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# **Pre-understanding: An interpretation-enhancer and horizon-expander in research**

## **Abstract**

Pre-understanding – our presuppositions of reality – underlies all research. Many researchers probably also draw productively on their pre-understanding in their studies. However, very few rationales and methodological resources exist for how researchers can enrich their research by mobilising their pre-understanding more actively and systematically. We elaborate and propose a framework for how researchers more actively, systematically and visibly can bring forward their pre-understanding and use it as a positive input in research, alongside formal data and theory. In particular, we show how researchers, in dialogue with data and theory, can mobilize their pre-understanding as an interpretation-enhancer and horizon-expander throughout the research process, including stimulating imagination and idea generation, broadening the empirical base, and evaluating what empirical material and theoretical ideas are interesting and relevant to pursue.

## **Keywords**

pre-understanding, knowledge production, theory development, interesting studies, research methods, hermeneutics

## **Introduction**

Formal data and established theory are typically recognized as the main inputs into social and organizational research (e.g. Eisenhardt, Graebner, & Sonnenshein, 2016; Mouzelis, 2003). However, a more basic, but considerably less actively and systematically used, or at least reported, input is the researcher's *pre-understanding*. Originally developed within hermeneutics, the notion of pre-understanding stipulates that we never develop knowledge from 'ground zero' but always rely on some form of prior understanding (e.g. individually and collectively accumulated knowledge, ideas, perspectives, beliefs, customs, assumptions, goals, interests) of the phenomena under investigation (Feher, 2016; Gadamer, 1960/1994; Palmer, 2004; Taylor, 1979). Given its pervasive nature, it is crucial to consider carefully how the researcher's pre-understanding affects and can be mobilized in knowledge development.

Many interpretive-oriented (qualitative) researchers certainly claim that they draw on their pre-understanding in their studies (e.g. Aspers & Corte, 2019; Denzin, 2001; Fleming, Gaidys, & Robb, 2003; Knapp, 2016; Mills, 1959; Strauss, 1987; Suddaby, 2006; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006), primarily because in qualitative research 'the researcher *is* the instrument of research' (Maxwell, 1996 p. 27). This is particularly the case in auto-ethnographic studies where the researcher is the 'primary focus' of research and, thus, draws extensively on their pre-understanding (e.g. Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Empson, 2013; Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016). There have also been some efforts to use pre-understanding more ambitiously when working with empirical surprises (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011) and ethnographic work with another culture (Agar, 1986).

Yet, despite many (qualitative) researchers in principle readily acknowledging pre-understanding as necessary and productive (although they rarely make explicit their use of it in their writing), surprisingly few rationales and methodological resources exist for how

researchers can mobilize their pre-understanding more actively and systematically as a positive input in research (Fleming et al., 2003; Maxwell, 2013). This is a significant shortcoming because, as we will show, a more *deliberate, active, and systematic use of our pre-understanding* can significantly enrich studies, from idea generation to evaluation of findings and theory. In fact, many of the now classic management researchers, such as Taylor (1911), Barnard (1938), Penrose (1959/1995), and Dalton (1959), drew deliberately and explicitly on their pre-understanding in developing their theories of management, leadership and organizations.

Mobilizing our pre-understanding more deliberately means actively and systematically *bringing forward* aspects of our prior understanding (of the phenomena under investigation) alongside formal data and theory in research. (By ‘formal data’ we are referring to the explicit, pre-planned and systematically generated empirical material that typically makes up a study.) As scholars (particularly in the area of organizational behaviour), we not only possess considerable prior academic knowledge of the phenomena we study, such as gender, leadership, power, competence, management control systems, teams and identity; we have also often accumulated significant prior non-academic knowledge of them through our everyday participation in society and organizations. This pre-understanding can be used to mobilize a larger set of observations, experiences and cultural reference points that may deepen and broaden the knowledge base for interpretations and assessment. Specifically, as we will show, if actively and systematically but (self-)critically applied, researchers’ pre-understanding provides an extensive *source of inspiration* to think differently about things relative to theory and data; significantly *broadens the empirical base*; and offers additional *resources for evaluating* the relevance and novelty of formal data and established theory, as well as of emergent findings and theory.

The aim of this paper, then, is to develop and propose a framework for how researchers can more deliberately and actively mobilize their pre-understanding as a positive input in research, alongside formal data and theory. We begin by more precisely defining the notion of pre-understanding and how it is implicated in research, followed by a discussion about existing methodologies for helping researchers handle their pre-understanding in knowledge production. Against this background, we elaborate our pre-understanding framework in three steps. First, we further differentiate and specify the broad and somewhat fuzzy notion of pre-understanding. Second, we propose dialogue as the basic principle for bringing pre-understanding into a conversation with data and theory in research. Finally, we discuss and illustrate how pre-understanding in dialogic conversation with data and theory can work as an *interpretation-enhancer* and *horizon-expander* throughout the research process, from formulating research questions to writing up the study.

### **Pre-understanding: A Necessary Condition for Knowledge Development**

How do we understand and gain knowledge about reality? A key insight generated by the hermeneutics of Heidegger (1927/1962) and Gadamer (1960/1994) is that knowledge development always requires some prior understanding of the phenomenon we address. In order to develop knowledge about something (e.g. leadership, identity, decision making), we have to presuppose it, and this is what our pre-understanding does for us. Specifically, our pre-understanding is that which enables us to interpret something *as* something in the first instance (Heidegger, 1927/1962, pp. 182–188; Warnke, 2011, p. 93): for example, to see something *as* ‘discrimination’, ‘authority’, ‘trust’ or ‘decision making’ and then develop knowledge about these phenomena.

The necessity of pre-understanding means that knowledge development is not linear (i.e. we do not start developing understanding of a phenomenon from scratch), but rather

*circular* in character (Gadamer, 1960/1994; Heidegger, 1927/1962). Circularity here refers to the fact that our pre-understanding provides an initial grasp of the phenomenon under investigation, which becomes (potentially) enriched through further investigations; this ‘new’ and more complete understanding subsequently provides a new pre-understanding when it guides further investigations and so on. This means that knowledge development never becomes complete but is ongoing. It is this continuously pre-established understanding that we always bring to a phenomenon we want to investigate.

Although each of us has a unique life trajectory, our pre-understanding is primarily *social-historical* rather than personal-historical in character. This is because the continuous development (and revision) of our pre-understanding occurs against the background of the specific society, culture, religion and social practices in which we constantly participate, and which we have (largely unquestioningly) taken over from others through our upbringing, education and work (Heidegger, 1927/1962). As Gadamer (1960/1994, pp. 276–277) notes, ‘long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination (reflexivity), we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life.’ Given that we have largely taken over our pre-understanding from others, it is mostly *unreflective* rather than reflective in character, making us view phenomena as self-evident and ‘natural’ (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

Moreover, and importantly, given its social-historical character, pre-understanding inevitably encourages *prejudices* about reality, potentially threatening our capacity to develop valid and reliable knowledge. Ever since the Enlightenment, therefore, researchers have tried to develop methodologies that help them steer away from their pre-understanding or to keep it under strict control, so it does not impede knowledge development (Gadamer, 1960/1994, p. 270). Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron (1991, p. 13) probably echo the common-sense

view of many researchers when they argue that our pre-understanding of social reality ‘is the epistemological obstacle *par excellence*, because it continuously produces fictitious conceptions or systematizations’. We therefore need to be vigilant of the ‘self-evidences [of our pre-understanding] which all too easily provide the illusion of immediate knowledge and insuperable wealth’.

Gadamer, however, urges us to recognize that our pre-understanding can be something genuinely *positive* for knowledge development – an ‘enabling condition’ (Gjesdal, 2019, p. 358), as it makes knowledge development possible in the first place (Grondin, 2002). In the words of Malpas (2003, p. 6), ‘rather than closing us off, our prejudices are themselves what open us up to what is to be understood’. Pre-understanding is therefore not only a potential liability but also, if acknowledged, a significant asset in knowledge production.

### **Putting Pre-understanding in Its Methodological Context**

Although it is widely acknowledged that the researcher’s pre-understanding inevitably shapes knowledge production (Jarvie & Zamora-Bonilla, 2011; Mir, Willmott, & Greenwood, 2016), it has largely been seen as a source of biases (e.g. gender stereotyping, race discrimination, one-sidedness) and other problematic prejudices that interfere negatively with ambitions to produce valid and reliable knowledge through rigorous data management (Astley, 1985; Sandberg, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Schmidt & Hunter, 2014). This threat to valid knowledge has resulted in the development of methodologies for helping researchers to steer away from pre-understanding in knowledge production, or to keep it under control. The main methodologies include the scientific method, relying strictly on systematic procedures for empirical observations (Chalmers, 1999; Gower, 1997); applied bracketing, trying to suspend our theories and prejudices when interpreting lived experience (Sandberg, 2005); and increased reflexivity, trying to become aware of how conceptual frameworks, paradigms,

cultural conventions, language, discourse, research interactions, gender and so on may shape our research endeavour (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018; Finlay, 2002; Hibbert, Sillince, Diefenbach, & Cunliffe, 2014; Rhodes, 2009; Steier, 1991).

Although existing methodologies for helping researchers to handle the negative side of pre-understanding are valuable, with the exception of strong reflexivity used in, for example, auto-ethnography (e.g. Ploder & Stadlbauer, 2016) and some ideas on using various perspectives and starting points to open up for and confront alternative interpretations and support imagination (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018), they tend to offer limited knowledge about how pre-understanding can be used *positively* in research. Consequently, and crucially for this paper, although Gadamer's insight about the inevitability of pre-understanding in knowledge development has been widely accepted within the scientific community, surprisingly few attempts have been made to develop methodological resources for using pre-understanding more systematically as a positive input in research. In fact, despite his extensive writings on pre-understanding, Gadamer himself does not provide a methodology for using pre-understanding more systematically in knowledge development (Grondin, 2002). Yet, his idea of *dialogic conversation with the other* provides some indications of how this might be done.

As noted above, in order to break with our current pre-understanding, we need to become aware of it. But how can we achieve such an awareness when our pre-understanding for the most part is 'operating unnoticed'? Only, says Gadamer (1960/1994), 'when it is, so to speak, provoked' (p. 299) by 'otherness' – that is, by a view that is different from our own – can we become conscious of our own pre-understanding and how it constrains us from developing novel knowledge.

Gadamer's chief strategy for such awareness confrontation is dialogue. It is in dialogue with other people (face-to-face, or in texts) that we encounter different views of the



subject matter, and through this our own pre-understanding of it becomes visible. Key in this dialogue is to be able to identify productive aspects of our pre-understanding and to differentiate them from constraining aspects, thereby weeding out fixed ideas, confirmation bias and other blinders. A dialogue calls for openness to other people's viewpoints and a preparedness to adjust our current pre-understanding in the light of them (Rhodes & Carlsen, 2018). However, surprisingly few attempts have been made to elaborate Gadamer's dialogic conversation as part of a research methodology (Fleming et al., 2003).

The aim of the remainder of this paper is to do so. However, before we continue, we make two points of critique of Gadamer's ideas of the inevitability of pre-understanding in knowledge development. First, although awareness of pre-understanding is necessary, we need also deliberately, actively and systematically to *bring forward* aspects of our pre-understanding and use them together with formal data and theory. Second, although Gadamer provides a detailed elaboration of how pre-understanding is inseparably tied to knowledge development, he is far less specific about what actually makes up pre-understanding. There is therefore a need to differentiate pre-understanding into more manageable dimensions and elements (for rare exceptions, see Gummesson, 2000; Nyström & Dahlberg, 2001).

### **A Framework for Using Pre-understanding in Research**

In this section we develop a framework for how pre-understanding can be actively, systematically and explicitly used in research, alongside formal data and theory. We first further differentiate and specify the notion of pre-understanding, and thereafter propose a set of core principles for how it can be used together with formal data and theory knowledge development. We then elaborate and more concretely illustrate how researchers' pre-understanding can be brought forward alongside formal data and theory throughout the research process, from the formulation of research questions to the writing of texts.

### *A Differentiation and Specification of Pre-understanding*

As researchers' pre-understanding is often both broad and dynamic and largely taken for granted or used implicitly and cautiously, we see it as important to offer conceptualizations that make pre-understanding easier to identify and address explicitly. Therefore, we differentiate the notion of pre-understanding by distinguishing and elaborating the following dimensions and elements: the academic and non-academic dimensions of pre-understanding; and the pre-specific, pre-pattern and pre-frames elements of pre-understanding.

*Academic and non-academic dimensions.* One can make a broad distinction between the academic and non-academic dimensions of pre-understanding. The *academic dimension* is about the ideas, beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions that we have acquired and internalized by being part of a paradigm or a research group (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2014; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Kuhn, 1970). Researchers also commonly conduct several studies in a specific domain over some time, and through that acquire a considerable academic pre-understanding that often goes far beyond what is directly summarized in their publications. Based on their academic pre-understanding, researchers are able to ask better research questions, deal with and evaluate existing literature in a more informed way, and design and conduct empirical work in more original and appropriate ways. At the same time, academic pre-understanding may lead to various insider or 'going native' problems: one may be caught in a framework naturalizing a specific way of seeing things, share taken-for-granted views of informants and/or within the academic subtribe and, thus, be inclined to reproduce institutionalized 'truths' – the boxed-in problem, as Alvesson and Sandberg (2014) call it.

As the academic dimension of pre-understanding is fairly well known, particularly after all the interest in paradigms, we want to emphasize the often less articulated *non-*

*academic dimension* of researchers' pre-understanding: that is, the continuously accumulated social-personal knowledge of the world that we acquire and internalize through our participation in society, its specific institutions (e.g. hospitals, child care centres), its social practices (e.g. shopping, tennis playing) and its workplaces, including academia. For example, you may encounter gender inequalities, quality control, cynicism, bureaucracy, escalation of conflict etc. at your workplace (academic or not) without the encounter being guided by an explicit academic framework or pre-understanding.

In social science, academic and non-academic pre-understanding are often fused together, as academic life forms part of societal culture and life in general: for example, when working in a professional bureaucracy and being of a certain gender. You do not meet the phenomena you are researching in the laboratory and you do not observe them through a microscope. Many of the phenomena we study are also informed by academic theories, such as HRM, leadership and strategy, which blur the line between theory and data. We therefore do not want to over-stress the distinction between the academic and non-academic dimensions of pre-understanding, but still emphasize that we continuously accumulate a huge amount of non-academic pre-understanding, which provides a broader set of reference points and experiences than the more specialized and focused academic dimension.

*Three basic pre-understanding elements.* As a way to further differentiate the notion of pre-understanding, we now distinguish and elaborate three distinct but overlapping 'pre-understanding elements': pre-specific, pre-pattern and pre-frames elements. These elements of pre-understanding are distinguishable within both the academic and non-academic dimensions of pre-understanding. Moreover, these elements move from being personal aspects of pre-understanding (pre-specific elements) to broader and more collective aspects of pre-understanding (pre-frames elements).

The *pre-specific* elements of pre-understanding refer to researchers' *direct, personal* experience and observations of specific organizational phenomena inside or outside academia, which they can remember and describe fairly accurately. For example, a researcher may have direct, personal experience of leadership by having occupied some leading roles in the workplace or in the sports club, or (more commonly) being a subordinate. Researchers have also commonly gained through their research, but not necessarily reported in their publications, direct, personal experiences of specific instances of a whole raft of (organizational) phenomena. Similarly, a researcher may have gained through direct, personal experiences both academic and non-academic pre-specific elements of people's career motives, bullying or gender relations. The pre-specific elements of researchers' pre-understanding are, of course, always uncertain, as they can easily be selectively remembered, over-interpreted or constructed in specific ways, or encourage the researcher to jump to premature conclusions. However, such uncertainty also applies to formal empirical material such as ethnographic observations, interview accounts, diaries or questionnaire responses, which seldom or never mirror reality (Alvesson, 2011; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

The *pre-pattern* elements of researchers' pre-understanding refer to their *aggregated* and more *general* experience of specific phenomena that they have accumulated over their lifetime. Pre-pattern elements are more impressionistic and uncertain than the more precise but narrow pre-specific elements. For example, many years of gender interactions outside, as well as inside, specific work contexts provide us with rich and varied elements of pre-pattern understanding of gender interactions. Similarly, researchers who have conducted many identity studies over the years across different contexts are likely to have formed some pre-pattern elements of people's identity work that can facilitate future studies. Pre-pattern elements can also be generated from conversations in private life, leading to broader impressions rather than distinct observations. For example, if you have friends or relatives

who work as hospital managers or nurses, you may over the years get a good pre-pattern understanding of some aspects of health care, at least experienced from a specific angle. There is also the possibility of readings of mass media leading to a formation of a pre-pattern understanding regarding the situations of, for example, schools or specific aspects of gender inequality. Mills' (1959) classic description of intellectual craftsmanship provides an excellent example of how to document pre-specific and pre-pattern elements practically in terms of personal experiences and how to relate them to ongoing research.

In contrast to the pre-specific and the pre-pattern elements (which are mainly based on our direct personal experiences or interactions), the *pre-frame* elements of our pre-understanding are predominantly based on our general accumulation of information and clues of various phenomena gained through newspapers, movies, social media and various conversations with parents, teachers and friends. As such, pre-frame elements consist of broader cultural ideas, folk truths and commonsense understandings that we have taken from others but interpreted and merged with our individual experiences and thinking. In fact, much of what we know about phenomena such as employment, ethnicity and values is based on such pre-frame elements (Bourdieu et al., 1991).

For example, when McCloskey and Klamer (1995) make the point that 25 per cent of the US workforce are employed in what they label 'persuasion work', Sennett (1998) writes about the corrosion of character, and Giddens (1991) addresses the self in an age of reflexivity, they make informed and qualified assessments and characterizations of our time and society that span much more widely than pure data and pure theory-based reasoning allow. Of course, they support their theses with data and references, but rely mainly on their broader experiences and observations of our larger traditions and institutions to analyse and describe contemporary society. It is noteworthy that in Sennett's case pre-specific elements are also central, as he draws on specific case studies of people he has met, such as his bartender.

Taken together, the three pre-understanding elements point to what is brought into a specific knowledge-seeking activity – from distinct personal experiences or observations to more aggregated cultural ideas and understandings. However, as the boundaries between them are blurred, it is often difficult to carve out and rely strongly on a particular pre-understanding element. A pre-frame element may encourage the remembering of, and emphasis on, a particular pre-specific element. Moreover, each element involves pros and cons for the research process. While the first two elements (pre-specific and pre-pattern) are comparatively solid, they tend to provide narrow and limited clues for research. Pre-frame elements are more far-reaching and richer in terms of general ideas and broader contributions, such as those of Giddens, McCloskey and Klammer, and Sennett. At the same time, they are more uncertain and may reproduce problematic commonsense understandings, fixed ideas and general confirmation bias.

Importantly, the three pre-understanding elements are intertwined in terms of sociality and individuality. Direct, personal experiences (pre-specific elements) concern social phenomena interpreted by the subject through social categories and lenses. Also, when broader, institutionalized pre-understandings (pre-frame elements) are at play, it is not a matter of the subject drawing on these in a socially standardized way. All the pre-understanding elements can therefore be seen as a nested combination of direct, personal experiences, observed or mediated social phenomena, and cultural traditions.

### *Dialogue as the Basic Principle for Using Pre-understanding in Research*

Systematically using pre-understanding in knowledge development is not primarily about following a strict methodological procedure or rationale, as in the scientific method, or being reflexive about every step we take in research, as in the reflexivity literature. Instead, it is about bringing our pre-understanding into a *dialogical conversation* with data and theory, in

which they provoke each other in ways that ‘open up’ and bring the phenomenon at issue into view (Risser, 2010), leading to the development of more original, complete or re-thought knowledge of the phenomenon. Pre-understanding is necessary for the sensitive reading and assessment of theory and for enriching and evaluating empirical material, but also for supplementing the latter. Working with theory may challenge and enrich pre-understanding while data supplements, but also sometimes kicks back against, pre-understanding ideas and examples.

In dialogical conversation, all three input elements (pre-understanding, literature, data) need to move in a circular motion in which they are inspiring, critiquing and correcting each other throughout the research process. Consequently, and importantly, the three elements should be continuously revised and refined in the light of the knowledge that is being developed. A criterion for the successful use of pre-understanding is that it is not just reproduced, but actually changes.

Apart from the somewhat trivial use of it to navigate in academic and empirical domains, bringing forward pre-understanding in dialogue with data and theory may benefit research in three major ways. First, pre-understanding can be applied as an *inspirational source* in generating ideas and formulating research questions. Second, it can *broaden the empirical base*, as well as being mobilized as a *source of critique* of emerging empirical material. Third, it can be used for *evaluating* the relevance and novelty of the knowledge being developed. In this regard, pre-understanding can work both as an *interpretation-enhancer* and as a *horizon-expander* of formal data and theory. By bringing forward their pre-understandings, researchers can enhance their interpretation of the data collected far beyond the interpretations generated by formal theory, as well as expand their horizons beyond the viewpoints offered by data and theory. We elaborate further below how our pre-understanding

framework may enrich the research process, from the formulation of research questions to the writing of texts.

### *Bringing Forward Pre-understanding as a Positive Input in Research*

In this section, we elaborate and more concretely illustrate how an active and systematic use of our pre-understanding in dialogic conversation with formal data and theory can enrich knowledge development in the following key parts of the research process (hereafter RP): research question, literature review, design, fieldwork, analysis, contribution and writing. We do so by discussing more generally how pre-understanding can be brought forward alongside formal data and theory in each key part of the research process, following this with a concrete example of how it can be used in a (planned) study of leadership in professional organizations. By discussing how pre-understanding can be productively used in each phase of RP we do not, of course, imply that research is a linear process. The research question may, for example, appear or be revised late in the RP, and the analysis may encourage follow-up fieldwork.

*1. Research question.* Researchers predominantly generate research questions by spotting gaps in existing literature (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). An active and systematic use of the researcher's pre-understanding in dialogue with theory and data can generate more interesting and impactful research questions by going against dominant assumptions and well-established thinking about phenomena (Davis, 1971). Researchers can, and often do (but rarely systematically), identify and bring forward their academic pre-understanding in generating research questions. But equally important, non-academic pre-specific, pre-pattern and pre-frame elements may stimulate good ideas and research questions. Here, researchers' pre-understanding is mainly employed as a *horizon-expander*, providing them with a richer and



more varied number of viewpoints that may lead to revisions of thinking and the formulation of a more novel, relevant and potentially impactful research question.

For example, if we, in our (planned) study of leadership in professional organizations, were to rely mainly on the existing literature, leadership is predominantly about style, values, identity, behaviour and relation. However, based on our overall pre-understanding – that is, a mix of non-academic and academic pre-specific, pre-pattern and pre-frame elements – we think that managers often face a contradictory work situation: a leadership-celebrating culture and *zeitgeist*, and subordinates often having mixed feelings about the value of leadership and being followers. Despite the label ‘leadership’ being applied to managerial jobs, it sometimes masks administration, struggles with bureaucracy, human conflicts and messiness. Some of these understandings partly, but rarely, turn up in the literature, but a combination of pre-specific, pre-pattern and pre-frame elements could lead to sharper, different and more innovative research questions: for example, can leadership in professional organizations be seen as navigating sensitive terrain and followership be viewed as a partial and reluctant positioning in selective situations? Perhaps leadership could be seen as zig-zagging between different problematic positions?

2. *Literature review.* A central aim of the literature review is to fine-tune the research question and highlight areas for theoretical advancement. Researchers’ pre-understanding, particularly their non-academic pre-frame elements, interacts with the literature to facilitate possibilities of framing a research topic by providing different modes of problematizing the literature (Davis, 1971; Shepherd & Suddaby, 2017). Rather than reproducing the doxa of the field or being committed to a heterodoxa – the established alternative (Bourdieu, 1977) – researchers’ pre-understanding may encourage considerations of additional alternatives. What is missed, what conventions rule in the existing literature, and what alternative views do one’s pre-

understanding indicate? For example, when reading an article, one may (and this is probably often the case) carefully assess the credibility, relevance and weaknesses of it in terms of one's pre-specific, pre-pattern and pre-frame elements. It is important here to let the literature review 'talk back' to the researcher's pre-understanding to avoid the risk of just reproducing some convictions. Pre-understanding should be used in the interplay with literature to broaden one's horizon and see if more varied sources of inspiration lead to a creative take on the literature.

For example, in a recent review article relevant to our (planned) leadership study, Dinh, Lord, Gardner, Meuser and Liden (2014, p. 37) suggest that 'leadership involves the contribution of multiple actors and bidirectional influence (top-down and bottom-up) that unfolds along different time scales (from minutes to years)'. We do not disagree, but bringing forward our own pre-understanding makes us consider leadership in professional organizations as an outcome of more horizontal forces, such as community pressures, fashions and people moving between senior/subordinate (leader/follower) and egalitarian positions as part of a shared professional collective. Hence, the common one-dimensional, top-down/bottom-up image may be supplemented by more horizontal and nested images of leadership (e.g. mutual influencing games), as well as by images in which leadership is played up and played down in different situations, and these 'up' and 'down' acts may be more symbolic or ceremonial than an expression of effective influence.

*3. Research design.* Although existing literature and method books are central in design considerations (Knapp, 2016), bringing forward relevant elements (particularly non-academic elements) of our pre-understanding can mobilize broader reflections on what can be expected in inquiries, including difficulties in getting questions answered. For example, in terms of designing our leadership study, following our own pre-understanding, we think it is important

to consider that managers are often inclined to promote or legitimize themselves and their organizations, which suggests that it may be beneficial to approach non-managers or other people who can offer more 'neutral' answers, and not rely too strongly on managers themselves talking about their leadership. In order to increase chances of managers responding openly and thoughtfully to questions about leadership, one could also consider interviewing them about work from which they have some distance, possibly motivating a sample of managers who have retired or switched jobs.

Advice of this kind may be found in the method literature, but this literature often diverges and cannot be relied on alone by researchers. Instead, they need to think carefully about their specific study, conducted in a specific time and cultural context, and to mobilize pre-specific, pre-pattern and pre-frame elements to consider issues that are critical to the study in question. Studying academics in senior positions is different from studying managers in companies, the latter probably being more worried about image and customer relations. Studying leadership in a professional setting may involve less managerial grandiosity than is common in many 'non-professional' organizations, as collegial norms may have a moderating impact on the many leadership ideologies currently circulating, perhaps implying a higher likelihood of 'realistic' accounts of leadership.

*4. Fieldwork.* A cornerstone in most empirical studies is to follow a rigorous methodological procedure for generating and evaluating empirical material. Although interviews and field observations may offer rich and qualified material, there are often good reasons to be cautious and acknowledge the situatedness and uncertainty of most interview-based studies and the limitations of what can directly be observed. In the worst case, in interview-based studies, we may risk studying people's interview behaviour or impression management rather than the research phenomenon in question (Alvesson, 2011; Silverman, 2006). This and other risks

can be reduced by bringing the researcher's pre-understanding, particularly the non-academic elements, into dialogue with the emerging empirical material.

When conducting interviews in the leadership study, our pre-understanding can be used to bring up issues, themes and perspectives that are not spontaneously raised by the interviewees or formal theory, such as about messiness, imperfections, sensitive issues in leadership, managerial subordination (most managers are below the top and follow policies and instructions) and narcissism. For example, one of us observed a talk by a vice chancellor, emphasizing that the organization of the university needed to be improved and decisions implemented. 'Decisions can't any longer be addressed as arguments in a debate', he said, sounding frustrated. This pre-specific element (of our pre-understanding) could be presented as a counter-claim and thought-provocation in interviews with managers who are emphasizing their significance as leaders and are claiming to have a strong influence on their followers.

In other words, instead of relying on 'strict' data management (typically following interview protocols and coding empirical material without considering its quality), researchers may use their pre-understanding to consider problems in what interviewees report (and avoid talking about). What do interviewees (not) bring up? Is there a social desirability bias? Do they address issues in a specific light or bypass certain themes? Might it make sense to employ alternative framings (identity positions, language uses, etc.)? Of course, many researchers may do so, but this seldom comes out in reports, so such work may be cautious and not so significant.

The researcher's pre-understanding could also be used to *expand the empirical material* studied, highlighting themes of relevance for the research phenomenon outside the formal research setting. The phenomenon of 'leadership' might not only appear within the particular research sites in which it is studied, such as hospitals and engineering firms. The researcher may also have accumulated an extensive non-academic pre-understanding of

leadership (or its absence/marginal significance) through engagement in the golf club, their spouse's talk about work in an R&D unit, or credible media accounts. The example of the VC experiencing people not taking his decisions seriously is illustrative of valuable material 'collected' outside a formal research site. Everyday observations and informal talks with people assessed to deliver credible examples could qualify researcher judgement, as well as leading to valuable empirical examples. Some consulting professors have, for example, made good use of observations outside formal inquiry in their fieldwork (e.g. Argyris, 1994; Zaleznik, 1997). Of course, this needs to be critically assessed and used carefully and the researcher must motivate the employment of specific observations.

5. *Analysis*. Most data analyses in contemporary research studies are guided by a particular theoretical framework together with techniques for coding the data in a systematic and transparent way (e.g. Creswell & Poth, 2017). The use of pre-understanding can enrich the analysis by enabling a much broader *mobilization of judgement*, including the consideration of multiple meanings of empirical events. Conventionally, an open mind is often viewed as 'withholding as best one can prior expectations' (Shepherd & Suddaby, 2017, p. 63): that is, minimizing pre-understanding. However, rather than withholding our pre-understanding elements, they can be brought forward and carefully used as a broader interpretive lens on formal theory and data, considering a range of expectations and interpretive possibilities, as another way of opening up research.

The researcher's pre-understanding can also enrich a *source critique* of the data (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). Interviews may, for example, be more a matter of impression management or moral storytelling than the reporting of actual experiences. In order to handle this, the researcher can mobilize a broader set of cultural knowledge (pre-frames) to assess more critically what is worth taking seriously in the data and to aim for non-obvious

meanings. For example, analysing the data collected from the proposed leadership study is not only about the straightforward codification, structuring and linking of explicit themes in the data. It also calls for the ongoing assessment of the meaning of possible expressions about leadership, such as ‘inspiration’, ‘values’, ‘strategic importance’, ‘role model’ and so on. The researcher needs to consider whether people talking about leadership just follow social conventions rather than providing descriptions that reflect their specific experiences and reality. Here, the skilful use of pre-understanding may guide both the evaluation and the linking of data, as well as facilitating going beneath the surface.

Hence, bringing pre-understanding into dialogue with formal theory and data means that the analysis becomes a generative confrontation between ‘sticking to the data’ and evaluating its relevance and uniqueness. Over-interpretation and confirmation bias need, of course, to be considered. Again, the (self-)critical dialogue between pre-understanding, data and theory is necessary. Triangulation or abduction may also be possible, but these techniques do not typically bring forward pre-understanding as an input into the analysis.

*6. Contribution.* Pre-understanding may be actively and systematically invoked to evaluate what is interesting and relevant outside an academic sub-specialism. This would mean something other than just ‘adding to the (sub-specialized) literature’. Central to making a strong contribution – that is, saying something more than what people know already or find trivial (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Bartunek, Rynes, & Ireland, 2006; Davis, 1971) – is having a good understanding of the audience(s) and what they find relevant and interesting. This calls for the active mobilization of pre-understanding, particularly non-academic pre-pattern and pre-frame elements that can be used for informed assessment, to think through what we (the educated public) broadly believe we know about a certain phenomenon and what

would be a genuine addition to this public knowledge. This is, of course, not to deny that some contributions may be of a more sub-specialized and intra-academic nature.

Pre-understanding enlarges the repertoire of possible added insights by providing better sensitivity in assessing potential contributions. Both similarities and variations in terms of the different pre-understanding elements (pre-specific, pre-pattern and pre-frame) may add nuance to meanings, but also present challenges in terms of possible contrast and frictions between the elements and the empirical material formally produced. For example, the pre-understanding enriched dialogue used in the leadership study may lead to some rethinking of knowledge of leadership in professional (and perhaps other) settings, where concepts such as low-key or camouflaged leadership and anti-, reluctant or closet followership – ideas emerging mainly from our pre-pattern understanding – may hint at novel contributions. But as stated previously, pre-understanding elements need to be invoked carefully, as a valuable contribution is typically a combination of empirically robust findings and the challenging of dominant, implicit assumptions. It draws upon but also problematizes theory by adding something novel.

7. *Writing*. Complaints about articles being dull, abstract and formulaic are common (Alvesson, Gabriel, & Paulsen, 2017; Richardson, 2000; Tourish, 2019). Often academic pre-understanding is mobilized to convince sub-specialized reviewers. However, in order to reach a larger audience and go beyond the ‘find-and-fill-a-gap-in-the-literature’ formula, researchers need to have a good sense of potential readers’ way of reading and understanding (or becoming alienated by) the text. This feel for the broader readership is typically not something that formal theory or data grasps. Here, it is vital to mobilize non-academic pre-understanding – from specific observations and experiences as a reader (of inspirational texts

or examples) to knowledge in identifying and anticipating potential reader groups and consideration of ways of writing.

For example, making the topic of leadership in professional organizations potentially of broad interest calls for some careful thinking about audience assumptions, expectations and lines of thinking. When ‘writing up’ the results from the leadership study, it may therefore be beneficial trying to put oneself in the shoes of an intelligent school principal, head physician or other person in the educated public interested in leadership. Such efforts, going outside the academic journal writing conventions, may contribute to saving organization studies as a socially relevant project. The labelling and distribution of people as leaders and followers in professional organizations may not work well, empirically or in the eyes of people less inclined than conventional leadership researchers to divide people into these categories. Most people we know do not seem to see themselves, or to be seen by their managers, as ‘followers’. Hence bringing researchers’ non-academic pre-understanding into dialogue with data and theory transcends the intra-scientific, and the reader more fully becomes part of an imaginary dialogic mode of writing.

### **On the Risk of Reproducing Current Pre-understanding**

Although pre-understanding can be used as a positive input in research, there is a risk that we, as researchers, even when working actively and reflexively with pre-understanding, confirm expectations, are caught in strong beliefs or prejudices, and reproduce truths rather than reconsidering and enriching current pre-understanding.<sup>1</sup> As we have outlined above, a central way of countering this risk is to put pre-understanding into a dialogic conversation with formal data and theory through which they question and correct each other.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a similar problem in the use of formal theory, where researchers may apply institutional theory, practice theory or Foucauldian ideas, for example, without much resistance from empirical material which is easily domesticated by the preferred framework.



Important here is to ask reflexive questions, such as: How can I resist and rethink cultural habits and broadly shared inclinations to think about the subject matter? How can I ‘de-familiarize’ myself from my pre-understanding: that is, how can I see part of what we – in our cultural-academic communities – tend to view as natural and self-evident, instead as something exotic, arbitrary and historically defined (Marcus & Fischer, 1986)? A related way is to cultivate doubt about what we are interested in, thus confronting pre-understanding as a blind spot (Woolcott, 1999), leading to surprises and doubts about our own pre-understanding. The point is then to come up with alternative or counter-intuitive views, as a way to work seriously with doubt about what we think we know (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008).

One can also use established theory ‘negatively’. Normally, theory is used as a positive framework for structuring and ordering data and forming a theoretical contribution. But theory can also be employed as a counterforce to the unproblematized workings of pre-understanding. For example, one possibility is to use a different root metaphor from the one normally employed (Morgan, 1986), as a way to challenge one’s academic pre-understanding and thus open up our vision.

Moreover, we could carefully consider our own possible selectivity in the construction processes of remembering phenomena. For example, do the pre-understanding ‘elements’ bear critical scrutiny, or are our prior knowledge and observations of a phenomenon an expression of ‘I see (or remember) it because I believe it’? In order to evaluate our current view of a phenomenon, try to think about counter-examples, either in the literature or through using pre-understanding to expand your horizon. For instance, if we believe in leadership or inequality, we could try to find examples where leadership was rejected, or equality appeared.

The above and other strategies for becoming aware one’s pre-understanding do not, of course, guarantee that researchers’ pre-understanding will not impact negatively on their

attempt to develop valid and reliable knowledge. But if researchers can demonstrate how their pre-understanding has informed their research project and been developed as part of the research, it is likely that some of the problematic biases of their current pre-understanding have been avoided.

### **When to Use Pre-understanding in Research**

Pre-understanding is unavoidable, sometimes as an intellectual autopilot guiding much of our common-sense understanding. Minimally it works as a lubricator in research, softening the strict, rigorous approach expelling all ‘subjectivity’ from research and making the research process smoother. Researchers lacking sufficient pre-understanding may experience a frictional research process. Our point is that pre-understanding can be used more or less deliberately, actively and systematically in research. It is therefore important to discuss when and how much pre-understanding should be systematically activated in knowledge development, particularly as time, energy, attention and text space are limited. Certain conditions motivate a moderate use. A project involving extensive reading up and huge empirical work may reduce both the time and need for pre-understanding supportive work. Sometimes our pre-understanding is of marginal methodological relevance due to the topics under investigation. Studying identity or resistance among professionals is different from researching mergers in the arms industry in the 1930s. In some instances, pre-understanding may be difficult to handle, particularly if the researcher is strongly emotional about a theme. A leadership trainer who has spent 20 years only working with managers, or a minority group member with strong feelings about discrimination based on (idiosyncratic) experiences, may have problems with gaining enough critical distance to use pre-understanding productively.

In many other cases, pre-understanding can form a more significant part of a study. It can be even a key part of the study. Pre-understanding support is motivated when the formal

study is of weak to medium strength in terms of empirical richness and the ability to say something of broader relevance. A narrow formal study – irrespective of its richness – can be productively compensated by accessing broader pre-understanding considerations.

When pre-understanding is used as the main input in generating research ideas, as well as in making empirical claims, we can talk about *pre-understanding driven* research. This is different from the more common and cautious *pre-understanding supported* research, where formal data and theory play the key roles, but are supplemented by our pre-understanding in various ways. Pre-understanding driven research appears to be more common in books (Foley, 2010; Sennett, 1998; Spicer, 2017, but can also be found in some papers (e.g. Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Perrow, 1978). Instead of starting with, and only relying on, formal theory and data, the researcher's pre-specific, pre-pattern and pre-frame elements concerning the subject matter drive the project. Experienced and skilled researchers who can draw upon extensive academic and non-academic pre-understandings may be in a particularly good position to do pre-understanding driven research (e.g. Wright & Wright, 2020). Of course, existing theory and empirical work need to be consulted and used, partly in order to kick back one's pre-understanding and refine the contribution, but the point is that pre-understanding forms the main ingredient, supplemented with formal data and literature references.

Does the use of pre-understanding in research need to be made explicit? It all depends. In pre-understanding driven research, it should normally be so. A qualified use should make it clearly visible in research writings, although the exact role of pre-understanding may not be fully articulated in publications. Our own pre-patterns indicate that most researchers not only keep a low profile but also hesitate to draw upon their pre-understanding in research, motivating us to challenge espoused norms for writing and doing research and to put this theme on the agenda.

## Conclusions

In this paper we have proposed and elaborated a rationale and framework that enables researchers more actively, systematically and explicitly to bring forward their pre-understanding as a positive research input alongside formal data and theory. The framework contributes to existing (qualitative) research approaches in three main ways. First, it further differentiates and specifies the somewhat loose notion of pre-understanding into two broad dimensions, academic and non-academic pre-understanding, and three elements: pre-specific, pre-pattern and pre-frame elements. This increased differentiation and specification of pre-understanding enhances researchers' ability to identify and systematically bring forward relevant aspects of their pre-understanding in research. Second, the framework provides a set of principles and concepts by which researchers can work actively and systematically with pre-understanding alongside formal theory and data: (a) it proposes and elaborates *dialogic conversation* as the basic principle by which researchers can make three key inputs (researcher's pre-understanding, formal data and theory) interact in a circular movement in which they are interpreting, critiquing and correcting each other; (b) it proposes that researchers' pre-understanding can be brought forward in three main ways in the research process: as a *source of inspiration* to think differently about things relative to theory and data; to *broaden the empirical base* – that is, as an addition to formal data; and to *evaluate* the relevance and novelty of the knowledge being developed. Third, the framework offers systematic guidance as to how the researcher's pre-understanding can be put into a dialogue with formal data and theory as an *interpretation-enhancer* and *horizon-expander* in various parts of the research process: research question, literature review, research design, fieldwork, analysis, contribution and writing.

Although several (qualitative) researchers may already acknowledge and draw on their pre-understanding in research, they generally do so implicitly and minimally. We suggest

something more active and systematic. Specifically, our proposed framework (a) *formalizes* and elaborates *how* researchers can actively and systematically mobilize their pre-understanding in research, (b) points to how such an active use of pre-understanding can add significant *value* to a range of different parts and aspects of the research process, (c) shows how researchers can make their use of pre-understanding more *visible* in their writing, and (d) thereby also *legitimizes* a more deliberate, active and systematic use of pre-understanding in research. Our framework thus suggests an important upgrading of pre-understanding: from something more or less implicitly and marginally used to a systematic horizon-expander and interpretation-enhancer in research.

These contributions mean that research can become a three-legged rather than two-legged affair, adding pre-understanding to theory and data. Instead of leaving pre-understanding in the back seat of research – as a more or less taken-for-granted, intuitive and implicit intellectual and emotional resource – it can be upgraded and used systematically and explicitly in dialogue with formal theory and formal data in research. Of course, the relevance and potential of pre-understanding are related to the subject matter (some topics are ‘pre-understanding alien’, i.e. remote from the life-world of the researcher), as well as the richness of the researcher’s pre-understanding, where more experienced researchers may be more helped and driven by pre-understanding than junior people.

Nevertheless, if we actively, but self-critically draw on our pre-understanding in research – including how to make an interpretation (of literature or data) – we can improve the chances of being more creative and using our judgement more carefully. This is because pre-understanding involves considerably more empirical reference points and sources of potential insightfulness than strict adherence to scientific literature and data allows. Actively using pre-understanding does not replace data and theory in research, although we see a place for pre-understanding driven research. More commonly, pre-understanding can significantly

supplement theory and data and thus improve idea generation and novel theorizing, which, according to many commentators, we are in much need of (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Suddaby, Hardy, & Nguyen, 2011). It is therefore about time researchers returned to the well-known principle of the Enlightenment formulated by Kant: ‘Have the courage to make use of your *own* understanding’ (Gadamer, 1960/1994, p. 271, italics in original).

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