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Examining Researchers' Pre-Understandings as a Part of the Reflexive Journey in Hermeneutic Research

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Abstract

This article considers one of the philosophical sources of reflexivity, the concept of “pre-understandings” as envisaged by the German philosopher, Hans Georg Gadamer. There are a number of empirical research studies employing a Gadamerian approach, and while some authors may describe methods of examining pre-understandings and applying findings reflexively to hermeneutic enquiry, there remains a general lack of sufficient detail given over to the “how” in relation to this process. Furthermore, Gadamer describes how the “provoking” of one’s pre-understandings is required in order to make them realizable and this is rarely evident within authors’ work. As part of a hermeneutic research project exploring health professionals’ views of conscientious objection to abortion, we as a research team undertook a process of “provoking” our pre-understandings surrounding conscientious objection to abortion. This was undertaken by a preliminary discussion to examine our pre-understandings. A second discussion followed to examine if and how our pre-understandings had altered, and was conducted after the research team had read five transcribed interviews from a study on health care professionals’ perspectives of conscientious objection to abortion. By reviewing our pre-understandings, we were able to begin to make conscious what was unconscious, widening some of our initial views, being more definitive in others and in some cases endorsing our original pre-understandings. Using a reflexive process, we assimilated these findings with our research project and used it to inform our data collection, analysis and interpretation, demonstrating the application of rigor to our hermeneutic study.

Keywords

methods in qualitative inquiry, qualitative evaluation, hermeneutic phenomenology, Husserlian phenomenology, ethical inquiry

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Background

Qualitative research is now firmly established in a number of health disciplines with its recent rise to prominence being outlined by Alasuutari (2010). As part of its evolution, inevitably it has become more sophisticated with an increasing number of philosophers’ work being used to underpin such studies (Fleming et al., 2003). Some 30–40 years ago many qualitative researchers were attempting to emulate criteria for rigor used by quantitative researchers. This was particularly noticeable in studies based on the work of Husserl (2009/1930), where researchers attempted to bracket or withhold their own thoughts from the data they were analyzing. However, this approach was challenged by others (Crotty, 1996) and as Lvasseur (2003, p. 416) posited, “*Thus, the vexing question*

of whether we can ever be free of our own conceptual understanding and particular historical point of view is doubted: Even if we, as researchers, can bracket our own viewpoints, what of the participants?” The reverse situation has now come to the fore with the concept of reflexivity being considered key in rigorous qualitative studies (Dodgson, 2019). Authors such as Shaw (2016), however, offer a robust critique of some of the

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ways in which this concept, like others before it, have become misunderstood or misapplied.

In this article, we consider one of the philosophical sources of reflexivity; the concept of “pre-understandings” as envisaged by the German philosopher, Hans Georg Gadamer (1900–2002). A central philosophical question, to which Gadamer refers, in his main work “Wahrheit und Methode” (Truth and Method) (Gadamer, 2010/1960) is: “How can understanding be gained?” Approaching this question requires, according to Gadamer, becoming aware of one’s pre-understandings because they exist before the process of understanding begins and influence emerging understandings. Becoming reflexive, therefore, is the central aspect of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. It relates to one’s pre-understanding because this is seen as the starting point where true understanding begins (Figal, 1999).

Hermeneutics must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to the subject matter that comes into language through the traditionary text and has, or acquires, a connection with the tradition from which the text speaks. On the other hand, hermeneutical consciousness is aware that its bond to this subject matter does not consist in some self-evident, unquestioned unanimity, as is the case with the unbroken stream of tradition. (Gadamer, 2006, p. 295)¹

However, Gadamer neither provided a clear definition of “pre-understanding” nor repeated a single term consistently, even within the German publications of “Wahrheit und Methode” (Gadamer, 2010). In awareness that other terms such as “prejudice” (Gadamer, 2006) were sometimes used in translations or academic literature, we decided to use the term pre-understanding as this was also used in the Gadamerian-based research method (Fleming et al., 2003). While noting that this term might require further discussion, we used the term pre-understanding within this article because it expresses the relationship between “understanding” that is aimed to be achieved and those understandings that each team member held prior to it, elucidated by the “pre” in its iteration.

Gadamer (2010) referred to the importance of becoming aware of individual perceptions, thoughts and preconceived opinions in relation to a specific topic of interest or a situation if understanding is to be achieved. Pre-understandings characterize a person’s range of vision at a specific point in their life, which can be perceived and challenged throughout life-experiences and situations but are flexible and dynamic in their nature meaning that they can change during or after experiences that are made during reflexive processes. This explains why Gadamer attributes importance to the aspect of becoming aware of one’s pre-understandings as an initial point during the process of understanding. It respects how a person’s view can change and Gadamer suggests that in such a case an “increased understanding” is gained. Pre-understandings are, according to Gadamer, also dynamic in the way that depth of understanding can be different in each team member, related to the degree of how intensively they are identified. This means that the depth

of self-reflection in relation to how one’s own pre-understandings are identified, influences the depth of the understanding at which one eventually arrives. In addition, his philosophy proposes that pre-understandings exist and characterize a person’s background and that this is related to their language and tradition. Pre-understandings, therefore, cannot be excluded, which is the opposite of Husserl’s idea of reduction. Also contrary to Husserl (2009), pre-understandings should not be eliminated but provoked in hermeneutic understanding (Gadamer, 2010). This Gadamerian understanding has roots in Heidegger’s understanding of “fore-structures,” although these comprised the tenet that the way in which someone “being in the world” influenced how this person interpreted things or phenomena (Heidegger, 2001). Gadamer further introduced his idea of a “hermeneutic trained consciousness”:

Rather, a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither “neutrality” with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings. (Gadamer, 2006, pp. 271–272)

According to Gadamer, only the conscious dealing with one’s own pre-understandings allows deeper understanding to be gained. However, pre-understandings are not obvious at once but need to be provoked and identified. Reflexive processes are necessary to identify, change or revise existing pre-understandings, for example while dealing with the text’s alterity or alternative meanings. Gadamer explained:

The prejudices and fore-meanings that occupy the interpreter’s consciousness are not at his free disposal. He cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstandings. Rather, this separation must take place in the process of understanding itself, and hence hermeneutics must ask how that happens. But that means it must foreground what has remained entirely peripheral in previous hermeneutics: temporal distance and its significance for understanding. (Gadamer, 2006, p. 330)

The conscious dealing with pre-understandings contributes to the development of an increased understanding that finally enables one to experience and come to a “fusion of horizons” that can be seen as “altered-understanding” within an understanding process. Gadamer’s understanding, however, requires another understanding here as well, because understanding has no definite end and is an ongoing process. According to Gadamer, a process of understanding cannot be ended, but is interrupted and requires interruptions so that understanding is gained. Within a research study, this is conducted by a continuous reflection process. Hermeneutic thinking is ongoing, which means that the “fusion of horizons” gained after this reflection process may serve as new understandings in further

situations, research or life experiences. Thus, the need to identify “pre-understandings” within hermeneutic research as essential aspects within the process of “gaining understanding” requires a focus on the importance which is attributed to reflexive processes.

There are various examples of empirical research employing a Gadamerian approach. While some authors describe methods of examining pre-understandings and applying findings reflexively to hermeneutic enquiry (Feeley, 2019; Geanellos, 1998; Nystrom & Dahlbery, 2001; Stenner et al., 2017; Thompson, 2018; Walshaw & Duncan, 2014), there remains a general lack of sufficient detail given over to the “how” in relation to this process. Furthermore, Gadamer describes how the “provoking” of one’s pre-understandings is required in order to make them realizable (Fleming et al., 2003), and this is rarely evident within published work. In relation to this, we argue that authors often pay “lip service” to the provoking of pre-understandings, therefore it is important to consider how pre-understandings contribute to the reflexive process of gaining understanding within hermeneutic research. As this paper is concerned with an ethical issue that continues to stir up acrimonious debate in many countries (Fleming & Robb, 2019), we feel it is particularly important that our own positions be aired and challenged throughout the research process, thus reflexivity becomes a major component of our journey toward understanding.

Aim

This paper aims to detail a process of “provoking” our pre-understandings as a research team and describes how this initiates a reflexive process to alterations in understanding within an active research project. To illustrate the process we utilize empirical data drawn from our recorded discussion of our pre-understandings related to a project on which we are currently working.

A Study Exploring Conscientious Objection to Abortion

Initially, in the examining of pre-understandings, the identifying of the research question is required (Fleming et al., 2003). In a project we are currently carrying out, we aim to answer two questions applying Gadamer’s philosophy: 1. What do health care providers understand as constituting “participation in abortion?” and 2. What forms of involvement in the abortion process should health care professionals be entitled to opt out of on grounds of conscience? Such questions are emotionally charged and have the potential to be further complicated by the differing views and experiences we, as a research team, bring to the project. These views are informed by our backgrounds, as midwives and/or researchers with a psychological background, as academics and as women. Some of our team have practiced as midwives, while others have no clinical background. The team consists of five members, all women, of whom four are Roman Catholics—although only two describe themselves as practicing. Due to the heterogeneous nature of the research

team, it was likely that our pre-understandings would differ, particularly as we would be bringing divergent “historical situations” to the project, situations that Gadamer views as forming the basis of all understandings (Gadamer, 1975). As such, by examining our pre-understandings and applying the resultant altered understandings reflexively to our research project, we would be “. . . ready to understand the possibility of a multi-plicity of relative viewpoints” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 1) surrounding our project subject of conscientious objection to abortion.

The Process Undertaken to Provoke Our Pre-Understandings

Following the identification of the research questions, the provoking of pre-understandings is undertaken by focusing on dialogues. This begins to make explicit what may have been previously implicit or unobserved. Dialogue is referred to by Gadamer as one way to become aware of one’s pre-understandings and is seen as an “essential” step in the process of gaining understanding (Gadamer, 2006). He discusses how dialogue provides the basis in our lives of how from a hermeneutic perspective, we relate to other persons and our cultural past, particularly via the dialogue of question and answer (Gadamer, 2006). He goes on to describe how this is,

. . . not the residue of isolated moments, but an ongoing integrative process in which what we encounter widens our horizon, but only by overturning an existing perspective, which we can then perceive was erroneous or at least narrow. (Gadamer, 2006, p. 12)

In relation to our project, four research team members examined our pre-understandings in five stages by dialoguing with each other and with our data and then applying the findings to our research project.

Stage 1—During the first stage and prior to our data collection, the research team members sat together and audio-recorded a discussion of our own pre-understandings surrounding the subject of conscientious objection to abortion. A research team member was designated to “lead” the discussion to ensure that there was a focus’ on our pre-understandings of conscientious objection to abortion and its associated factors. Various areas emergent from the literature were explored, including what constitutes active participation in abortion, what underpins conscientious objection to abortion and accommodating conscientious objection to abortion.

Stage 2—Several months of data collection then ensued with health professionals participating in interviews undertaken by the research team surrounding conscientious objection to abortion. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the second stage saw each of us individually reviewing the same five interviews, which had been chosen at random. Each of us made notes concerning the interviews, focusing again on our pre-understandings and in particular where they may have changed.

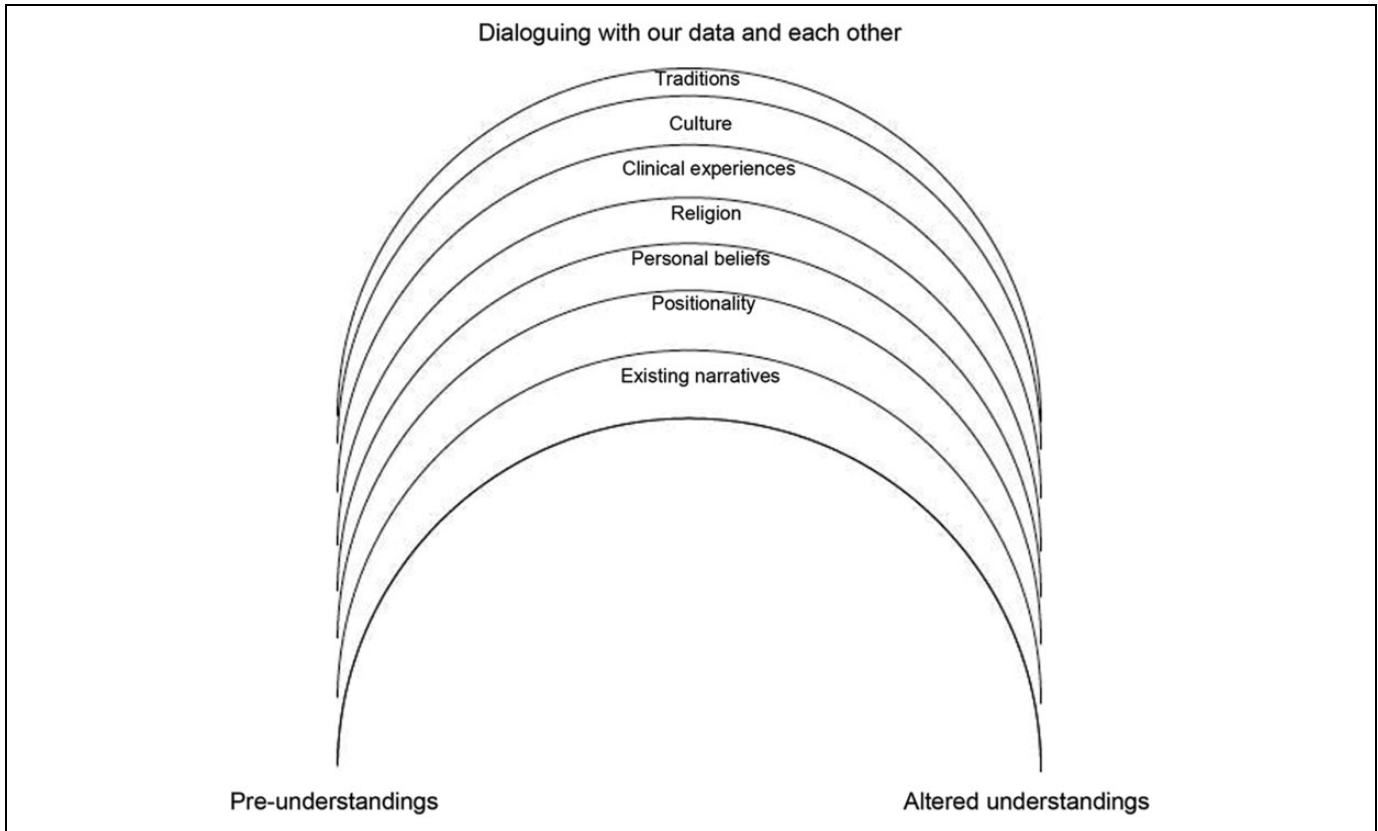


Figure 1. The arc of understanding.

Stage 3—During the third stage the same four research team members undertook a second audio-recorded discussion. This was again led by a research team member and focused on whether our pre-understandings had altered in the light of the transcripts we had reviewed (the transcribed discussions are available on request). Reference to our notes was made, with these being explored during our dialogue with each other.

Both audio recorded sessions lasted approximately 40 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.

Stage 4—During the fourth stage the transcripts were analyzed using a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) by two of the research team with a view to exploring how our pre-understandings had altered. The findings were disseminated to the research team to review prior to stage four of the process.

Stage 5—Finally, during the fifth stage, we came together and explored how our pre and altered understandings contributed to and influenced our project, recognizing that as Gadamer notes, it is only by consciously assimilating pre-understandings that we can avoid “*the tyranny of hidden prejudices that make us deaf to the language that speaks to us in tradition*” (Gadamer, 2006, p. 239). This was undertaken through dialogue and we described our new or changed understandings as our “altered understandings” (Gadamer, 2006). The change in understanding can often be a subtle adjustment or revision of what is already understood and that this will be subject to further alterations in the future.

The next section of this paper will discuss the provoking of our pre-understandings of conscientious objection to abortion and our emergent altered understandings. In addition, it will illustrate how these understandings reflexively shaped our research project.

The Arc of Understanding

Fleming et al. (2003) describe how reflecting upon our pre-understandings enables us to move beyond our pre-understandings to understanding the phenomenon—in this case conscientious objection to abortion. We describe the process from pre-understandings to altered understandings as an “arc of understanding” (Figure 1), a concept we have developed to illustrate the progressive, reflexive nature of gaining understanding. The arc shows how our understanding moved from an almost static beginning point, where our pre-understandings remained unprovoked, increasing to the height of the curvature where our dialogue was at its most dynamic, then descending to a finishing-point where our dialogue was diminished and our understanding altered. We propose that this “arc” captures the “journey” of understanding one undergoes as a hermeneutic researcher. However, as one can see from Figure 1, the arc is not one-dimensional, but rather it is multi-layered, depicting the many facets that contributed to our pre-understandings and in turn to our altered understandings. The facets included our personal and professional beliefs, the existing narrative that

surrounds conscientious objection to abortion, and the concept of tradition, which encompasses a past of which we may not always be aware.

From a Gadamerian perspective, the arc exemplifies the research team's "historical situations" which underpin our understanding of conscientious objection to abortion. It should be noted, however, that our altered understandings, while emergent from the reflexivity process remain subjective in nature. Although several people may contribute to a process with their pre-understanding, the pre-understanding itself relates to their historical situations such as culture, beliefs and tradition.

Examples of our Altered Understandings

There were a number of examples in which our pre-understandings had become altered during the process of examining them. These are presented below within the themes derived from stage four of the thematic analysis.

Religion and Conscientious Objection to Abortion

In our first discussion, our pre-understandings of why health professionals conscientiously object to participation in abortion were attributed to the health professionals' own religious beliefs "*religion, it's the key driver isn't it?*" (id 1). However, these pre-understandings did not appear to assimilate with our own personal experiences of religion, "*I'm a practising Catholic. It happens that my views coincide with the Catholic Church's. It's not the other way round*" (id 2). In effect, our pre-understandings that conscientious objection to abortion is driven by a religious context, were being challenged by ourselves. In this instance, it could be conceived that our pre-understandings were underpinned unconsciously by the apparent narrative surrounding conscientious objection to abortion and religion (Davidson et al., 2010; Pellegrino, 2002; Sepper, 2012; Weinstock, 2014) rather than our own personal beliefs and practices.

During our second discussion there was a mutual understanding that religion was not a key driver influencing conscientious objection to abortion and that it was very much influenced personally, "*Interestingly enough, most people I've interviewed have been Catholics, but that's not necessarily informed their beliefs around abortion. It's their experiences...*" (id 3). Our understanding had become "altered." This altered understanding is in fact reflected in Fleming et al. (2018) systematic review of reasons for conscientious objection to abortion, where moral reasons such as respecting the importance of conscience, respecting autonomy and moral integrity needing to be respected, received the highest number of citations. In essence, by re-examining our pre-understandings this was opening us up to altered understandings regarding the connection between religion and conscientious objection to abortion. This was an important factor in relation to our interviews and interpretations during data analysis, with our views of what underpins conscientious objection to abortion being amplified.

Participation in Abortion

As a research team, during our first discussion, we found our pre-understandings difficult to articulate in relation to what actually constitutes "participation" in abortion. This was predominantly observed in relation to the subject of "referral," which would include a health professional "recommending" a woman to abortion services. The subject of referral, however, is complex, and not entirely clear within the UK's Nursing and Midwifery Council guidance for example (NMC, 2019). This was to an extent reflected in our discussion, "*Would I object to referring somebody? I think that's where my beliefs become a bit fluid. I don't honestly know...*" (id 2). From this, one could postulate that our pre-understandings were proving "challenging" to provoke. Upon revisiting the role of referral within participation in abortion in our second discussion, we presented more definitive views, in that referring a woman to abortion services was constituted as participation in abortion. In effect, our pre-understandings had now been provoked and our dialoguing with the data and each other for a second time had been the catalyst. This is commensurate with Gadamer's belief that all understanding exists and is waiting to be "provoked" (Gadamer, 2006); yet it also illustrates the complexities of making conscious what is unconscious and how this act is not readily undertaken in a single transaction. As a research team, we had begun to view what constitutes participation in abortion from a broad rather than potentially narrow lens, a concept referred to earlier as enabling a "*widening of horizons*" (Gadamer, 2010, p. 1). This widening of our horizons would contribute to what Gadamer (2006) perceives as a "*fusing of horizons*," with participation in abortion being interpreted through both our own and our participants' eyes. Gadamer (2006) also describes how it is by being "open" to the language of new experiences that enables us to learn from them and it could be construed that by displaying this pre-requisite of "openness" within our dialogues that our pre-understandings eventually came to the fore.

Guidelines on Conscientious Objection to Abortion

The iterative process of examining our pre-understandings was illustrated in relation to the project's aim of developing national guidelines for health professionals pertaining to conscientious objection to abortion. This was not a subject that had been referred to at all in our first discussion. However, from our second discussion it was evident that we had harbored pre-understandings concerning guidelines and that they had seemingly not been provoked during the first discussion, "*I suppose we thought, 'Oh yes, it'll be this, this and this,' and now I'm thinking, 'Actually, no, let's respond to what the clinicians are telling us.' It's perfectly acceptable, probably, to still have a grey area*" (id 3). Interestingly, it was evident during our second discussion that our pre-understandings were being both provoked and altered, illustrating the dynamic nature of the process of examining pre-understandings. This also encapsulates us entering what is often described as the "hermeneutic

circle” (Gadamer, 2006), where when seeking understanding, one moves from the whole to the part and back again. Cyclically, as researchers, we were moving back and forth between becoming conscious of our own pre-understandings and then our altered understandings, which would contribute to an eventual shared understanding with our participants surrounding conscientious objection to abortion. However as Hopkins et al. (2017) describe, this eventual shared understanding “...is still tentative” (p. 23), illustrating the ongoing nature of gaining understanding. Assimilating the findings of this process with our project, our altered understandings were becoming less prescriptive, recognizing the need for flexibility, which would inevitably affect the interpretation of data in relation to the development of guidelines.

Personal Beliefs on Abortion

Our own personal beliefs concerning abortion were also explored during discussions. In a subject as emotive as conscientious objection to abortion, it was important to recognize and respect the differences in our beliefs concerning abortion and our motivations underpinning them. Our beliefs could be seen to be polarized, “...I couldn’t condone abortion...Because I believe it is a life...” (id 2) “...I believe that women have got the right to choose abortion, whether I believe the reasons for the abortion doesn’t come into to it” (id 3). Critically, our personal beliefs concerning abortion had the potential to “hijack” our study and one of the aims of exploring our pre-understandings was to ensure that we did not get “stuck” in the ethics of abortion and so challenge the legality of conscientious objection and abortion. By provoking our pre-understandings concerning abortion per se, we were able to recognize their potential impact on our study, but also to “move on” and focus on our research questions. One could argue that here we were undertaking the process of “bracketing” as discussed earlier in this paper, which in relation to pre-understandings Nystrom and Dahlberg (2001) interpret as the “withholding” of prejudices in order to be open to new understandings (or “altered understandings” as we define them). However, we would argue that to suspend, withhold or bracket out our pre-understandings concerning abortion would be somewhat impossible, as the subject of abortion is highly emotive and so the “isolating” of our personal perspectives was recognized as being unrealistic. Furthermore, our pre-understandings were motivated by both personal and professional experiences which in some cases were long held and as such would be challenging to separate, thus our aim was to make our pre-understandings explicit and to integrate them reflexively into our project enabling a more rigorous approach to data collection, analysis and interpretation.

Influences on Conscientious Objection to Abortion

During our discussions, it was evident that for those of us who had been practicing midwives, our clinical experience

contributed to the forming of our pre-understandings, “...mine is now very much shaped by clinical practice. I can’t really remember what my thoughts were (on conscientious objection to abortion) before that you know” (id 1). In addition, the non-clinicians among us began to reflect accordingly upon the discussions of the midwives, for example when the midwives described the “misuse” of conscientious objection to abortion in practice by colleagues in order to reduce their workload. This was something to which the non-clinicians had not been exposed and illustrates how by examining pre-understandings within a group setting, that they can be shaped by exposure to one another. Thus, we would contend that our process of reviewing our pre-understandings was both of “provoking” and also “developing” them from an intersubjective perspective. However, it should be noted that for those of us who were clinicians, our pre-understandings would not have been influenced wholly by clinical practice. As discussed by Geanellos (1998, p. 240), this would have been “...co-determined” with “tradition” and “language,” concepts alluded to earlier in this paper, that inform one’s background and subsequent pre-understandings (Gadamer, 2006). Accordingly, the non-clinicians among us would interpret the discussions surrounding clinical practice and conscientious objection to abortion using their own “tradition,” which would inform their subjective pre-understandings. Furthermore, the use of “language” among the midwives would be used by the non-clinicians to contribute to their own pre-understandings.

Pre-Understandings and Positionality

Our discussions revealed that by provoking one’s pre-understandings, “positionality,” i.e. the “stance” the researcher takes within a study and the impact it subsequently has upon it, is also explored and reflected upon (Van Leeuwen et al., 2017). Although the focus of this paper is on our pre-understandings, positionality was an important factor within this research project, given the heterogeneous nature of the research team and the sensitivity of the topic we were researching. It is acknowledged that the exploration of our positionality was closely linked to the process of provoking our pre-understandings. This was evidenced in that the researchers who were midwives among us had had exposure to conscientious objection to abortion in their clinical practice, which in some cases contributed to their pre-understandings. From this, the midwives represented themselves as “insiders” within the study, with the non-clinicians typifying themselves as “outsiders,” concepts reported by previous authors (Stenner et al., 2017). By acknowledging the differing positions we have within our research team, we were able to reflect upon the relationships they have with our pre-understandings and subsequent altered understandings. Importantly, this link between pre-understandings and positionality also resonates with Gadamer’s view that all understanding is underpinned by one’s “historical situation,” a situation that is constantly evolving, encompassing the past, present and future (Gadamer, 2006).

Impact of the Study on Provoking Our Pre-Understandings

Although it is evident that by provoking our pre-understandings we were able to begin to make conscious what was unconscious, it can also be argued that our pre-understandings were not always “*peripheral*” as Gadamer (2006) describes. For some of us, it was only by undertaking the project per se that we began to develop our pre-understandings. “...until this project I’ve always just had a blanket sort of approach to it (conscientious objection to abortion) whether it’s right or wrong full stop” (id 4). Therefore, the very involvement in the project was contributing to “shape” the researchers’ views, leading to altered understandings. This was not an isolated observation, as other researchers during the discussions would describe how they “*hadn’t given thought*” to certain areas until now. Gadamer (2006) sees this as us already holding pre-understandings, and it is only by confronting or provoking them that we began to give them recognition.

Applying Our Understandings Reflexively

By exploring our pre-understandings we widened some of our initial views, which reduces potentially narrow interpretations being employed within our research project and decreases us coming to what Van Leeuwen et al. (2017) describes as a “*pre-determined horizon*” (p. 4). In other cases we were able to be more definitive in our pre-understandings, particularly concerning the area of referral, where our pre-understandings were initially difficult to internalize. These, however, tended to relate more to the rights and wrongs of abortion rather than the rights of the health professionals to object. The various shifts in our pre-understandings emphasize the dynamic nature of being inside Gadamer’s “*hermeneutic circle*,” which was particularly evident after exposure to our dialogues with our data and second discussion. This inevitably points to our altered understandings being further altered as our project progresses, illustrated by Gadamer who states “...if one understands at all, one understands differently” (Gadamer, 2010, p. 301). It should be noted that not all of our “*shifts*” in pre-understandings were radical, indeed, some exhibited little or no change. However, in relation to the latter, by provoking our pre-understandings this has the propensity to endorse original understandings.

As discussed in the introduction to this paper, Gadamer’s idea of pre-understandings is not well-defined. Unlike previous authors and Gadamer himself, throughout this paper our pre-understandings are not referred to as “*prejudices*” or “*bias*.” This was a deliberate decision, in order to reduce the negative connotations that can be associated with pre-understandings when using this terminology. This is similar to Van Leeuwen, Linyuan and Week’s description of pre-understandings as being “...a constructive contribution rather than a source of bias.” (Van Leeuwen et al., 2017, p. 3) and to Stenner and colleague’s discussion of pre-understandings contributing to facilitating interpretations, “...allowing for a more complete

understanding” (Stenner et al., 2017, p. 331). Furthermore, we described our understanding as being “*altered*” in acknowledgment of the iterative process of developing and gaining understanding

By provoking our pre-understandings we have been able to “*legitimise our subjectivity*” (Van Leeuwen et al., 2017, p. 8). In turn, by examining how we have assimilated our pre-understandings into this research project, we have been able to demonstrate what Thompson (2018) describes as the “*interplay between pre-understandings and interpretation*” (p. 575). We have also realized Gadamer’s requirement of detailing process as well as findings and by exploring our pre-understandings and making it explicit how they influence our study, we have contributed to the associated need for trustworthiness and transparency within qualitative research (Fleming et al., 2003).

Limitations

This process of identifying pre-understandings and reflexively merging the resultant findings into a research project is not without its limitations. The process used was applicable to a team of researchers and a single researcher would need to adapt this. Fleming et al. (2003) suggest dialogue with a colleague, while Van Leeuwen et al. (2017) discuss employing the use of a critical friend to explore pre-understandings. In addition, due to time and resources, the pre-understandings discussions were limited to two and were reviewed during part of our data collection period. Additional data collection and time will most likely reveal further alterations in understandings that can contribute to our project.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated an approach to examining pre-understandings within hermeneutic research. It has shown that by provoking our pre-understandings concerning conscientious objection to abortion, this has at times led to altered understandings surrounding the subject. By focusing reflexively on this process, we have demonstrated how our pre and altered understandings have contributed to our research project and that by examining our own pre-understandings this, in turn, elucidates a deep level of understanding surrounding our project topic. Without this process, we would argue that only a superficial understanding may be gained. This paper adds to an existing yet limited body of knowledge concerning the “*how*” in relation to provoking and examining pre-understandings, in addition illustrating how findings influence the undertaking of a research project. It highlights the central role pre-understandings have in relation to reflexivity within hermeneutics, a role that should, in our opinion, be made explicit and detailed by researchers when undertaking hermeneutic research. Moreover, we believe our process can be adapted by all researchers in order to provoke and appraise their subjective knowledge, which would enable them to utilize this knowledge productively within their studies. We would also reiterate,

however, that while we have examined our pre-understandings and made use of our altered understandings within our research project, due to the dynamic and iterative nature of understanding this process is ongoing and is to be continued . . .

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Note

1. N.B Due to two of the research team members speaking German, both the 2006 (translated) and 2010 (German) versions of Gadamer's Truth and Method are referenced and referred to in this paper.

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