

## TITLE PAGE

**Title:** The role of philosophical hermeneutics in contributing to an understanding of physiotherapy practice: a reflexive illustration.

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26 **Abstract**

27

28 **Title:** The role of philosophical hermeneutics in contributing to an understanding of  
29 physiotherapy practice: a reflexive illustration.

30

31 This paper provides an overview of Philosophical Hermeneutics based on the work  
32 of German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer. The concepts of the ‘hermeneutic  
33 circle’ as a vehicle for interpretation, management of the researcher’s pre-  
34 understandings (prejudices), and the ‘fusion of horizons’ are introduced and  
35 illustrated by examples from the first author’s research, before considering how  
36 rigour can be achieved in this type of research. The actual research study which  
37 aimed to explore how shared decision making and patient partnership are addressed  
38 by physiotherapists in the process of exercise prescription for patients with low back  
39 pain (LBP) is not the focus of this paper. However short descriptions of the study are  
40 used to explore issues surrounding a hermeneutic inquiry.

41 For physiotherapists interested in research or considering undertaking an interpretive  
42 phenomenological inquiry, this theoretical discussion paper explores how Gadamer’s  
43 philosophy offers a credible framework for undertaking such research.

44

45 **Key words**

46 Philosophical Hermeneutics

47 Interpretive Phenomenology

48 Physiotherapy

49 Research

50

51 The role of philosophical hermeneutics in contributing to an understanding of  
52 physiotherapy practice: a reflexive illustration.

53

54 Introduction

55 The landscape in which physiotherapists practice continues to evolve, bringing with it  
56 new and exciting challenges, which include developing a greater understanding and  
57 appreciation of both patients' and clinicians' care experiences. In research a  
58 qualitative methodology is appropriate when the aim is to gain insight into the ways  
59 that people perceive, interpret and explain their world. Within physiotherapy the  
60 amount of qualitative research published has steadily expanded in line with the  
61 increasing acceptance that the physiology of the human body cannot be separated  
62 from the psychosocial factors contributing to the experience of pain, illness and  
63 disability [1]. There are many philosophical orientations and methodologies available  
64 to researchers within the 'qualitative' research toolbox, but ultimately, the choice  
65 depends upon the research question and the skills and position of the researcher in  
66 relation to research processes.

67

68 This paper provides an overview of the key features of a Philosophical Hermeneutic  
69 inquiry and demonstrates how this 'interpretive' orientation based on the work of  
70 German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer [2] provided credible and rigorous  
71 guidance for a doctoral research study undertaken by the first author [3]. This paper  
72 offers an insight into some concepts described by Gadamer [2] that were useful in  
73 facilitating understanding of participants' experiences, such as the 'Hermeneutic  
74 Circle' as a vehicle for interpreting the text, tradition, the importance and  
75 management of the researcher's pre-understandings (prejudices), dialogue, and the

76 contribution of the concept of 'Fusion of Horizons'. Finally it considers how rigour  
77 (trustworthiness) can be achieved in this type of research.

78

79 A full account of the research to which this paper relates exploring the process of  
80 exercise prescription for patients with low back pain (LBP), taking into account  
81 issues such as decision making and how this accords with patient preferences and  
82 experiences has been previously reported [4,5].

83

84 This article may be of interest to allied health professionals in advanced practice  
85 roles, and those undertaking higher degrees and planning research, to decide  
86 whether Philosophical Hermeneutics is suitable as a foundation for research projects  
87 seeking to answer questions related to the experiences of clinical staff or patients.

88

## 89 Background

90 Phenomenology, which can refer to a philosophy with a set of principles which can  
91 be used to underpin a methodology has two different philosophical traditions;  
92 descriptive and interpretive. 'Descriptive' phenomenology seeks to describe rather  
93 than explain, and starts from a researcher perspective free from pre-conceptions [6,  
94 7]. In contrast, a researcher using 'interpretive' phenomenology aims to describe,  
95 consider and interpret participants' experiences [8]. This involves gathering context-  
96 specific, in-depth accounts of perceptions using inductive, qualitative methods such  
97 as interviews, participant observations and other bespoke creative methods to  
98 present an interpretation of the meaning of the experiences of research participants.  
99 Phenomenological approaches have previously been adopted within physiotherapy

100 [9, 10] although as Walsh [11] found with nursing research, the particular  
101 philosophical tradition within these studies is often not explicitly defined or apparent.  
102 The marriage of phenomenology and hermeneutics was introduced into modern  
103 philosophy by Heidegger in opposition to Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology  
104 [6, 12]. The discovery of the ontological significance of understanding formed the  
105 foundation of Heidegger's 'new' phenomenology which was a major turning point in  
106 hermeneutic theory, and Gadamer's work can be conceived as an attempt to work  
107 through the implications of it. All deliberate interpretation takes place on the basis of  
108 historicity, that is, on the basis of a pre reflective understanding of 'being' in relation  
109 to the interpreter's past and future [2].

110

111 Phenomenology therefore becomes hermeneutical when its method is taken to be  
112 interpretive. As a contemporary philosophy and research methodology,  
113 hermeneutics is concerned with the thick description which emanates from people's  
114 detailed stories of their experiences in their everyday understanding of 'Being-in-the-  
115 world'. Hermeneutics is described as a method which facilitates interpretation of  
116 texts within certain contexts, where 'texts' refers to sources of information in addition  
117 to the written or spoken word [13]. The 'hermeneutic circle' is a metaphor used to  
118 describe the dynamic movement which occurs between parts and the whole of the  
119 text whilst seeking 'verstehen' (understanding). The researcher constantly weaves in  
120 and out of data sets whilst conducting the research reflexively, so that the  
121 researcher's 'self' is central to understanding and interpretation using Gadamerian  
122 Hermeneutics.

123

124 The study itself took place in a musculoskeletal physiotherapy service delivered  
125 across seven departments in South West England. The study involved collecting  
126 data which explored both physiotherapists' and patients' perspectives and  
127 experiences of exercise prescription for the management of LBP and the extent to  
128 which this was a collaborative process. Analyses based on the work of Gadamer  
129 address data as 'text'. In this study, text was in the form of observation field notes  
130 and transcribed interviews (informal field interviews and more formal semi-structured  
131 interviews), which was then placed alongside and fused in context with the author's  
132 experiences or pre-understandings as a physiotherapist with extensive knowledge of  
133 managing patients with LBP to facilitate interpretation allowing for a more complete  
134 understanding.

135

136 Within qualitative research the process of examining and recording the impact of the  
137 researcher and the intersubjective elements on the research is known as 'reflexivity'  
138 [14]. Being 'reflexive' requires researchers to focus on how their presence and  
139 positioning might influence the research process and outcomes. Identification of their  
140 pre-understandings or prejudices of the topic enhances transparency and also helps  
141 them to examine their prejudices and the degree to which these influence  
142 subsequent interpretation by trying to remain open to all possible alternative  
143 meanings. These were therefore set out prior to the commencement of the research  
144 study. In addition rather than presenting a sanitised account, reflexivity was used to  
145 highlight how the researcher's 'self' used their experience and insider perspective to  
146 obtain richer data. This specific comportment towards the participants and clinical  
147 setting enabled the researcher greater access to their world to understand, interpret  
148 and make meaning of the data.

149

150 The Hermeneutic Circle

151 Gadamer used Heidegger's Hermeneutic Circle as the central organising concept in  
152 hermeneutics [12]. The idea of the Hermeneutic Circle (see figure 1) is that the  
153 understanding of a piece of text always modifies the whole and the constituent parts.  
154 Tuohy et al. [15] described this 'circularity of understanding' as the manner in which  
155 interpretation is achieved by the reciprocal process of questioning with the aim to  
156 discover the true meaning of experience for that person. However, a circle has no  
157 end point, implying that existing interpretations can be challenged, and more  
158 meaningful insights may come along. In some qualitative methodologies data  
159 saturation is required to recognise the end of new insights, but in Philosophical  
160 Hermeneutics they are replaced, thus no meaning saturation can exist [16].

161

162 *Insert Figure 1 about here*

163

164 Entering the Hermeneutic Circle involved the author using their own experiences or  
165 pre-understandings as a physiotherapist working with patients with LBP to better  
166 appreciate the participants' experiences. To achieve this, a critical self-awareness of  
167 their professional background, views and experiences were juxtaposed alongside  
168 accounts of the participants, and brought into the Hermeneutic Circle to create an  
169 understanding and interpretation of those narratives. In an effort to make this  
170 process both visible and transparent, personal reflections of how experiences were  
171 used to gain an understanding and interpretation of the data were set out in a  
172 different font in the doctoral research report in sections termed 'reflective comments'  
173 [3].

174

175 In the study, interviews were used to explore physiotherapists' and patients'  
176 perspectives of the characteristics and processes of exercise prescription, and  
177 uncover explicit details that are normally implicit such as feelings, understandings  
178 and decision making. In transcribing the interviews the author became involved in  
179 the 'circularity of understanding', engaging with the participants' narratives to try and  
180 gain a true understanding for each person. For example it became apparent early on  
181 that exercise was almost regarded as the 'default' approach to care for this patient  
182 group. However, when deciding on the type of exercise to be prescribed, it emerged  
183 that the physiotherapists perhaps more than had been anticipated, had a thorough  
184 appreciation of the evidence base for the effect of exercise therapy in the  
185 management of LBP and voiced an awareness that patient preference should be  
186 considered as an intrinsic motive to initiate and maintain an exercise programme.  
187 Yet despite this, all but one talked about constructing an intervention based on  
188 specific postural, structural or biomechanical problems identified at assessment,  
189 such that the focus of the interaction appeared to be on the clinical condition and not  
190 the person.

191

192 According to Gadamer [2] there can be no understanding without the activity of  
193 questioning, and Koch [16] argued that for a text to become an object of  
194 interpretation it must ask a question of the interpreter. Throughout the process of  
195 understanding, the dialogue that occurred between the researcher and the 'texts' led  
196 to the formation of several questions in the researchers mind such as; 'Do  
197 physiotherapists, based on their perceived professional role, have a feeling that they  
198 have not done their job properly unless they have given the patient a specific regime



199 of home exercises?’ ‘Does this approach help to reinforce their own professional  
200 identity as physiotherapists, and offer a way for the therapist to remain in control of  
201 the situation?’

202

203 By accessing experiences of the physiotherapists and patients, in hermeneutic terms  
204 the author was able to use their experiences to discuss key factors relating to  
205 exercise prescription and patient participation that were identified in the observations  
206 or from the informal field interviews. This allowed for the Hermeneutic Circle to be  
207 experienced and through such feedback and subsequent dialogue shared  
208 understandings reached.

209

#### 210 Acknowledging the effects of pre-understandings and experience of the researcher

211 One of the core features of Philosophical Hermeneutics is the notion of pre-  
212 understandings, pre-conceptions, or what Gadamer considered as ‘prejudices’.  
213 Gadamer declared that we live within traditions that are part of our history, and it is  
214 only through this historical awareness and past experiences that understanding is  
215 possible; researchers cannot simply rid themselves of what they know and think [17].  
216 Gadamer maintained that it is impossible to lose one’s pre-understandings, arguing  
217 that it is only through our ‘prejudices’ that we can begin to understand the ‘lifeworld’  
218 of others; there can be no understanding without having first understood [18]. This  
219 perspective has important implications for physiotherapists aiming to use qualitative  
220 methodologies because their professional background is rooted in positivism and the  
221 importance of a single reality and logic to investigate the physical sciences.  
222 Researchers within the physical science traditions or even those following a  
223 Husserlian phenomenological approach might contend that in order to understand

224 the nature of a phenomenon all prejudice must be eliminated [6]. However, it was  
225 considered that the researcher's past experiences could not simply be 'bracketed' by  
226 employing certain methods, and so a reflexive form of bracketing was used, as to  
227 suspend the subjectivity of the researcher given their professional background, was  
228 deemed to be unachievable [19]. Gadamer viewed an awareness of historically  
229 informed prejudices as a basic contention of understanding:

230

231 *"A person who believes he is free of prejudices, relying on the objectivity of his*  
232 *procedures and denying that he himself is conditioned by historical circumstances,*  
233 *experiences the power of the prejudices that unconsciously dominate him....A person*  
234 *who does not admit he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what manifests*  
235 *itself by their light"* [2, p.360].

236

237 Therefore Philosophical Hermeneutics was chosen as it allowed the physiotherapist  
238 researcher to remain visible in the 'frame' of the research as an interested and  
239 subjective co-participant rather than a detached and impartial observer. This, in turn,  
240 provided an opportunity to engage participants in bringing to awareness, describing  
241 and interpreting a particular aspect of clinical practice thus making their experiences  
242 accessible to the researcher.

243

#### 244 Fusion of Horizons

245 'Fusion of horizons' was a key term for Gadamer which he associated with  
246 understanding and which occurs when the horizon of another person or text  
247 intersects with our own horizon, changing and extending our construction of  
248 understanding. For Gadamer hermeneutical understanding is also the result of

249 'fusion of horizons' between the past and our present which includes attention to the  
250 prejudices individuals bring to the interpretive event. In this research the historical  
251 horizon of the past was the personal and professional background of the researcher,  
252 combined with the literature relating to exercise prescription for LBP, patient-centred  
253 care and shared decision making, situated alongside the participants' texts.  
254 Using a hermeneutic approach and the concept of 'fusion of horizons', interpretation  
255 is seen as a process that permeates every activity such that the research account  
256 and findings that emerge are based on the specific interpersonal context of the  
257 researcher who uses 'Self' as a research tool. The Hermeneutic Circle facilitated  
258 interpretation of the participants' experiences whilst acknowledging the researcher's  
259 own anticipations and expectations of what they might do or say. Familiarity with  
260 physiotherapy practice also enhanced the quality of questioning during interviews;  
261 this may not have been achieved by a researcher unfamiliar with physiotherapy  
262 practice. Through such subsequent dialogue a richer understanding emerged and a  
263 new horizon formed between researcher and participants. This is, indeed, a useful  
264 position of understanding between the researcher and researched.

265

#### 266 Achieving trustworthiness (rigour)

267 Qualitative research is often criticised by physical science healthcare professionals  
268 for lacking methodological rigour and for introducing researcher bias. Freshwater  
269 [14] has argued that bias is inevitable in any research, although this may not always  
270 be fully known or understood by the researcher. Therefore any researcher, following  
271 a Gadamerian approach, has a responsibility to ensure that their research is  
272 'trustworthy' in the sense of being able to demonstrate both rigour (process) and  
273 relevance (end product).

274

275 The concepts of validity, reliability and generalisability provide the traditional  
276 framework for evaluation of quantitative research; however these positivist concepts  
277 are inappropriate for qualitative research because they are concerned with  
278 measurement and representation, and qualitative researchers do not measure  
279 anything. The issue of appropriate qualitative criteria has been the subject of  
280 considerable debate, indeed Green and Thorogood [20, p.243] suggested that “the  
281 idea of quality criteria is a logical impossibility”. Lincoln and Guba [21] proposed four  
282 criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability) which linked well  
283 with the way the researcher accounted for their role in the research.

284

285 Koch [16, 22] argued that credibility is enhanced when researchers describe their  
286 experience as researchers, ensuring that sufficient detail and reflective writing is  
287 visible within the research report. Credibility can be further established by ensuring  
288 that the perspectives of participants are accurately accounted. In this study the  
289 researcher endeavoured to not misrepresent in anyway the perspectives of the  
290 participants which had been provided in good faith by the use of many original  
291 participant quotes. Credibility was further enhanced by returning to the research  
292 participants repeatedly during the research process. Doyle, [23] based on reports  
293 from other phenomenological researchers, commented that participants benefit from  
294 being treated as equals in the research process, and are interested to hear the  
295 researcher’s interpretation of what they have shared. The use of text interpretation  
296 summaries allowed participants to comment on the accuracy and to critically reflect  
297 on the extent to which the researcher’s interpretations reflected the experience of the  
298 phenomenon as understood by them [3,24]. This approach further fitted with

299 Gadamer's description of the Hermeneutic Circle, and also allowed for Gadamer's  
300 notion of the 'fusion of horizons' as returning data interpretation to the participants  
301 offered the opportunity to stimulate shared understandings.

302

303 One way for a Gadamerian based research study to demonstrate dependability is for  
304 the process to be audited. A study and its findings are auditable when another  
305 researcher can clearly follow the decision trail used by the investigator in the study,  
306 and the researcher's position vis-a-vis the research process is transparent. True to  
307 the philosophical approach it is acknowledged that the researcher's previous  
308 experiences unquestionably influenced the interpretive perspectives and ways of  
309 constructing meaning and they could not be certain that another researcher would  
310 arrive at the same conclusions given the same data, perspective and situation.

311 Nevertheless transparency about the research method, and presentation of a  
312 detailed discussion of the findings should allow a cautious reader to decide whether  
313 the findings 'fit' into contexts outside the study situation which are both meaningful  
314 and applicable in terms of their own experiences (transferability) [22].

315

316 Using this interpretive phenomenological approach requires no independent analysis  
317 of the data. This is because data are co-constituted during the interview process  
318 between the researcher and participant, often as a result of intense engagement.

319 Therefore 'objective verifiers' bring to the analysis their own pre-understandings with  
320 respect to past experiences, and this introduces a third dimension to the analysis –  
321 one that lacks the context of the interview event. To contribute to the rigour of the  
322 analysis process, the second author (TM) challenged (RS) about the methods  
323 employed to interpret the data.

324

325 Conclusion

326 This article has provided both a personal and theoretical insight into the use of  
327 Philosophical Hermeneutics and revealed how the concepts of the Hermeneutic  
328 Circle, position of the research 'Self', and Fusion of Horizons offer an approach for  
329 physiotherapists to explore their practice which contrasts to the traditional notions of  
330 objectivity and quantification. Based on the work of Gadamer this paper illustrates  
331 how his philosophical thinking and primacy of application to the understanding of  
332 texts can also be successfully applied to the understanding of healthcare situations  
333 within physiotherapy to explore both patients' and clinicians' perspectives more  
334 thoroughly. For those physiotherapists interested in research from a Hermeneutic  
335 Interpretive Phenomenological approach, this paper might be useful when deciding  
336 whether Philosophical Hermeneutics is an appropriate foundation for their research.

337

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400

401 **Figure 1. The Hermeneutic Circle**

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