
Journal of Applied Hermeneutics
January 16, 2017
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Is it Really “Yesterday’s War”? What Gadamer Has to Say About What Gets Counted

Nancy J Moules, Lorraine Venturato, Catherine M Laing, & James C Field

Abstract

In this paper, the authors address the perceived recent trend of funding and publishing bodies that seem to have taken a regard of qualitative research as a subordinate to, or even a subset of, quantitative research. In this reflection, they pull on insights that Hans-Georg Gadamer offered around the history of the natural and human science bifurcation, ending with a plea that qualitative research needs to be received, appraised, judged, and promoted by different lenses and criteria of value.

Keywords

Qualitative research, hermeneutics, rigor, narratives, experience, funding of research, publishing qualitative findings

In February 2016, an open letter was published in *The BMJ* where 76 senior academics from 11 countries challenged *The BMJ* to reconsider their practice of rejecting qualitative research as low priority, lacking practical value and interest to readers, and being unlikely to be cited (Greenhalgh et al., 2016). The published letter makes a compelling argument for the need for complementary perspectives that are embraced by quantitative and qualitative research methods, citing and commending organizations that lay claim to the idea that “quantitative versus qualitative is yesterday’s war” (p. 4).

We applaud this letter and its intent, but offer that, from our perspectives, this “war” seems to have returned and seems to be alive and well today, unfortunately. We can only speculate on what drives the majority of funding agencies to fund primarily, if not exclusively, quantitative

Corresponding Author:

Nancy J Moules
Email: njmoules@ucalgary.ca

studies. At best, to be funded, a study must contain “mixed” or “multiple” methods, whereby the qualitative aspect is generally a watered-down version of what could stand as a sophisticated method in and of itself, cobbled onto a quantitative study. For example, to have a study that is purely hermeneutic in nature funded by a major granting agency is becoming increasingly impossible, it seems. Yet, hermeneutics as a research method is a rich, sophisticated, well-documented approach to the human sciences that is grounded in a long tradition of philosophical thought dating back to the Greeks, manifested in over three decades of research in the human sciences (Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015). Similarly, we run into the very problem that the authors (Greenhalgh et al., 2016) identified with *The BMJ*: Getting published is becoming more difficult and, more often than not, the reviewers of submitted hermeneutic research manuscripts are guided by very different understandings, and regularly demonstrate an apparent misunderstanding of the purpose, substance, and contribution to the understanding that hermeneutics can make.

In this paper, we take the stance that qualitative research addresses and answers different questions than quantitative research and it needs to be seen differently, and more importantly, evaluated differently. We draw on hermeneutic philosophy to offer some of the distinctions that hermeneutic research, as one example of qualitative work, can bring to knowledge.

“What is established by statistics seems to be a language of facts, but which questions these facts answer and which facts would begin to speak if other questions are asked are hermeneutical questions” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 84). Gadamer reminds us that facts are important but also that there are different kinds of facts and different meanings of facts.

The development of the natural sciences as a rigorous method comes with a history that has bequeathed to us a seemingly impenetrable order that is imposed in research.

What imposed itself in the seventeenth century was a new concept of science. Founded upon experimentation and mathematics, it was a new attitude focused on quantification that, in constant progress and lasting self-improvement, eventually transformed science into research. (Gadamer, 1988/2016, p. 35)

This new concept of science created a bifurcation whereby the human sciences became the country cousin to the natural sciences, at best being regarded as an inexact science and, at worst, as nothing of value beyond self-indulgent subjectivity. Thus, “being subjective” (as opposed to being “objective”) was leveled as a criticism at qualitative research and any claims to truth were dismissed as soft, rigor was questioned, and the un-testability of the results posited as a serious limitation. Moules was recently asked by a colleague, how she could prove that her interpretations in her research were true and, if she could not prove they were, was the research method more like religion than it was like research? Forgotten in this question is what truth means and Gadamer’s distinction between certainty and truth is useful here.

What motivates the priority of self-consciousness over against the consciousness of things in modern thinking is the primacy of certainty over truth, which was founded on the idea of method in modern science...method has been understood as a path towards reaching certainty. (Gadamer, 1975/2016, p. 128)

We think, in this instance, the challenge was based on the assumption that, in a religious sense, truth is aligned with faith, and faith is often critiqued as being blind. However, there are certain overlaps between faith in religion and openness in hermeneutics. Both rely on an absence of certainty, an absence of proof, and on the possibility that what you find might be wrong. Indeed, faith can only exist where there is uncertainty, and you cannot have faith without uncertainty. Fanaticism, then - - the defining quality being extreme, uncritical, single-minded zeal (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) - - is the opposite of faith because of the degree of certainty required. You do not need faith if you are a fanatic because you “know” it to be true. A fanatic, as Winston Churchill said, “is someone who can’t change his mind and won’t change the subject.” Thus, certainty and proof are an anathema in both religion and hermeneutics - and yet there is also truth in both.

Truth in qualitative work is often erroneously thought of as subjective correspondence between thought and world.

Hermeneutic truth is plural, not singular, in this way: *There is not one right way* to help all patients recover from cancer, for example, or a single method for helping every child learn to read. At the same time, *not every way is right*. We can get it wrong; we can make people sicker in trying to help them heal. We can make learning to read impossible; while trying to teach, we can deceive ourselves thoroughly and fall into untruth (Wrathall, 2013) in the very pursuit of truth.... truth is tricky in hermeneutic work because it disappears as it appears. We never get “the whole truth and nothing but the truth,” because *truth is both revealed to us and concealed from us at once*. (Moules et al., 2015, p. 76)

When method leads us to certainty rather than truth, as in the way that interpretations that hold up are “true” of something that brings us closer to understanding the topic, then certainty closes off any further understanding. Certainty is in alliance and partnership with agreement, and Gadamer reminds us that mutual understanding does not imply agreement; in fact, if agreement exists, then there is no need to seek understanding as it has already been relegated to certainty (Vandavelde & Iyer, 2016).

The provocative question asked by the colleague encapsulates the very critique that is often leveled at qualitative research and that ends up in a diminishment or dismissal of what it has to offer. Sometimes, and more frequently it seems, it results in such studies not being evaluated as worthy of funding. An example we offer is a study that Moules and colleagues have been trying to have funded for many years involving an examination of parents’ experiences of anticipatory grief of knowing their child is dying, in relationship to their experiences of post death grief. The reviews received on grant applications consistently suggest that, since the study was not going to involve any measurement of these experiences, the value of the study was questionable. There is much debate in the fields of thanatology, grief, and bereavement of whether or not measuring grief is possible but even with those who believe it is and that such a tool is valuable, there is consensus that the experience of grief is complex, immeasurable, deeply individual and experiential - - far beyond what any tool might discern. There are aspects of grief that can never be measured or, in some ways, ever articulated (Moules, 2010). Grief is a profound experience of suffering that invariably escapes our capacity to quantify.

It is indeed true that experience and the natural sciences founded upon experience carry with them the following assumption about being of nature: that which is without foundation, the accidental, the miraculous has no place in it...It can be said, though, that experience teaches us precisely that unpredictable arbitrariness of human beings constantly intervenes in the course of nature. (Gadamer, 1964/2016, p. 3)

Human experience, upon which qualitative research is based, is complex and often cannot be explained, and Gadamer suggested that “the complex does not have the character of a connection between cause and effect in the way it underlies our knowledge and calculation of the course of nature” (p. 4). He challenged the fundamental assumption of science in being able to determine precisely both the cause and effect, claiming that the opposite is often true when it comes to experience: sometimes “small causes have huge consequences” (p. 4).

For a full century, we have attempted to delineate the human sciences by contrasting them with the natural sciences, to the extent that the human sciences have been measured by the scientific character proper to the kind of sciences they are...Now present-day researcher opine that both groups of sciences might eventually merge together again, but not because the so-called human science would in the meantime have become more exact but because the natural sciences themselves would have transformed. (Gadamer, 1988/2016, p. 25)

The demand for verification, correctness, and provability underlies the exactness of the natural sciences, and we concede that some things need to be exact and verified, but we offer that few things can be, *and* some need not be. Gadamer harkens us back to the idea of myths. Myths do not demand verification and they are not provable. “‘Myth’ indeed means nothing other than narrative, but it is a narrative that authenticates itself, that is to say: a narrative that one does not attempt to authenticate and confirm” (p. 31), reminding us that Aristotle claimed that it is “mark of the educated person to know of what to demand proofs and of what not to demand them” (p. 31). We do not need to demand proof of the suffering of parents who have lost a child to cancer (Moules, Estefan, McCaffrey, Tapp, & Strother, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c); we do not need to demand proof that children’s cancer camps make a difference in the lives of families experiencing cancer (Laing & Moules, 2015). We do not need to verify that relationships matter in teaching, or that children ought to be treated with respect, or that what they have to say about what they know is important, or that teachers need to listen carefully to those they teach. What we do need to do is to ask of these experiences, to probe them for what is meaningful, to make sense of what our patients or students live through, that is, we have to understand them so that we can help them heal and learn. In doing so, we have to better understand ourselves in relation to our patients or students and understanding, in relation to others, is not something that needs to be verified in a scientific sense. Rather, understanding is about discovering the rich contours of the lives we inquire into, and what matters or does not matter, that is, *what helps*. When we examine our own understanding and praxis in the face of the suffering we encounter, and when we respond appropriately to the miracles and the mysteries that arise suddenly in the middle of our inquiries, hermeneutic inquiry can reveal things science cannot. These *are* narratives that authenticate themselves in relationships that teach or heal.

We can formulate this concern about philosophy with the following question: can philosophy in the age of modern science be understood as something more than an *'ancilla scientiarum'*, the handmaiden of the sciences...called to service with the ceremonious name of "theory of knowledge"? Gadamer's answer to the question is an emphatic 'yes' because scientific knowledge can tell us nothing about human *praxis* at the individual and social level. (Vandeveld & Iyer, 2016, p. xxviii)

When he [Gadamer] speaks about how the human sciences cannot aspire to the same level of scientificity and objectivity of knowledge as the natural sciences, he is making a plea for the contemporary relevance of *praxis* against the exclusive power of *epistemē* and for the role of practical philosophy as it is embodied in the human sciences. This is how Gadamer may concede the truth of the mocking remark made by the Vienna Circle about the human sciences being at most ten percent science when it comes to their scientificity. But he emphasizes that it is the other ninety percent that is the most crucial from the standpoint of human existence as it concerns shared living and solidarity. (Vandeveld & Iyer, 2016, p. xxix)

Returning to the question of faith, truth, and religion, it is possible that one can become a fanatical hermeneut, falling prey to the lure of certainty. Let us be clear: We are not arguing here that qualitative research is *better* than quantitative. We are arguing that it is different and that it reveals equally important insights into practice, that is, it needs to be valued equally. It also needs to have its own rigor. Moules et al. (2015) addressed the issue of rigor and validation in hermeneutic work in particular, suggesting that the rigor that is sought in interpretive research does not conform to that of being strict, inflexible, exact, precise, accurate, and rigid. It does, however, meet another definition of rigor which is the "quality of being careful" (p. 171). Qualitative research must treat its topics care-fully (with care and fully), seeing validity that is located in being strong, powerful, robust, healthy, and telling (Moules et al., 2015, p. 172). It should yield insight into the human condition. It should help us decide how we might live well with others, how we might, given their lives, help them heal or learn. The difficulty lies, however, in how to convince those we rely on for funding or dissemination that our work is underpinned by these traits and, more importantly, that these traits matter as much as measures of exactness, causality, prediction, and repeatability.

Twenty years ago, qualitative work was recognized as legitimate; the accessibility of federal funding was evidence of this. Guidelines for Tri-Council funding in Canada even added a chapter on evaluating qualitative work differently with different standards. Publication in reputable journals did not require a desperate back-and-forth battle with uniformed reviewers. Qualitative journals sprang up; qualitative research institutes blossomed, and it no longer felt as though we were in competition with our big city cousin. We can only speculate on what has made the pendulum swing again. In current times, it might be economically driven – hermeneutics does not produce jobs, new technologies, or cures. The increased emphasis on evidence-based practice may be a factor. This, however, begs the question: What counts as evidence? How is it that we have shifted from the original tenets of evidence-based practice as a trinity of research evidence - health professional experience and judgment, and patient preferences - to one that prioritizes only quantitative research? If evidence only lies in numbers, mathematics, statistics, and calculability, then it makes sense that the kinds of results that arise

from qualitative research hold little utility from this perspective. Those results do not address causality or predictability; they do not speak to health economics or produce new drugs. Rather, they help us understand what it means to be human and to live together well. Is this enough? Given that the state of the world does not seem to be a “scientific problem,” we think so. “To understand the other is truly a difficult art, but also a human task” (Gadamer, 1988/2016, p. 39).

Gadamer (1988/2016) invoked as well the influence of modern technology as having played a factor in the objectification of the human sciences. “Increasingly, even the sciences we call human sciences, share in the progress of this technological development of the means of knowledge and information” (p. 38).

How much more complete is a computer generated index of today...But is it really only a progress...although all the information we need is available immediately, I wonder whether it is not better that, when having forgotten something, I have to look for it again and, perhaps, in the process find something other than what I was looking for. This is what we truly call doing research: to ask questions that always lead to further question, which we did not anticipate. We are now facing totally new possibilities for alleviating the burden on our memory. This entails that we no longer need our own mental power in order to reawaken what we have forgotten and we no longer nurture recollection...this situation cannot be totally different in the natural sciences...we have come so far with these new advances that research, which previously required twenty years, can now produce results with a computer in a matter of minutes. This has undoubtedly resulted in gains, but also in tasks that turn out to be evermore difficult when it comes to the rational application of our know-how. We only have to think of the beneficial wonder of forgetting and the transfigurative magical power of remembering. The retrieval of data from databases will not give us anything so felicitous. (Gadamer, 1988/2016, pp. 38-39)

In conclusion, qualitative research is not a “soft,” or “dumbed down” version of quantitative research. It is a different kind of research aimed, not simply at knowing, but more fully at living an ethical life as practitioners, something that cannot be achieved solely through science. If it is research aimed at helping us live well “with and for others in just institutions,” as Ricoeur (1992, p. 352) suggested, then it cannot be submitted to an explanatory science that only accounts for causality and order.

Human sciences rather belong to orders that constantly configure and reconfigure themselves through our own concrete participation in them and thereby contribute to our knowledge about the human possibilities and normative commonalities that affect us. Thus, the human sciences bring us before ourselves...Of all the sciences, it is especially the so-called human sciences that contribute the most to the nurturing of these capacities. They force us to confront constantly in all its richness the entire scale of what is human and all too human. (Gadamer, 1988/2016, p. 41)

What it means to be human and “all too human” is what tethers qualitative research to the real world. Qualitative research *articulates* human experience; it brings language to experience and then complements this articulation with a depth that helps us understand it. Understanding what

it means to be human, and how we can help others flourish, is not a trite matter but, rather, a difficult, on-going human task, and no computer can relieve us from its burden.

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