived directly from it or categories that we can force on to it.

The hermeneutic of Dasein is as dependent upon the concepts and categories used to generate 'accurate' and verifiable interpretations as the scientific method is when analysing 'objects'. *Vorhabe*, *Vorsicht* and *Vorgriff* provide the pre-suppositions for the constitution of an 'object'; though it must be re-iterated that there can be no object-in-itself. As such they represent a useful framework for documenting the intuition of interpretation in a systematic manner.

The Hermeneutic Circle

With Dasein, Heidegger represents an ontological hermeneutic circle of unconscious understanding and situated behaviour. The aim is to reflectively accept or reject those aspects of existential understanding or experiential fore-knowledge which can be re-specified for theoretical development. Heidegger's view of the hermeneutic 'circle of understanding' posits that understanding is determined by the anticipatory movement of 'fore-understanding'. Understanding a phenomenon starts with 'pre-understanding' or prejudice of the 'whole' by examining its component parts. However, understanding component phenomena can only begin when their relationships with the 'whole' have been determined. The determination of these contextual relationships is itself guided by an expectation of meaning arising from the preceding context (i.e. tradition influenced prejudice or perceptual filters).

In other words, when a phenomenon is present-at-hand to an actor, he will possess a prejudice-laden pre-understanding of it. Through a dialectic process he will identify its parts. Operating from a holistic perspective each part will be interpreted and its meaning and relationship to the whole consolidated into an emergent understanding of the phenomenon. Gadamer called this a 'subjective reflex' adopted by an actor towards the phenomenon – the intuitive anticipation of the whole and its subsequent articulation in the parts. See Figure 1.

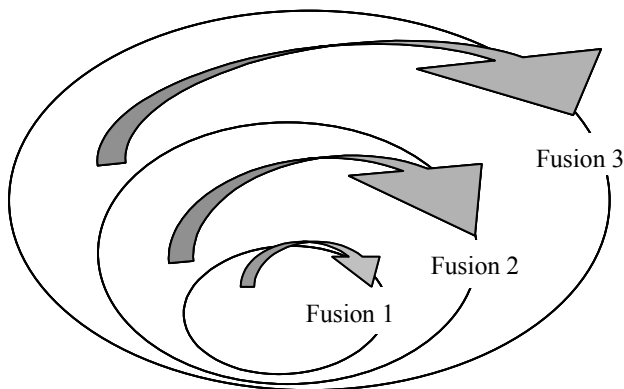


Figure 1. Cycles in the Hermeneutic Circle

Thus as Gadamer notes (1988, p.68)

The movement of understanding always runs from the whole to part and back to the whole. The task is to expand in concentric circles the unity of the understood meaning. Harmonising all the particulars with the whole is at each stage the criterion of correct understanding. Its absence is failure to understand.

Fusion of Horizons

In cycling through the circle of understanding each 'part' will be consolidated and so different perspectives will emerge.

However, Gadamer argued that the understanding attained in working out this relationship – negotiating the circle – is not perfect. The 'lived experiences' of individuals are unique and create temporally based limits, or horizons, of understanding (Gadamer 1975, p.269). Each iteration of the circle represents a dialectic of shared understanding of temporally-based prejudices. A 'fusion of horizons' occurs when a shared understanding is reached between researcher and subject regarding some 'part' of the whole phenomena. To achieve fusion, the researcher must be aware of his prejudices and recognize that his knowledge is incomplete.

Such limits can be transcended through exposure to others values because their horizons conveys views and values that places one's own horizons in relief. Gadamer's aim therefore is not to simply understand better the author's intentions by deciphering the world-view behind them as argued by the methodological hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Rather, the process is to move beyond original meaning towards a 'fusion of horizons' between the different values of subject and researcher. Thus understanding (Verstehen) is to understand differently from the initial concepts of either the subject or the researcher. See Figure 2.

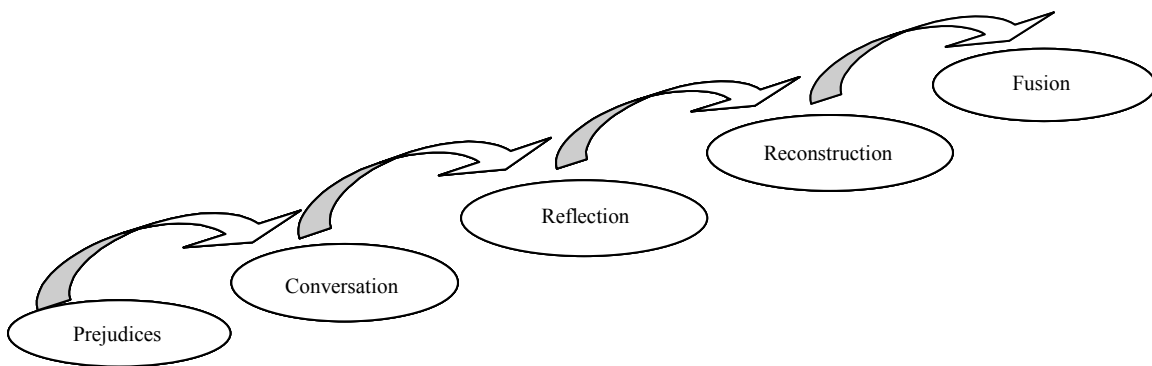


Figure 2. Stages Towards the Fusion of Horizon(s)

The framework outlined inverts the weaknesses associated with the hermeneutic problem: the role of the researcher in the practical acquisition of knowledge is now regarded as a strength. Explicitly sensitized to his Tradition-influenced preconceptions, the researcher is able to guide the process of inquiry in a more consistent fashion, whilst simultaneously neutralising the negative aspects of researcher bias by making them conscious before conversation. Similarly, the changing perceptions of both parties stemming from the necessarily close interaction with his subjects to induce contextual meanings as argued by Walsham (1995) no longer needs to be automatically condemned. The elicitation of implicit, often transitory 'essences' can now be captured through the prism of Tradition and associated question's designed to open up and keep one the potentiality of Being.

Using the ontological character of Dasein as an abstract concept provides a means of elevating the transparency of meaning elicitation when used in conjunction with the hermeneutic circle. More importantly, interpretative understanding (Verstehen) is no longer limited to the re-interpretation of an author's intent with regard to a text but, with abstraction, becomes the interpretation of a speaker's intent. Dasein transcends classic hermeneutic perspectives as the passive interpretation of text and enables researchers to actively participate in the generation of such texts.

The constructivist concepts advocated by Heidegger and Gadamer (pre-understanding, transcendental analysis and re-interpretation and construction) go some way to clarifying through systematic application the stages for attaining Verstehen. A researcher's pre-conceptions are created through familiarity of social, cultural and historical contexts and theoretical evolution. These preconceptions are then re-assessed following conversations aimed at uncovering hidden meanings and are re-interpreted in the light of what has gone before, what is understood now and what this means for the future.

By making explicit certain hermeneutic methods of inquiry and formalising them into a series of stages, the researcher is made aware of the difference between mini-fusions of shared understanding *on a particular issue*, and fusion of horizons with regard to the *multiplicity of issues* under discussion. Issues emerging from conversations and similar reflective activities create new concepts transcending originally held meanings. It is these transcendental meanings, agreed by both the researcher and subject

that represent Fusion. Consequently, it is the nature of Fusion, within the context of the framework that helps researchers determine when *Verstehen* has been attained.

Conclusion

In summation, freed from the (artificial) constraints of re-constructing author intent, the philosophical concepts outlined above transcend the limits of the *Verstehen* method. *Dasein* provides a means by which a researcher can become an active participant in the generation of a text in a formalised manner. Reflection, the continual re-assessment of meaning and hence interpretation, is explicitly and systematically incorporated into interpretative practice. As a result, interpretive practice is lifted from the level of ad hoc insights towards a more systematic, and thus rigorous, formulation.

References

References are available from the authors upon request.