Conducting Hermeneutic Research in International Settings: Philosophical, Practical, and Ethical Considerations

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Abstract

Hermeneutics has been theorized and applied as a philosophical framework and interpretive research methodology which pays particular attention to linguistic, social, cultural, and historical contexts to understand the life world and human experiences. While adopted as a qualitative research approach in the fields of education, nursing, psychology, and legal studies, its use is emerging in other human service disciplines. The rich philosophical and theoretical legacy embedded in this research methodology often presents unique challenges and a steep learning curve for researchers, particularly when the research is conducted in international settings. Drawing from insights gained from two hermeneutic studies conducted in Kenya and China, this paper presents considerations for designing a hermeneutic research inquiry. In addition to philosophical, practical, and ethical issues researchers need to consider when designing and implementing hermeneutic studies in international settings, we examine factors and strategies to facilitate successful data collection and interpretation.

Keywords

hermeneutics, interpretive research methodology, international research

Researchers who are interested in conducting qualitative research in international settings need to explore and adopt research methodologies that allow them to integrate the cultural, historical, and linguistic characteristics of the research setting into research design and implementation. Hermeneutics, a research philosophy and interpretive methodology, has been widely adopted as a qualitative research approach for research in the fields of education, social sciences, and

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humanities because it acknowledges and highlights the linguistic, social, cultural and historical contexts in research design and implementation. However, the rich philosophical and theoretical legacy embedded in hermeneutics and the distinctive methods, procedures, and writing style associated with hermeneutic inquiry often presents challenges and steep learning curves for researchers, particularly for graduate students who are interested in using a hermeneutic inquiry approach in international research.

Drawing from insights gained from two hermeneutic studies conducted in Kenya and China, we discuss the philosophical, methodological, practical, and ethical issues researchers need to consider when designing and implementing a hermeneutic study in international settings. We start with a brief summary of the hermeneutical orientations that guided the two international studies, and this summary is followed by discussions about the practical issues researchers need to consider in conducting hermeneutic research in international settings. Using the two studies as examples, we discuss how a researcher's role as a cultural insider or outsider affects the research process. We conclude with a discussion and critical analysis of ethical considerations for international hermeneutic studies.

International research can mean different things to different researchers. For the context of this paper, international research is defined as studies conducted overseas that involve relationships and understanding between and among nations, cultures, peoples, wisdom traditions, and discourses. The two international studies described in this paper were carried out in settings outside of Canada where the researchers' home institutions were based. Both studies intentionally examined and incorporated the interconnected relationships of cultural identities, wisdom traditions, epistemologies, and ontologies between Canada and the other country where the research was conducted.

Hermeneutics as a Research Philosophy

Research design involves the intersection of research philosophy, inquiry strategies, and specific methods and procedures. Research philosophy reflects a researcher's general orientation about the world and the nature of the study and is shaped by her/his discipline, personal and research experiences, and the beliefs and orientation of an adviser, advisory committee, or prominent scholars in the chosen field of study (Creswell, 2009). When selecting a research approach, the first task of the researcher is to understand, and be able to explicitly explain, the philosophical assumptions supporting his/her choice. The process of understanding and articulating a worldview and philosophical assumptions helps researchers become aware of how traditions, culture, motivations, identity, and institutional structures can impact their understanding and choice of a research philosophy and methodology.

Hermeneutics is defined as the science or art of interpretation (Gadamer, 1976; Malpas, 2014; Porter & Robinson, 2011). Derived from the Greek verb *hermeneuein,* the term hermeneutics means to understand or interpret (Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015; Patton, 2015). Emerging in the nineteenth century in reaction to the dominance of positivist scientific approaches, hermeneutics was theorized and applied as a philosophical framework as well as a research methodology for understanding the world and human experiences that gives special attention to the context in the human sciences (Gadamer, 1976; Guo, 2010; Patton, 2015). The

task of hermeneutics is not to solve problems in practical situations, but to serve as a mode of reflecting to question the meaning of being and to clarify the interpretive conditions for understanding the meaning of human experiences by attending to the roles of language, culture, historicity, and pre-understandings (Davey, 2017; Gadamer, 1976; Guo, 2010). Kinsella (2006) described hermeneutics as an approach that (a) seeks understanding rather than explanation; (b) acknowledges the situated location of interpretation; (c) recognizes the role of language and historicity in interpretation; (d) views inquiry as a conversation; and (e) is comfortable with ambiguity. These characteristics lend themselves well to international research contexts.

Different from the post-positivist worldview shaping most empirical research with a focus on problems and identifying objective reality through careful observation and unbiased measurement, hermeneutics allows a researcher to discern whether or not a problem truly exists through deeper understanding. Hermeneutics offers researchers an approach to explore and understand the complexity of a topic or phenomenon (McCaffrey, Raffin-Bouchal, & Moules, 2012; Moules et al., 2015) without problematizing a situation prematurely or inappropriately due to an inadequate understanding of the research context and topic. Researchers' pre-understanding is embraced as a constructive contribution to the research process rather than a potential source of bias, an attractive and prominent advantage of adopting hermeneutics in international research (Moules, 2002). This active role of the interpreter through self-reflection can provide an opportunity to refine reflection skills and develop self-understanding. These are principal tasks in hermeneutics. The integration of interpretation, historicity, and critical reflection in hermeneutic inquiry allows a researcher to understand human experiences from comparative perspectives and reexamine practices that are closely defined by traditions, cultures, history, and languages.

Hermeneutics permits researchers to explore complex, dynamic relationships and experiences while acknowledging issues such as asymmetries of power relations, gender (in)equality, or other contextual and historical factors (McCaffery & Moules, 2016). This approach is appealing to international researchers because designing and implementing research in international settings is complex and demanding and often involves comparative perspectives, choosing different or modifying research methods, a lack of literature with international/global perspectives, and cultural uncertainty and ambiguity. Hermeneutics provides researchers the space to identify and understand various perspectives on human experiences which is advantageous in international research (Grondin, 2002; Ricoeur, 1981). Meanwhile, incorporating the voices of participants in the construction of meaning through conversational interview approaches that affirm and reinforce positive cultural identities of participants can have a decolonizing effect, which is an important concern in conducting research in locations with a history of colonization (Kovach, 2010). In addition, international research particularly requires a researcher's thoughtful consideration of how her/his unique linguistic capacity and cultural identity influences the inquiry at hand and his/her pre-understandings, prejudices, and foreknowledge about the research topic and context. Hermeneutics brings awareness to a researcher's positionality as a cultural insider or outsider in international research and creates opportunities for understanding human experiences from multiple and comparative perspectives.

The relational, reflexive and artistic options provided by hermeneutics allow researchers to understand the depth and nuances of human experience and provide an interpretive lens of making meaning of the day-to-day experiences (Jardine, 2006; Newberry, 2012). Since

hermeneutics is not focused on a predetermined horizon and can generate new understandings of practical wisdoms, or *phronesis*, it has been adopted by researchers that work within the applied domains of the human sciences such as education, clinical psychology, social work, occupational therapy, medicine, legal studies, criminology, and psychiatry (Chowdhury, 2016; Guo, 2010; Kinsella, Bossers, & Ferreira, 2008; Laing, 2012; MacQuarrie, 2005; McCaffery & Moules, 2016; Newberry, 2012; Ovens, 2014; von Zweck, Paterson, & Pentland, 2008).

Cross-cultural Competence

Effective use of context allows cultural factors to be foregrounded in international research (Stephens, 2012). In the process of conducting international hermeneutic research, the researcher's positionality can be viewed as cultural insider (i.e., collecting data within one's cultural community), cultural outsider (i.e., collecting data outside of one's cultural community) or a combination of both. An awareness of a researcher's positionality is critical and necessary for research design, preparation, and implementation, and reporting in an international context.

A culturally competent researcher is aware of his/her own cultural identity, understands the cultural norms of the research setting, seeks to minimize and cope with cultural differences, articulates the cultural explanations of perspectives and behaviors, has cross-cultural communication skills, and capitalizes on the similarities of common experiences. The hermeneutic practice of articulating prejudices and biases can bring awareness to the cultural and academic filters that may be encountered in the interpretive process. Preparatory reading for cross-cultural research, reflection, and discussions with local contacts or a critical friend can also serve to sensitize the researcher to contextual issues that might otherwise be missed or not questioned. Utilizing a critical friend will be discussed in the section on Preparing to Conduct International Hermeneutic Inquiry.

The collaborative stance in hermeneutic inquiry may be unfamiliar and initially uncomfortable to research participants given their cultural experience or the perceived power imbalance in the research relationship. Accordingly, there may be a need to nurture in-depth conversations with participants through taking extra time to develop the research relationship and making a concerted effort to carefully ask probing questions during conversations to achieve a fusion of horizons. It is necessary to demonstrate the ability to conduct research that is trustworthy and respectful of the cultural context and divergent worldviews; these are features of decolonized research which will be discussed in greater detail below. A hermeneutic approach shifts the orientation away from the outsider's voice, placing the researcher in a less authoritative position while privileging the voice of the participants (Carson, 1986; Stephens, 2009).

Researchers' Hermeneutic Orientations Illustrated in Case Studies

Reflecting on the case of a Chinese researcher conversing with Chinese teachers in China and a Canadian researcher collecting data from Kenyan university students in Kenya, the authors present the key principles underpinning their hermeneutic research studies in international settings. This overview is illustrated by two case studies which critically examine how the authors' research positionality affected methodological, epistemological and ethical considerations. The first case is hermeneutic research conducted by Guo (2010) that aimed to

understand what the nation-wide New Curriculum Reform in China meant for teachers who experienced the inspirations and struggles during curriculum implementation. The second case is a hermeneutic inquiry conducted by VanLeeuwen (2017) to explore Kenyan university students' learning experiences in community-based field placements and what community-based learning meant for their academic, personal, and professional growth.

Hermeneutic Principles Guiding the International Research

Hermeneutic literature and tapestry has categorized hermeneutics into five orientations, including romantic or conservative hermeneutics, phenomenological hermeneutics, critical hermeneutics, radical hermeneutics, and philosophical hermeneutics. Each hermeneutic orientation has distinctive concepts and principles. The hermeneutic orientations guiding the authors in conducting the case studies in China and Kenya are philosophical, radical, and critical.

For example, the goal of romantic or conservative hermeneutics is to reproduce and reconstruct interpretation (Ramberg & Gjesdal, 2013). This orientation emphasizes the importance of language as the medium of understanding and the role of dialogue in the extension of understanding (Moules et al., 2015). Phenomenological hermeneutics requires researchers to reflect on their pre-understanding, framework, and biases. This orientation requires a researcher to search for genuine openness to engage in a conversational relation with phenomena (van Manen 2006; van Manen & Adams, 2010). "Epoché" and "reduction" are two important concepts in phenomenological hermeneutics. Epoché deals with freeing oneself of ("bracketing") assumptions, and reduction deals with returning to the original sources of people's experiences. Reduction refers to a regimen designed to transform a philosopher into a phenomenologist by the attainment of a certain perspective on the world phenomenon. Phenomenological hermeneutics allows a researcher to use an interpretive approach to gain deep understanding of phenomena and uncover the complex realities of difficult life situations (van Manen, 2006).

Philosophical hermeneutics offers several key principles which informed these two inquiries. The hermeneutic circle is an important concept in philosophical hermeneutics and it refers to the elements of the ontological structure of understanding (Gadamer, 1960/1975). Philosophical hermeneutics recognizes that understanding is reached within a fusion of horizons. Through the collaborative, cyclical, interpretive process, the researcher and the participant(s) reach a fusion of horizons and gain a more profound understanding of the experiences being studied (Gadamer, 1976). Philosophical hermeneutic principles assist the researchers in bringing the historical context, cultural traditions, and our prior knowledge into the hermeneutic circle because such prior knowledge served as an enabler to understanding, rather a barrier (Jacobs, 2014; Malpas, 2014; Moules, 2002). Philosophical hermeneutics is a very open domain of enquiry which cannot be definitively defined or understood (Davey, 2017). The task of hermeneutics is to clarify the interpretive conditions in which understanding takes place (Gadamer, 1976). The preparation and reflection process was important in setting the stage through a heightened sensitivity to language, tradition, historicity, culture, and our personal subjectivity as the fertile ground upon which conversations and understandings occur (Gadamer, 1960/1975; Jardine, 2006). Understanding our prejudices, the values, experiences or "fore-structures" as researchers, enabled us as researchers to be open to dialogue and new possibilities and avoid closing off dialogue because

the conversations were used only as confirmation or contradiction of an established position (Davey, 2006; Gadamer, 1976; Malpas, 2014; von Zweck et al., 2008).

Critical hermeneutics attempts to critique the relations of power inherent in tradition, and to expose the institutionalized, reproductive exploitations of persons and classes (Apple, 1982; Friere, 1970; Giroux, 1983; Habermas, 1971). Critical hermeneutics advocates critical reflection which can neutralize researchers' experiences through self-reflective methodologies to that of a non-participative, external observer who emancipates interpretations from authority structures (Jacobs, 2014). Critical hermeneutics allows researchers to become aware of the impact of traditions, culture, ideology, institutional, and organizational structure and attends to the extra-linguistic forces that possibly influence the interpretations of meanings. An important concept in critical hermeneutics is the hermeneutic arc, the back and forth movement between the text as a whole and its constituent parts during the interpretative process. As analysis continued through the back and forth movement between explanation and understanding, interrelated and complementary processes, understanding deepens, and initial or naïve understandings are discounted, re-oriented, or accepted and gradually expanded upon, keeping in mind that all phases of analysis are informed by the interpreter's pre-understanding (Ricoeur, 1981; Tan, Wilson, & Olver, 2009).

Radical hermeneutics uses deconstruction as the primary interpretive tool to disrupt and destabilize expectations rather than determining truth (Caputo, 1987; Porter & Robinson, 2011). Radical hermeneutics settles on the indeterminacy of interpretation because it recognizes that interpretive acts cannot escape one's subjectivity and always privileges one meaning over many possible others where the meaning of experiences emerged through a relation with what it was not (Porter & Robinson, 2011).

Case 1: Researcher as a Cultural Insider

China has the world's largest and oldest public education system with deep roots in its cultural and historical traditions. The new national curriculum, which was heavily informed and influenced by Western philosophy and epistemology, represented a radical departure from traditional Chinese education and brought tremendous ambiguity and dilemma to Chinese teachers during the implementation process. The hermeneutic research aimed to reveal the complexity of the new curriculum reform by understanding teachers' experiences in curriculum reform and the contributing factors to the challenges and struggles during new curriculum implementation (Guo, 2010). A combination of philosophical and radical hermeneutics was adopted as the inquiry approach to fulfill the dual methodological tasks of this study – understanding the meaning of curriculum reform and transforming education practice through interpretation. Participants were six educators in Western China and three conversations were conducted with each participant over a period of four weeks.

As a Chinese native and a researcher from a Canadian university while conducting this study, Guo grew up in China and obtained educational and professional experiences in both Chinese and Canadian contexts. She viewed herself as a "cultural insider" when entering the research field. This positionality affected the research process from different angles. First, as a Chinese native speaker, the researcher was able to conduct a literature review in both Chinese and

English. The thorough literature review helped the researcher identify a topic and research design absent in both Chinese and English literature as well as to make the research topic and questions significant and relevant to local, national and international research contexts. Second, the shared cultural, linguistic, and ethnic identity between the researcher and the participants allowed the researcher to obtain a deeper understanding the social, political and academic contexts of the research settings. They also served as advantages in recruiting participants through culturally responsive strategies (e.g., phone calls, emails, meetings, introduction by a third party) and in establishing trust and rapport with the participants. Third, the researcher could minimize the logistical challenges of data collection in China, such as booking flights and hotels, scheduling meetings, and making travel arrangement to research sites. Fourth, the researcher could have conversations with the research participants in Chinese, which allowed the participants to freely share their experiences and express their insights. The conversations were transcribed in Chinese first and fully translated into English. Hermeneutic inquiry expects a researcher to understand and interpret not only what is said, but also what is unsaid by the participants. Being a Chinese native speaker offered the researcher linguistic and cultural advantages to achieve this task during the data collection and interpretation process. Such advantages enabled the researcher to understand the power relationships, participants' social-economic positions, their concerns for confidentiality and anonymity, and the proper procedures needed for obtaining research consent and engaging in ethical research appropriate for the research site. Last, an insider's in-depth understanding of the research context and topic provides the opportunities to facilitate the fusion of the researcher and participants' horizon on the topic by sharing new perspectives during research conversations.

Case 2: Researcher as a Cultural Outsider

The decision to employ hermeneutics came as a surprise to VanLeeuwen who was looking at methodologies which would incorporate context in meaningful ways, work from a cultural outsiders' perspective and serve as means to decolonize the research process in Kenya. Hermeneutics fits these criteria and the resultant inquiry was informed by a combination of three strands of hermeneutics. Firstly, adopting a critical hermeneutical orientation allowed her to highlight how traditions, culture and institutional structures impact the experiences of participants. As a cultural outsider, her interpretations were different based on her unique pre-understandings, prejudices, foreknowledge, and preparation for research in the field. Critical hermeneutics provided opportunity to consider motivation as well as focus on issues such as asymmetries of power relations, gender (in)equality, and the colonial and Indigenous contexts of Kenya. Utilization of Ricoeur's (1981) theory of interpretation offered procedural, interpretive, evaluative, and reflexive rigor in data interpretation. Given the significant role played by preunderstanding and positionality as a cultural outsider, plurivocity or multiple interpretations are very probable and expected within critical and philosophical hermeneutics (Grondin, 2002; Ricoeur, 1981). Secondly, the deconstructive process in radical hermeneutics allowed her to consider what is and is not said by participants (Caputo, 1987; Porter & Robinson, 2011). Philosophical hermeneutics was the third and principal strand of hermeneutics utilized. The fusion of horizons was *the* concept that attracted her to hermeneutics, however, it was the process of learning about and communicating the historicity of context that confirmed the suitability of hermeneutics for international cross-cultural research, where sensitivity to context is essential (Gadamer, 1976; Moules, 2002). Hermeneutic methodology acknowledges researcher

prejudices and uses them in the interpretive process by recognizing relationships and legitimizing the subjectivity of researcher interpretations (McCaffery et al., 2012). The deeper she ventured into hermeneutics as philosophy, theory, and methodology, the more she learned about her own prejudices and biases, thereby enhancing awareness of the cultural and academic filters that could be employed or encountered in the interpretive process.

Six university students in Kenya enrolled in a program that focused on preparing students to work as professionals providing community and human services were purposely selected and invited to participate based on their gender, ethnic/tribal heritage, type of organization and the location of their field placement. Data was collected by conducting three conversations with each participant over three weeks, one focus group, and Photovoice. The participants were fluently multilingual in three languages, their home or tribal language, Kiswahili and English. English was the common language between the researcher and participants and was used for the research conversations and focus group.

As a Canadian researcher of Irish and French Canadian heritage, VanLeeuwen had travelled to Kenya and collaborated for over 4 years with Kenyan university faculty through research and international development projects in their shared discipline of Family Sciences. These prior experiences provided her with a preliminary understanding of the Kenyan context and culture. However, she could only work with one official language (English), but not with the second official language (Swahili) or the languages used by Indigenous ethic groups. She considered herself as a "cultural outsider" when entering the research field due to limited exposure to Kenyan culture and language skills.

This positionality as an outsider affected the research process in several ways. First, embarking on a hermeneutic inquiry requires that researchers articulate their prejudices and prior understandings and Gadamer insists that prior hermeneutical situatedness incorporate cultural and historical background (Porter & Robinson, 2011). As a cultural outsider, a researcher needs to reflect and explore prejudices and (new) understanding in relation to perceptions and experiences of the unfamiliar cultural context and his/her values associated with local knowledge (Gadamer, 1976). Reading about the context to prepare for the multitude of cultural differences and articulating these pre-understandings is only the beginning. Being prepared to engage with strangeness in the process of trying to make sense of things that fall outside of our experience was also required (Smith, 2003). Second, in addition to self-location as a researcher, it is essential to consider the purpose and motivations guiding the research (Kovach, 2009). As a Canadian aware of the exploitation experienced by Canada's First Nations communities, the potential for the research to be experienced as a form of re-colonization was a concern. Actions were taken throughout the inquiry to decolonize the research for example by articulating awareness and sensitivity to the colonial experience. Fourth, using a hermeneutic approach as a cultural outsider makes it easier for a researcher to be attentive to the dynamics around issues such as power, language use, and gender. This positionality provides the researcher rich opportunities to observe cultural factors from a comparative perspective, where possible, and to critically examine their influences on the data collection and analysis processes as a researcher's ongoing reflexivity. Fifth, within the hermeneutic tradition, it is important to remain open and alert so that the layers of complexities and additional questions can be revealed through conversations, however, accents and local differences in language usage can interfere with this

process. A cultural outsider needs to adopt active listening strategies and clarify ambiguous expressions during conversations with participants. Careful re-listening is required during the process of data analysis and interpretation to understand the meanings generated from what is said and unsaid. Finally, thorough preparation for field work in international settings is vitally important for a researcher as a cultural outsider to make data collection processes smooth and productive.

Preparing to Conduct International Hermeneutic Inquiry

There are many key issues that researchers need to examine when planning to conduct an international hermeneutic inquiry. In this section, we examine aspects of decolonizing research knowledge, pragmatic and logistical factors, utilizing a critical friend, and ethical issues. While these considerations are not exclusive to international research, these are considerations that we found to be particularly helpful to keep in mind.

Decolonizing Research Knowledge

Conducting research in international settings is often a complex process looking at difficult questions and issues with different theoretical lenses (e.g., anti-colonial, liberatory, feminist) and perspectives rooted in Indigenous cultures, histories and heritage (Dei, 2012). A consistent thread in this discourse is the focus on asserting humanity in light of terribly dehumanizing imperatives of colonialism related to language, social and cultural relations, and the economy (e.g., Smith, 1999; wa Thiong'o, 1981). The strength of anti-colonialism rests in how it examines systems of oppression structured along lines of difference (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, [dis]ability, language, religion, ethnicity) repositioning the notion of agency and resistance into the heart of the framework to give voice to the oppressed and serve as a tool for accountability for the colonizer (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001; Simmons & Dei, 2012).

This gives rise to empowerment, the underlying purpose for decolonizing research, by recognizing the processes of knowledge production, how it was or is legitimized, and prioritizing research benefits to Indigenous communities (Beeman-Cadwallader, Quigley, & Yazzie-Mintz, 2011). As scholars, researchers and knowledge producers, there is need to move beyond simply challenging epistemological imperialism to rooting our practices in contexts which affirm the languages, perspectives, social values, and worldviews of our research participants (Dei, 2012).

In choosing to conduct international hermeneutic research in countries with a colonial history, concerns related to re-colonization and knowledge exploitation need to be explicitly addressed (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2011; Ndimande, 2012). This can be accomplished when researchers read broadly and deeply on issues associated with the experience of colonialism and colonial residue, articulate an appropriate level of sensitivity to the colonial experience, ensure robust cultural competence, and develop a strong awareness of the key issues and the factors which have and continue to influence the life experiences of participants. These decolonizing actions are consistent with the hermeneutic practice of articulating foreknowledge and prejudices.

Decolonization of research is a dynamic, evolving process and recognizing the potential for international research to be viewed as exploitative, careful consideration should be given to

models for the conduct of culturally appropriate research. The work of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars should inform the research design (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999). Studies by non-Indigenous researchers who have co-researched with Indigenous researchers are valuable information sources on research practices to avoid re-colonization effects (Fleet & Kitson, 2013; Hodge & Lester, 2006; Smithers Graeme, 2013; Smithers Graeme & Mandawe, 2017; Stelmach, 2009). Researchers are advised to take the time needed to establish authentic relationships and promote collaboration during all phases of study by spending time in the setting, learning the language, and making findings available to participants (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2011). This promotes phronesis, the habit of attentiveness and understanding of life as it is lived. Deliberations such as these were important to Gadamer (1960/1975) and are not only effective strategies for decolonizing research; they are also vital aspects of hermeneutic practice.

Differences in philosophical, theoretical and practical perspectives between Indigenous and Western contexts often cause confusion and frustrations in research. This tension can be alleviated by having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, theories, values, and methods that inform decolonized research practices, combined with a deep and rich understanding of the specific local context required within hermeneutic tradition, which can support understanding from an Indigenous perspective (Moules et al., 2015; Ndimande, 2012). Hermeneutic inquiry, where knowledge is co-constructed with research participants through the fusion of horizons within the hermeneutic circle/spiral (Gadamer, 1960/1995; Moules, 2002; Porter & Robinson, 2011), requires a researcher to be aware of and sensitive to such differences.

For graduate students who are cultural outsiders, an important decolonizing action that can be considered is the purposeful selection of a supervisory committee with expertise on the international context. The knowledge, skills, and experience that committee members bring to the table can be a very helpful counterbalance to a graduate student's limited international research experience. Their vigilant oversight as academic advisors can help ensure the cultural competence of the research.

Pragmatic and Logistical Factors

International research requires thoughtful preparation and careful attention to pragmatic and logistical issues. Determining the amount of time to dedicate to field work requires meticulous attention to all the required research tasks. A comprehensive plan can ensure that appropriate time and resources are allocated to essential tasks and all processes are included. Special consideration may need to be given to situations where the researcher is unknown to the participants with time and effort dedicated to establishing relationships and developing rapport. In circumstances where the researcher does not speak the local language, planning to work with a translator may be a consideration. Given the significant role language plays in hermeneutic research, the benefits would need to be carefully weighed against the challenges and limitations that this would place on the data analysis and interpretation processes.

External factors can also influence the timing of a research visit, thus staying abreast of current events where the research is to be conducted is important. As experienced researchers know, field work rarely proceeds exactly as planned, so it is prudent to factor in a healthy percentage of extra time. However, this comes with a cost, as extending field work means additional expenses

for travel and accommodation. While it is important to remain focused on the goal of data collection, prepare to be flexible when carefully laid plans come apart, and be resourceful and open to inventive solutions when issues arise. For example, we have had to deal with extended electrical power brownouts or outages, unfamiliar civic or religious holidays, being sensitive to gender proprieties for one-on-one conversations or interviews when participants are of the opposite gender, and very different cultural and administrative expectations related to class attendance at the beginning of a semester (e.g., students do not attend class until their tuition fees are paid in full, which can take a period of weeks).

Spending extensive time on field work requires adequate resources. In addition to funds, this can be a time-consuming undertaking. Having a trusted local contact person to work with in making arrangements can be a huge benefit, such as a liaison for recruiting participants or securing a place for the research conversations or helping to arrange researcher accommodations for field work. Developing a comprehensive budget can ensure that essential expenses are included. When expenses for entry visas, research permits, immunizations or medications, such as anti-malarials, and medical and travel insurance premiums are added to those for international travel, accommodation, food, local transport and possibly interpreter/translation services, the final tally is not insignificant. For some, these expenses are a prohibitive barrier to conducting international research. In an era when research funding is limited, funders may question or decide not to fund a project that either appears to have unrealistic expenses or an inadequate budget.

Utilizing a Critical Friend

For international researchers, it can be very helpful to have a "critical friend" from the research site to provide local support at different points in the research process (Costa & Kallick, 1993). This role is separate from, but complementary to, academic supervision provided by supervisors and committee members of graduate students (Appleton, 2011). Engaging one or more critical friends in an international research inquiry can serve as a mechanism to strengthen awareness and sensitivity to various contextual and historical factors which shape hermeneutic interpretation and maintain researcher integrity in particular with regard to monocultural interpretation (Appleton, 2011; Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009).

A critical friend can be invited for several purposes. First, she or he may help the researcher facilitate local logistical arrangements, provide support during the ethical review or assist with participant recruitment. Second, for a researcher as cultural outsider, a critical friend may serve as a cultural guide, a translator if participants use words or phrases in an ethnic language, or a note taker if focus groups are used. A critical friend who is familiar with the research topic and context can ask thoughtful, provocative, and challenging questions about the research design; engage in conversations that clarify the researcher's perspectives during data collection; provide critique to data interpretation; and participate in knowledge dissemination and translation in international settings. For international researchers, these purposeful discussions and communications with a critical friend could be conducted through e-mail, mail, google chat, skype, and other forms of electronic communications (Appleton, 2011; Costa & Kallick, 1993). Finally, in acknowledgement of the myriad challenges that come from carefully studying and becoming familiar with the topic, a critical friend can "commiserate and console and clarify" (Jardine, 2016, p. 1).

Ethical Considerations

Depending on the context of the inquiry to be undertaken and the participants' situation, international researchers need to be clear if additional ethic reviews are needed. For example, the school boards involved in the study conducted in Western China do not have policy and procedures in place for research; the researcher only needed to have the research plan reviewed and approved by the Canadian university where the she initiated the study. However, in the context of the study in Kenya, the researcher had to apply for a government research permit and request research affiliation with a research institution or local community organization in Kenya. As the result, extra time was planned and allocated to have these additional reviews approved before data collection.

Given the volume of data that can be generated in hermeneutic research and the distances involved for field work, data organization is key since researchers cannot easily return to the field if they discover that something is missing, or lost and not recoverable. All documents should be digitalized to facilitate transfer of documents to and from the international location. Plan to have all raw digital data (photos or recordings) backed up regularly and stored in a secure location away from the primary work location. Early in the planning stages of the inquiry, it is prudent to develop plans to meet institutional requirements for protecting research data and carefully investigate whether there are any legal restrictions on transnational or international data collection in the country to avoid problems later.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection methods in hermeneutic inquiry cannot be simply formalized into a series of technical procedures; a variety of modes of inquiry or activities can be utilized to conduct hermeneutic inquiry. In this section, we introduce methods we have adopted to understand and interpret the meaning of human experiences. These methods of conversation, photovoice, focus group discussions, and reflective journals and field notes are consistent with Kinsella's (2006) description of hermeneutic inquiries, reveal the cross-cultural competence of the researcher, and can help avoid re-colonization of participants.

Conversation

Characterized as a dialectic dialogue process of question and answer, giving and taking, talking at cross-purposes, seeing each other's point through working out the common meaning, conversation has long been recognized as a research mode for collecting, analyzing and making meaning of data (Carson, 1986; Feldman, 1999; Gadamer, 1960/1975; Guo, 2010). Conversation allows the researcher and participants to share knowledge, develop deeper understanding of the topic, and help each other make meaning of the topic under discussion (Feldman, 1999; Guo, 2010). The dialogic nature of hermeneutics gives researchers the ability to ask questions about complex human situations that are centred in language and the historical, highlighting the critical importance of context (Moules et al., 2015). As hermeneutics ventures deeply into the contextual world of research participants, researchers are called to consider not only what is said, but also

what is silenced or not said (Grondin, 1995, cited in Moules et al., 2015). Utilization of a conversational method is congruent with hermeneutics as a philosophical orientation, but also within an Indigenous worldview (Kovach, 2010). Privileging participants' voices using conversation can affirm and reinforce positive cultural identities of participants (Ndimande, 2012). While serving as an efficient data collection method, conversation is also an oral inquiry and horizon-expanding process in hermeneutic inquiry. Conversations with participants, as opposed to highly structured interviews, create spaces for thoughtful reflection and expanded horizons on the experiences being studied (Carson, 1986; Guo, 2010).

Seeking to advance understanding of a topic through a discovery of other people's standpoints and horizon is the nature of hermeneutic conversations. This requires the researcher and the participants to pay attention to the different perspectives or experiences the "other" has to share in order to achieve a fusion of horizons. Therefore, strong cross-cultural competence is a prerequisite for conducting hermeneutic research in international settings and is important to ensure successful and productive research conversations. We found that using culturally appropriate greetings were useful tactics for building rapport with participants and creating an atmosphere for conversations to flourish. In the Kenyan study, this involved standing, shaking hands, and sharing personal stories or experiences. Due to the inherent differences between oral and written means of discourse, particularly in cross-cultural or international situations where interviews may be facilitated through the work of a translator, a pilot process run can be most helpful to identify issues before beginning data collection conversations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

When conducting hermeneutic conversations, researchers can share their experiences related to the research topic or bring perspectives contradictory to participants' expressions to achieve the fusion of horizon (Guo, 2010). In addition, thoughtful choices of words to converse with participants can help keep the research conversation genuine and maintain inclusive, thoughtful, and respectful relationships with participants. Research conversations in international settings are often more complex and situational than what was planned in research design phases, therefore, researchers are expected to appreciate the essential difficulty of conducting hermeneutic conversations in cross-cultural settings. Participants may relate to the in-depth conversation as a structured interview, therefore, researchers need to intentionally preserve openness during the conversation and be prepared to face the challenges of asking questions of a personal nature to direct the inquiry deeper and re-focus the conversation related to the research topic when they go beyond research boundaries and social conventions (Baglin & Rugg, 2010; Guo, 2010; Moules, Field, McCaffrey, & Laing, 2014; Paterson & Higgs 2005; von Zweck et al., 2008). When researchers meet multiple times with participants, it is helpful to prepare a summary following each conversation to encourage reflection, mutual questioning and the generation of additional questions to clarify the unfolding stories for each participant, a process which often results in richer data and new understandings of the participants' experience (Carson, 1986).

Photovoice

Photos and video can be used as a supplementary data collection method for participants to share contextual information, helping direct the conversations to critical, meaningful objects, moments and experiences. With the availability of cell phones worldwide, use of photovoice is a more

viable option for international researchers, especially if the research population is younger and located in urban areas with good cell phone connections. Photos can reinforce memories from the setting and are useful where researchers do not need to capture elements of interactions. Video may also be used in situations where preserving an interaction is important. Regardless, attention needs to be given to the cultural appropriateness of data collection using photos or video. In addition, researchers need to be aware of potential ethical concerns with photos or video. This is a concern in international research where ethics protocols may be different, less developed or not exist at all in some locations.

The photovoice process involves the selection of, and talking about, a small number of photos which the participant believes are most significant, using a series of questions based on the SHOWeD Protocol to assist in taking a critical view of the stories portrayed through their photos (Wang & Burris 1997; Wang, 1999). Conversation flowing from these photos can serve as a means of engagement, empowerment, and a bridge to strengthen rapport, helping the participants and researcher get to know each other as they delve deeper into their inquiries (Moules et al., 2015). This method of engaging with participants provides a visual stimulus which can lead to new questions that complement or diverge from those arising solely from the conversation. This process can lead to more fusions of horizon between researcher and participant and result in deeper understanding. For example, in the Kenyan study, participants shared photos from their placement activities in a camp for internally displaced persons, a women's group meeting in a rural community, and faith-based service organization in an urban slum. These images allowed the researcher and participant to attend to the community context in ways that would not have been possible without the photos. Vivid images such as these can enhance hermeneutic writing, helping researchers reveal the diverse layers of the topic.

When utilizing this method, information with basic photography tips can be provided during the recruitment process to review possible ethical concerns and identify ways to minimize possible risks to participants themselves or those in the photo when taking pictures for the research project. Wang (1999) described how issues such as social class, access to power, and education have the potential to increase the sense of vulnerability of individuals that participants may wish to photograph. On the other hand, when participants are given control over what they photograph and which aspects of the photo they want to discuss or highlight in their conversations with researchers, this can be an empowering experience (O. Bryanton, personal communication, May 24, 2017). An information sheet can also provide ideas of alternative ways to represent or portray their experience. If the researcher is providing the cameras, then this expense and funds for participant training needs to be built into the overall budget.

Focus Group Discussions

Focus groups may be used to establish relationships between the participants and the researcher, an option for international researchers who are looking for opportunities to engage with small groups of participants that they may have only recently met (Moules et al., 2015). While some hermeneutic inquiries use conversational interviews with family members as a group, very few appear to take advantage of the benefits of a focus group to highlight the voices of participants (e.g., Laing & Moules, 2013). A focus group may generate deeper and richer data through a discussion of the topic between participants, allowing for additional fusions of horizons and

interpretations. For example, in the Kenyan study, the participants were very keen to share and discuss their experiences of community-based learning with each other. This focus group was their first opportunity for peer sharing. Listening to, and observing, the interactions among and between the individual participants was insightful for the researcher. Opportunities for participants to reflect on and discuss their shared or unique aspects of their experience can potentially allow participants and researcher to reach a new fusion of horizons. In addition, researchers who are positioned as cultural outsiders may gain insights from focus group discussions where participants might only feel insiders would understand and would simply not think to talk about with an outsider. On the practical side, thought should be given to who will facilitate the focus group discussion, an issue for researchers who are cultural or linguistic outsiders.

Reflective Journals and Field Notes

A critical aspect of hermeneutic work is the reflexivity of the researcher engaged in their own reflective writing regarding the research process, personal learnings, or confusions as part of a personal process of turning around the topic (Moules et al., 2015). A self-reflective grasp of the hermeneutic structure of the lived meaning of time is a difficult and often laborious task, involving a process of reflectively appropriating, clarifying, and making explicit the aspects of meaning of the experience (van Manen, 2014). For international hermeneutic inquiries, a considerable amount of time needs to be dedicated to writing researcher's reflective journals or field notes to document the myriad of background elements associated with the international context for the research. This is in addition to the typical notes, reflections, and observations from the conversations, questions that emerge from listening to recorded conversations, or points that come up during the focus group discussion. These include additional information such as vocal intonations and gestures of participants, notes related to the meeting context, or reflections and notes from reading or re-reading data.

Data Interpretation and Writing

Hermeneutic analysis encompasses more than the spoken words of the participants, and can include speaking, listening, sharing, questioning, and reflecting by the participants and researcher as they engage in a conversation about what their experience means to them. Consequently, thorough preparation for field work and strong cross-cultural competence is essential. Data analysis in hermeneutic inquiry starts as soon as data collection begins. We examine here issues related to the transcription of conversations, interpretation of data, and writing hermeneutically in an international context.

Transcription of Conversations

In hermeneutic research, decisions regarding the transcription process should be carefully documented in a researcher's log to ensure consistency. Assuring the accuracy and validity of transcripts is critical since the transcripts are not simply copies of the original conversation; they are interpretive and decontextualized (Kvale, 1996). Transcriber reliability and the interpretational character of transcription needs to be considered along with the layers of context that are documented in the transcribing process around features such as pauses, repetitions, and

tone of voice to interpret what is said or unsaid particularly in international research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Participants at a distance could be offered the opportunity to discuss the transcript or summary via phone or Skype instead of more traditional member check processes to ensure accuracy and clarity (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). There are those, however, that do not see a fit of any form of member checking with hermeneutics (see for e.g., Moules et al., 2015).

Interpretation

Interpretation of the meaning of experiences occurs through a precise understanding of the social, cultural, and historical context (Gadamer, 1960/1975). A systematic process of listening to conversations along with reading and re-reading conversation transcripts, summaries, field notes, and the researcher's reflective journal helps to identify emergent themes from the data and establish naïve understanding of both the whole and parts. This initial phase in working toward a hermeneutic understanding of participants' experiences is followed by writing about the context for each participant prior to presenting the meaning and understanding of their experience by situating his/her horizon. Throughout the interpretative process, researchers need to take time to allow all the histories and voices to reveal themselves and have their say (Jardine, Graham, Clifford, & Friesen, 2002). It would be prudent for researchers to periodically revisit preparatory notes and readings to ensure that they remain sensitive to the international context of their research. As international researchers move further into data interpretation, deeper layers of understanding will be uncovered and they should remain vigilant to ensure that they remain conscious of the hermeneutical situation/position along with the cultural and historical context (Gadamer, 1960/1975).

Listening to the recordings along with reflective writing while still in the field can help form (naïve) interpretations and uncover additional questions that need to be asked. As data analysis and interpretation continues, researchers should clearly acknowledge and remain open and sensitive to the various ways that their preunderstanding has and continues to influence their interpretations.

Writing Hermeneutically

In hermeneutic research, a researcher is a seeker of meaning. The purpose of hermeneutic inquiry is not to provide "information" or "solutions" in a technical sense, but to enhance our perspectives and provide pathic forms of understanding that are situational, relational, and enactive (van Manen, 2014). Therefore, hermeneutic writing reflects how philosophical and methodological perspectives are practiced in research and the process of presenting and making sense of human experiences. In other words, writing hermeneutically is not simply writing up conclusions or preparing a report at the end of inquiry, it is an engaging process with human existence in a linguistic form (Gadamer, 2006). A hermeneutic writer does not present the reader with a conclusive argument or with a determinate set of ideas, essences, or insights. Instead, he or she orientates the reader reflectively to participants' experiences in recognizable form.

Hermeneutic research is a philosophical project, therefore, its writing needs to reflect the philosophical reflection on the world and the experiences being studied (van Manen, 2006). Thoughtful hermeneutic writing presents something familiar into profoundly unfamiliar and

touches the readers by the epiphany effect of its reflective engagement with prior experiences. The hermeneutic text brings readers in touch with the familiar experiences, resonates with the reflective being, and changes their understanding of the being through gaining new meanings from the text and experiences.

Hermeneutic inquiry-writing reflects the idea that no text is ever perfect, no interpretation is ever complete, no explication of meaning is ever final, and no insight is beyond challenge (Moules et al., 2015; van Manen & Adams, 2010). During the writing process, a hermeneutic writer is situated in a solitary sphere and is profoundly affected by the infinite uncertainty and possibility presented in the text. The researcher steps back from the text to encounter the fundamental questions behind the naked human experiences, recognizing the limitation of human understanding, without completely stepping out of his or her social, historical, biographic being. In writing international hermeneutic research, a researcher considers the integration of the fundamental questions addressed in the study, the philosophical and interpretive traditions of hermeneutics, the linguistic and cultural differences as interpretive conditions and analysis of the data, and a deepened understanding of meanings and human experiences from comparative perspectives. A hermeneutic writer also moves through the hermeneutic circle to consider a particular topic in both international and local contexts. This is a challenging process, but one that supports broader interpretations through different lenses. Our own research writing experiences confirm that it is sometimes challenging to find the Indigenous terms or words that have equivalent English expressions or vice versa. Therefore, it is always helpful for a researcher to adopt key Indigenous words or phrases to achieve accurate interpretation. This writing process not only facilitates transnational conversations on the topic, but also allows the researcher to move in and out of the data and reflect the possibilities and limitations language creates in understanding and interpreting the meanings.

Conclusions

As an interpretive methodology, hermeneutics allows an international researcher to gain deeper understanding and new perspectives on human experiences through interpreting text and highlighting the cultural, historical, philosophical, and linguistic characteristics of the research setting. Therefore, it appeals to researchers in fields such as education, clinical psychology, criminology, legal studies, family sciences, nursing, and medicine. However, the unique philosophical legacy embedded in hermeneutics and the distinctive processes of interpretive writing combined with the challenges inherent with working in an international setting need to be faced head on by researchers who are interested in conducting hermeneutic inquiry in international settings.

Based on our experiences with two hermeneutic studies conducted in Kenya and China, we present these ideas as signposts to guide hermeneutic inquiry, particularly for graduate students who are traversing the intersection of research design and international context. We examined philosophical, methodological, practical, and ethical issues a researcher needs to consider when designing and implementing a hermeneutic study in international settings. These considerations are not only practical for following hermeneutic traditions in international research, but also crucial for decolonizing research and knowledge through transnational conversations and collaborations.

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