UNIVERSITY OF BATH

University of Bath

Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:
openaccess@bath.ac.uk

The Case for Intercultural Hermeneutics? A Brief Introduction to an Interpretative Research Framework

Michael D. Smith

Kobe University, Graduate School of Intercultural Studies
Email: MDS66@Bath.ac.uk
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4492-1648

Abstract: Recognized as the theory and practice of interpretation, hermeneutics presents us with a methodological-philosophical framework paying particular attention to the linguistic, historical, and sociocultural contexts shaping human experience. Contrary to positivistic interpretations of reality, hermeneutics honors the role of personal history during a participant's negotiation of culture, presenting a versatile–yet, comparatively under-utilized–research methodology that accommodates knowledge as reducible from our pre-held subjectivities. In doing so, hermeneutics seeks not to overcome or eliminate bias but to appreciate the consequences of its limits. Calling on Gadamer's post-Heideggerian extension of hermeneutics, this paper intends to communicate the value, limitations, and applications of this approach, specifically to cross-cultural research. In discussing its applications, principles such as *effective history*, *prejudice*, *provocation*, and *fusion of horizons*, scaffold practical tips, including the role of the intercultural hermeneutic researcher, ethical and quality control measures, interview procedures, transcription, and the interpretation and analysis of data.

Keywords: Hermeneutics; Hermeneutic Phenomenology; Research Methods; Interpretivism

Introduction

Derived from the Greek *hermēneuō* ("explain" or "translate"), hermeneutics constitutes the science, art, philosophy, and methodology of iterative interpretation (Dieleman, 2017). As a transdisciplinary research framework, hermeneutics seeks to honour one's lived–and, thus, intersubjective–experience; yet, in doing so, it concedes that bias is not without value *per se*. Indeed, one's pre-held convictions are not only unavoidable, but present as opportunities for reflective understanding. Emerging from biblical studies, hermeneutics in its current form may be applied to text as any form of written or verbal communication, where, due to its focus on human intention, its practice reflects the social, cultural, and political backdrops from which experiences arise, and how historically conditioned individuals perceive their lifeworlds within this dense sphere of practice (George, 2020). Consistent with interpretive inquiry more generally, the notions of *tradition*, *language*, and *context* remain key to understanding lived phenomena. As such, while hermeneutics may be used as part of a mixed-methods paradigm– for instance, in a sequential exploratory, concurrent embedded, or, as will be outlined later in this paper, sequential transformative design (Creswell, 2009)–it is not a strategy applicable to positivist-rationalism (i.e., quantitative research) in isolation.

Nevertheless, given its potential to accommodate mixed designs (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015), nor is hermeneutics *strictly* relativist. Zimmermann (2015), for example, describes the wide-held misconception of hermeneutics as renouncing objectivity due to its emphasis on interpretative knowledge. Rather, if we accept "interpretation" as social actors perceiving the World through diverse lenses, we are not, by association, obliged to concede this World as socially constructed. Hermeneutics is not ontological relativism, but a form of critical realism (Vandenberghe, 2022), one that acknowledges individual action as central to

interpretation. Rather than constructing the World, the World discloses itself to us based upon our attunement to it and, through language and history, a culturally valid (yet, inherently external) context of meaning. Thus, the hermeneutic claim that knowledge relates to experience may only be viewed as relativ*ist* if one isolates Being from social origin–a claim at odds with even the most radical schools of constructivist thought and, for that matter, relativism more generally. In essence, while hermeneutics holds that to understand is to interpret, it does so based on "the admission that we are not gods" (Zimmermann, 2015, p.18).

Against this background, hermeneutics presents a philosophically rich and *innovative* research strategy that appreciates the lifeworld of researcher and participant alike during the former's attempts to gain an in-depth understanding of lived phenomena. Indeed, given hermeneutics' rejection of strict rationalist-relativist, subject-object, and researcher-participant binaries, its relevance to intercultural research is manifest: it implores us not to lose sight of our histories but *embrace* them. Yet, given its philosophical basis, there remains a dearth of articulated step-by-step or user-friendly strategies for achieving hermeneutic enquiry (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). As such, this article communicates the fundamental concepts of hermeneutics as an intercultural qualitative and mixed research method, as based on Gadamer's (1976) post-Heideggerian turn. Focusing on human experience, hermeneutics implores us to decipher unfamiliar histories and contexts, recognizing that "there is always more than one worldview for us to respect and at the same time we should be true to our own perspectives" (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021. P. 2). Before pressing forth, it is important to note that the guidelines presented here are, indeed, intended to *guide*. I lay no claim to comprehensiveness, nor do I presume to endorse hermeneutics as a one-size-fits-all approach to cross-cultural inquiry. Hermeneutics remains, at its core, iterative and longitudinal, requiring a dedication to reflective practice and the totality-part relationship. If you can commit to the above, I implore you to proceed.

Background

Contemporary Hermeneutics & its (Potential) Applications to Social Research

While the discipline may be traced to the works of Aristotle and Plato (Zimmermann, 2015), modern hermeneutics is commonly associated with Martin Heidegger and his student-cum-contemporary, Hans-Georg Gadamer. The former made use of hermeneutics in his early phenomenological inquiries, shifting focus from strict interpretation to existential understanding (ontology *before* gnoseology). In doing so, Heidegger (2010) established a richer, more direct conceptualization of Being-in-the-World (*in-der-Welt-sein*), which seeks to overcome the Western ontological subject-object dichotomy. In this sense, attempts to understand oneself (or anything, for that matter) remain contingent on the "pre-structures that determine in advance which possibilities of a situation we find significant, and by moods that determine in advance our attunement to a situation we are 'thrown' into" (George, 2020). Central to Heidegger's thesis is the hermeneutic circle, or the notion that our understanding of a text (i.e., discourse) is established through reference to its individual parts and its corpus as a whole. Neither may be understood without reference to the other; hence, a circle.

Gadamer, meanwhile, elaborated on hermeneutics based on the notion that perception is not fixed but rather changing and always representative of new perspectives. In this sense, the central task of the hermeneutic researcher is to unfold the nature of personal understanding and, in turn, explore and analyze lifeworlds (*lebenswelt*), or "that province of reality which the wide-awake and normal adult simply takes for granted in an attitude of common sense" (Schütz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 3). In this regard, lifeworld may be considered an implicit cognitive map, contingent on the "accepted" knowledge scaffolding the respective cultures through which we orientate ourselves in day-to-day life. This results in finite and, thus, diverse areas of meaning. Consequently, we organize our lifeworlds through various cultural filters, with each limited area (religion, science, politics, etc.) giving sense to a precise frame of reality

through which we assign meaning based on personal experiences. Thus, lifeworld presents a sphere of *inter*-subjective meanings shared by subjects while navigating their surroundings' externalized "objective structures" (to call on Bourdieusian terminology).

Indeed, parallels between Bourdieu and the hermeneutic tradition are, at this point, well-noted (Crossley, 2001; Susen, 2017; Vandenberghe, 1999), with the former's genetic-structuralist sociology seeking to reconcile the "ruinous" division of subjectivism and objectivism, or agency and structure, within social research (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 25). Bourdieu's conception of habitus, too, shares much with the hermeneutic lifeworld and, while he rejected the label during his lifetime, in seeking to disclose how social structures "limit interactions and knowledge, and the processes through which agents interpret their social realities" (Smith & Colpitts, 2022, p. 4), Bourdieu's work may be interpreted as adopting a hermeneutic/critical realist stance (Vandenberghe, 1999). Of course, research intent should *always* drive one's choice of theory and, for that matter, methodology. Nonetheless, the budding hermeneutic researcher could do worse than begin here, with Bourdieu's "thinking tools" proving fertile ground for intercultural research, particularly regarding the hierarchization of education. That said, one may utilize hermeneutics in domains ranging from lifeworld analysis, genre analysis, the documentary method, the sociology of knowledge, and beyond (Chang, 2022). Indeed, it is this adaptability which underlines hermeneutics as a compelling tool for cross-cultural research.

Methodological Considerations

Philosophical Underpinnings: Critical Realism

In consonance with a Bhaskarian (1978) critical realist dialectic, hermeneutics stands against the *strictly* positivist/rationalistic-and-constructivist/relativistic duality, moving towards an "ontology of understanding" (Scott-Villiers, 2014, p. 403), which foregrounds the nuanced internal subjectivities and experiences of individuals within the scope of external social structures. Here, positivism's "epistemic fallacy" (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 27), where, via a closed methodological loop, Being (ontology) reduces to our understanding of it (epistemology), is rejected. As too is radical constructivism's open epistemic foundation, in which "truth" emerges *solely* from discourse and lived experience. Notwithstanding their fundamental ontological conflict, "each reduces reality to human knowledge, whether that knowledge acts as lens or container" (Fletcher, 2017, p. 182). Conversely, critical realism places the physical and social sciences within a stratified ontology encompassing the *real* (why), *actual* (what), and *empirical* (who) domains (Costas Batlle, 2017). In doing so, constructivism's epistemic relativism, where "knowledge is conditioned by our prior social and historical knowledge and experiences" (Raduescu & Vassey, 2009, p. 1) and positivism's ontological realism, wherein reality exists independently of our knowledge of it, intersect. Affirming ontology as irreducible to epistemology, critical realism accounts for human interpretation in open, uncontrollable social systems while *also* making space for the external structures driving these systems. Bhaskar's (1978) stratified domains, presented in Figure 1 and visualized through an 'iceberg' metaphor (Anderson, 2020), remain central to understanding lifeworlds.

Figure 1.
Bhaskar's (1978) stratified ontology.
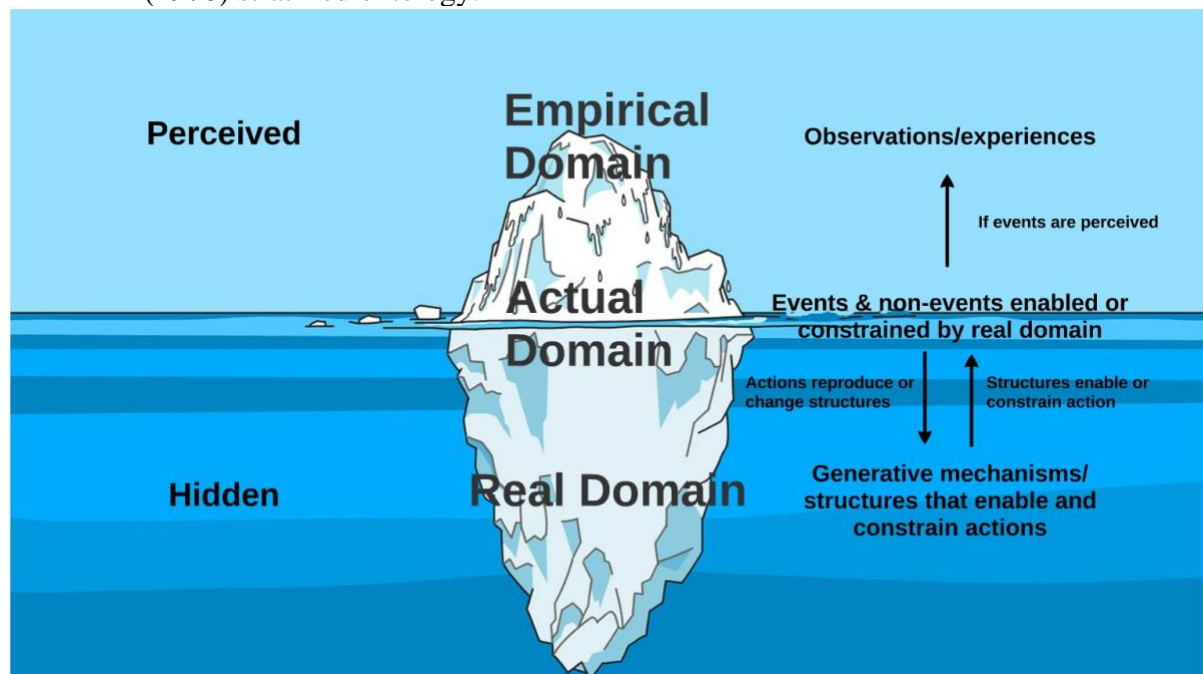
Note. From Anderson (2020).

Hermeneutics-as-Theory: Gadamer's Truth and Method

Hermeneutics rejects strictly "linear" understandings of meaning, moving towards a "circular" reading that recognizes finitude's interpretative logic as "an inescapable structure of human knowledge" (Smith, 2004, p. 34). Seeking to account for the dialogical interactions between individual elements and their whole, fragments of meaning can only be "understood in terms of the meanings of others or of the whole …, yet understanding these other elements, or the whole …, in turn, presupposes understanding of the original element" (Blackburn, 2005, p. 165). Thus, the hermeneutic circle represents a passageway to understanding that seeks not to overcome or eliminate human understanding's finite nature but to appreciate the consequences of these limits. Following Gadamer's (1960/2004) extension of Heideggerian thought, Scott-Villiers (2014) notes four normative implications for interpretation: *effective history*, *prejudice*, *provocation*, and the *fusion of horizons*. In theorizing effective history, Gadamer seeks to demonstrate that "understanding is never a subjective relation to a given 'object' but to the history of its effect" (Scott-Villiers, 2014, p. 404). From this perspective, the languages, symbols, traditions, and imaginaries guiding interaction shape perceptions of meaning; thus, a shared history, and the consequences of that history, are always *in* effect.

Placing effective history within an epistemological register, tradition mediates one's access to perspective, closing some doors while opening others; one's interpretations of "truth" and "knowledge", therefore, remain limited. Gadamer notes: "*to be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete*[1]" (1960/2004, p. 301). Recognizing finitude, *prejudice* (or pre-held cultural expectations and assumptions) regulates hermeneutical situatedness. In essence, this historically-effected consciousness structures the background from which each social agent emerges to encounter the World; hence, "prejudice is not negative or unproductive but a starting point for learning" (Scott-Villiers, 2014, p. 404). The positive conception of prejudice highlights the role of pre-judgement during the interpretation

---

[1] Emphasis present in original text.

of meaning; more pointedly, dialogues surrounding these biases force them–and, in turn, cultural filters shaping interpretation–to the fore. From Gadamer's perspective, researchers in the social sciences (if still reading, I assume this is you) should not suspend their subjectivities. On the contrary, one must consciously and iteratively commit to these biases when seeking meaning; thus, prejudice is productive. However, that is not to say that this is always the case: Gadamer acknowledges preconceptions as holding the potential to distort understanding–the point remains that they do not *always* do so.

Recognizing interpretation as an engagement with prejudice, how can one decode alternative, unfamiliar, or peripheral voices in a manner sympathetic to their intersubjective or socio-historical contexts? As noted by Scott-Villiers (2014), "it is not, as some have suggested, a case of putting oneself in their shoes, being neutral with respect to what is being said or extinguishing oneself–all of which are impossible" (p. 404). Indeed, hermeneutics, sometimes recognized as interpretive phenomenology (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015; Neubauer et al., 2019), actively rejects transcendental phenomenology's epistemological separation of observer and subject, seeking to situate the researcher within context so that they may "reflect on essential themes of participant experience with the phenomenon" (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 92). Through foregrounding one's experiences within the discursive process, tradition becomes a source of *provocation* and reflection, whereby insider-outsider perspectives combine "in a circular relation of whole and parts" (George, 2020) to interpret a given phenomenon; provocation, therefore, represents "the experience of understanding" (Scott-Villiers, 2014, p. 404).

Acknowledging pre-judgement as an enduring transmission of meaning, "hermeneutic reflection and determination of one's own present life interpretation calls for the unfolding of one's 'effective-historical' consciousness" (Herda, 1999, p. 63). Gadamer (1960/2004) posits that successful provocation culminates in a *fusion of horizons* that elevates both interpreter and interpreted alike "to a higher level of universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other" (p. 304). Horizons fuse when context leads participants to a new interpretation that is, ideally, shared by both. Thus, "the original understanding is surpassed and integrated into a broader, more informed understanding" (Vessey, 2009, p. 549). By emphasizing the significance of encounter, hermeneutics draws attention to the unceasing potential of reciprocal dialogue and the influence of normative experience on the interpretive process. Here, amongst this non-dualistic reading of truth, the connection between theory and method becomes manifest: present horizons cannot be divorced from lived traditions. Thus, one should never seek to limit or repress one's subjectivities but expand upon them.

Guidelines for Hermeneutic Inquiry: "Mixed Hermeneutics"

Mixed-methods research (MMR) represents a multi-method framework, where, in consonance with Bhaskarian critical realism, empirical-quantitative and interpretive-qualitative techniques consolidate. Despite the noted–for some, *untenable*–ontological divide between these paradigms (Migiro & Magangi, 2011), MMR's use within the social sciences is increasingly prevalent owing to its capacity for flexible and comprehensive analysis (Greene & Caracelli, 2003). From this perspective, inconsistencies between strictly quantitative and hermeneutic methods act as a benefit rather than an impediment. While the former helps generalize and test hypotheses, the latter places respondents within their social contexts, looking beyond "observable behaviours to develop insight into beliefs, value systems, and meanings ascribed to experiences" (Von Zweck et al., 2008, p. 121). When successful, MMR provides a holistic view of phenomena appreciative of overlapping or conflicting paradigms (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). Consequently, one may, if applying sociological theory, adopt the sequential transformative approach detailed in Figure 2 that, while not an MMR design in

the traditional sense, acts "as a worldview or philosophy that can provide the foundation for the use of mixed methods" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 61).

Notwithstanding hermeneutics' critical realist basis, questions over epistemic cohesion in MMR remain. As noted by Mayoh and Onwuegbuzie (2015), the outwardly diametric slant of positivism and interpretivism "amplifies the philosophical complexity of combination" (p. 97). Nevertheless, Lincoln and Guba (2003) question this traditional reading, noting that predominantly qualitative-based research may exploit multiple measures if it enhances the exploration and interpretation of observable patterns. This, as noted by   (2013),   "would then still allow for an epistemological understanding that there is no univocal way of envisaging the patterns" (p. 656). More pointedly, it demonstrates that there is "no royal road to ultimate knowledge" (Lincoln & Guba, 2003, p. 274). This reference to diverse roads "admits the possibility (at times) of employing both quantitative and qualitative methods as part of the knowing process, with the primary focus still being on developing context-grounded interpretations of social life" (Romm, 2013, p. 656). Within hermeneutic research, Mayoh and Onwuegbuzie (2015) note that this is best realized through sequential designs that facilitate phenomenological orientation and theory testing.

The above is, of course, all well and good, but how does it manifest as an *actionable* research design? Returning to my Bourdieusian example, sequential transformative MMR is particularly suited to inquiries guided by a pre-established theoretical framework, whereby specific advocacy–for example, the interpretation, expansion, and fusion of internalized metanarratives surrounding specific forms of capital–"is more important in guiding the study than the use of methods alone" (Creswell, 2009, p. 212), with precedence given to the technique exhibiting strengths appropriate to the research objective. To interpret socially-driven research aims and questions, one may, for example, prioritize the qualitative-hermeneutic phase–which may succeed quantitative surveying of descriptive and inferential data, purposive sampling, and interview guide orientation. Indeed, to better identify relevant experience during interviews, Van Manen (1997) stresses the importance of orienting to phenomena before formulating interview protocols.

Given hermeneutics' focus on uncovering jointly-constructed fusions of, in this instance, multicultural (and, therefore, potentially conflicting) horizons, the requirement to "focus carefully on the question of what possible human experience is to be made topical" reflects the "strong justification for the adoption of a quantitative preliminary phase in order to identify the most relevant phenomenological experience [and] … to test theories" (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015, p. 97). Additionally, considering the mixed-hermeneutic design, the quantitative phase further identifies, tests, and triangulates hypotheses in terms of complementarity and confirmation. As noted by Secomb and Smith (2011), this protocol "enhances the rigor of larger studies," being "particularly important in mixed-method research where the competing methodological perspectives can lead to ineffectual results" (p. 32). In doing so, a mixed-hermeneutic research process may, for example, consist of a chronological sequence of interconnected hermeneutic circles, or *spiral*, as demonstrated in Figure 2.
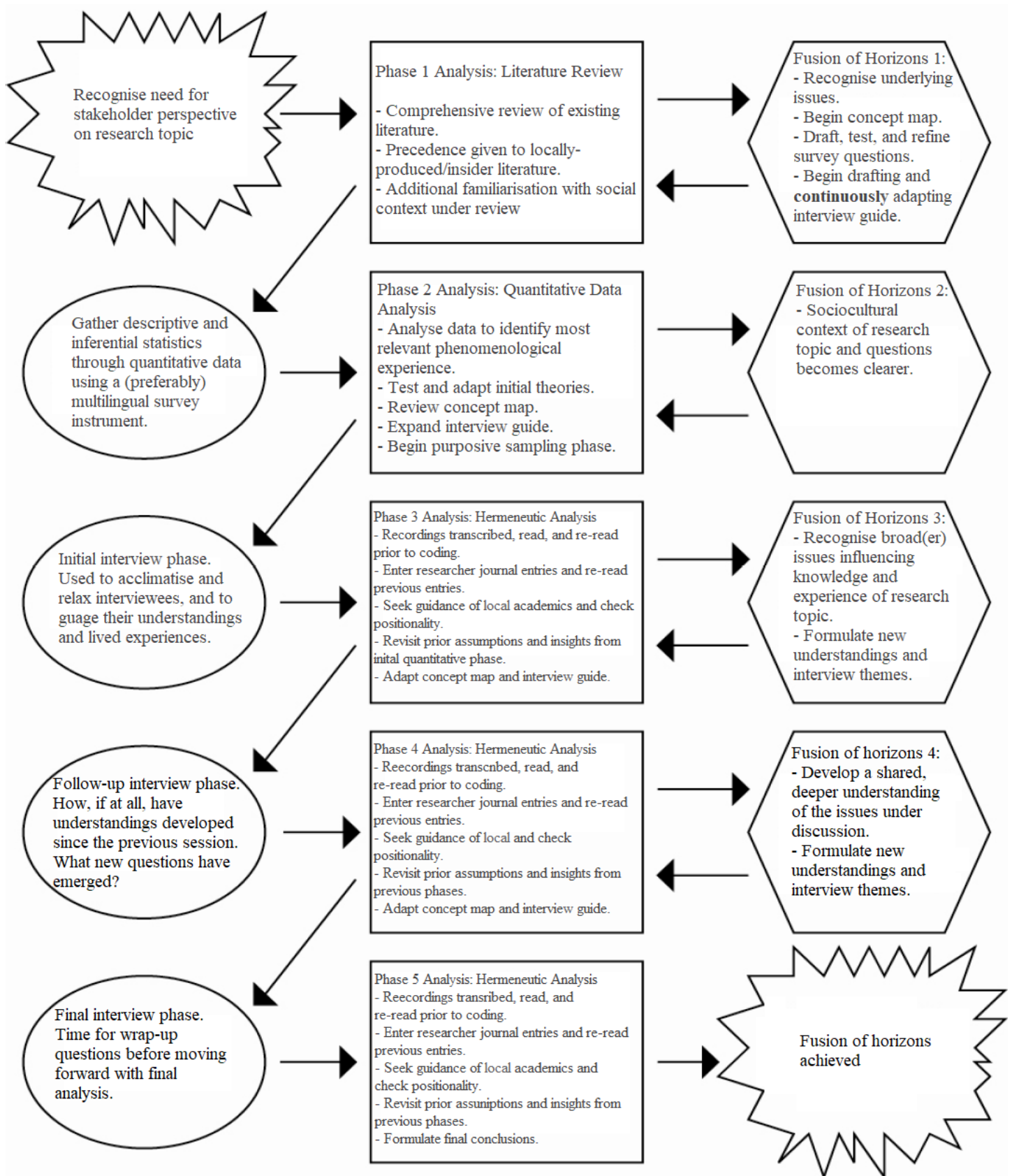
Figure 2

Example Longitudinal Hermeneutic Research Process

Note. Adapted from Paterson & Higgs (2005).

To translate theoretical research concepts into questions that may be examined empirically, it is useful to operationalize a concept map informed by an extensive literature review of issues raised previously. This may, for example, inform the design of an online, multilingual survey instrument incorporating interval-level Likert-type variables. Data gleaned from this questionnaire would provide descriptive and inferential statistics, with the latter used to test hypotheses and correlations between patterns of responses. During analysis, one may employ Cronbach's Alpha or Rasch analysis to assess the reliability coefficient of the initial survey, with sample numbers for this phase consistent with recommendations by Hair et al. (2018), who note a general preference for ten samples per measurement variable. Following analysis, this would provide phenomenological orientation through observable patterns in data, augmenting the concept map and, in turn, the hermeneutic interview guide.

Before pressing forth, I feel it important to address the linguistic elephant in the room: given that we are, I assume, intercultural researchers, which language (and, thus, cultural lens) should we interview *in*? Truthfully, there is no clear answer; one should address the situation as one sees fit. Of course, if the researcher is proficient in the interviewee's native language, this would prove highly advantageous, as with qualitative research more broadly. If not (and I regrettably fall into this category), then well-defined inclusion/exclusion criteria would undoubtedly save future heartache. Generally speaking, said criteria should always be driven by the research questions and population under study; however, a relatively high CEFR level (B2-C1, for example) in the interviewer's native language may be required. Given the noted complexity and time-consuming nature of hermeneutic research (Whitehead, 2004), I would advise a limited, purposive sample, with referral or snowballing if needed. Groenewald (2004), for example, notes a preference for two-to-ten research participants in phenomenological-hermeneutic research, Creswell (2013) a minimum of five, and Egitim (2022) six.

To disrupt the researcher-participant power imbalance, interviewees may set the language, locations, and times of all sessions. Following informed consent, participants should, through appropriately-crafted interview questions, undergo biographical reconstruction processes, which, over time, place ongoing experiences of the phenomena under study within a broader sociocultural context. While all sessions should be audio-recorded and semi-structured, non-directive techniques which invoke a natural, adaptable style encouraging open communication are advised; this includes employing a flexible interview guide rather than a set list of questions, minimal note-taking, and a preference for organic conversation and non-dichotomous questions. Here, the role of the researcher will take a maieutic dimension, minimizing disruptions to conversational flow unless necessary. Indeed, hermeneutic sensitivity is paramount; one will practise the art of listening and, in doing so, be cognizant of one's limitations as both an individual and a non-native researcher to the culture under study, for, as noted by Barthes (1985), "hearing is a physiological phenomenon; listening is a psychological act" (p. 245).

Following hermeneutic interviewing and follow-up phases, one should transcribe all audio recordings, considering paralinguistic context, including rhythm, intonation, and stress, and, via research notes, kinesics, such as movement and body position. Fundamental to the accurate interpretation of meaning is the verbatim transcription of each spoken word without embellishment, with demographic information, a reflective journal, and field notes recommended in order to add additional context to research findings. Before qualitative coding and data analysis, all transcripts must be read, re-read, and proofed. Given hermeneutic inquiry maintains a theoretical commitment "to the person as a cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being and assumes a chain of connection between people's talk and their thinking" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 54), the analysis should be both holistic and thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2006), situating interviewee horizons within the scope of the research goal.

To recover "the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 78), one may use the (admittedly expensive) NVivo software package to code, cross-examine, and thematically analyze all qualitative data, working towards a hermeneutic understanding situated within the horizon of interviewees. Alternatives to NVivo include Atlas, MAXQDA, and the open-sourced solution, FreeQDA. Regardless of the software package used, an effective organizing system remains central to the qualitative analysis process (Tesch, 1990); this includes numbering each transcribed line, multiple readings before coding, identifying and marking units, developing thematic labels, utilizing visual aids to identify inter-relationships, incorporating select empirical evidence within hermeneutic interpretations, and, seeking a circular hermeneutic understanding of the individual, revisiting and enhancing prior analyses and assumptions with insights gleaned from more recent interviews (Patterson & Williams, 2002, pp. 46–49).

Ethical & Quality Considerations

Upon obtaining clearance from the host institution's research ethics committee, surveying and interview preparation procedures should be consistent with Diner and Crandall's (1978) overlapping list of recurring ethical transgressions to ensure that *no harm comes to participants*, *informed consent is obtained*, *there is no invasion of privacy*, *nor any deception involved*. To avoid harm and ensure culturally sensitive and epistemically just findings, all participants must be protected from physical and mental anguish, including negotiating and mediating issues of power, and protecting the dignity of one's participants (O'Leary, 2004, p. 43). Further, research procedures should be consistent with Bates' (2004) principles of ethical beneficence, with participants receiving verbal and written assurance that involvement or non-involvement in the project will not impact their education. To provide "respondents the opportunity to be fully informed of the nature of the research and the implications of their participation at the outset" (Bryman, 2012, p. 140), all survey instruments and interviews may contain multilingual informed consent and information forms, which clarify that all responses will be treated as anonymous and confidential. Additionally, one should practice sound digital safeguarding, with all records backed up and protected through encrypted and password-locked folders. To preserve identity, meanwhile, participants should be referred to by pseudonyms in all research notes, analyses, and writings. Once all criteria listed above are met, face-to-face interviewing should follow established quality criteria that "guide the field activities and to impose checks to be certain that the proposed procedures are in fact being followed" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 330). For instance, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for establishing trust (credibility, transferability, dependability, & confirmability), as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1
Adapted criteria and techniques for establishing trust (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 301–327).

Criteria	Interpretivist-Relativist Terminology	Research Techniques
Truth value	Credibility	Prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, archiving of data, member checks.
Applicability	Transferability	Thick description.
Consistency	Dependability	Overlap/triangulation of methods, dependability audit.
Neutrality	Confirmability	Confirmability audit, triangulation, reflexivity.
All criteria		Reflexive journal.

Supporting the hermeneutic-interpretive belief that all knowledge is constructed and thus finite, Lincoln and Guba (1985) concede that "(i)t is dubious whether 'perfect' criteria will ever emerge" (p. 331). As such, these techniques *guide* the navigation of "truth". They "are not closed; they can be added to and subtracted from" (Sparkes, 2002, p. 211). Regarding *credibility*, the prolonged and persistent nature of the hermeneutic spiral enhances verisimilitude and methodological triangulation (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). Indeed, given hermeneutics' longitudinal convergence of part and whole, "attempt[s] to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint" (Cohen & Manion, 2000, p. 254) aligns with established understandings of triangulation. This includes Denzin's (2006) reading of data triangulation involving *time*, *space*, and *people*, which, as noted by Fusch et al. (2018), presents inter-related data points of the same phenomenon; "discovering commonalities within dissimilar settings … over time to observe ongoing interactions" (p. 22).

Regarding the seeming inconsistency of triangulating quantitative and qualitative data, Downward and Mearman (2006) argue that pluralistic research models "can be underpinned by a coherent ontological or epistemological position" (p. 81) insofar as non-dualistic readings of reality–such as those expressed by critical realism–posit "that reality is a structured open system in which the real, the actual and the empirical domains are organically related" (p. 87). From a sociocultural perspective, this position reflects not only the social imaginary as a system of interlocking spheres (Taylor, 2007) but Bourdieu's (1968) aspiration to bridge the individual and society, or of subjectivism and objectivism, whereby "objective relations do not exist and do not realize themselves except in and through the *systems of dispositions*[2] of agents, produced by the internalizing of objective conditions" (p. 705). With this philosophy in mind. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) separation of positivist-interpretivist paradigmatic realities appears somewhat redundant and, following their admission, *imperfect* (p. 331). Indeed, Creswell (2011) notes that "by 2005, Guba and Lincoln had taken down these artificial boundaries by declaring cautiously that elements of paradigms might be blended together in a study" (p. 275).

To further aid credibility and isomorphism, findings may be assessed using *member checks* or "testing the data with members of the relevant human data source groups" (Guba, 1981, p. 80)–for instance, returning interview transcripts to participants or conducting member focus groups–a process consistent with George's (2020) description of hermeneutic provocation. Finally, "truth" may be enhanced through regular peer debriefings from an academic native to the culture under study and, more importantly, removed from the research process, who acts as an emic guide, occasional translator, and identifier of prejudices and effective histories. To aid *transferability*, a *thick description* (Geertz, 1973) of all research context, including setting, participants, and backgrounds, should be collected and, where appropriate, made available to outside academics through published research to facilitate a match of generalizable characteristics. Guba (1981) notes that thick description may also be achieved through supplementary materials or appendices.

Dependability, meanwhile, represents quality assurance through systematic methodological protocols; yet, given the multifaceted nature of reality, it also recognizes that "what is being studied may not be reliable, consistent, or standard" (O'Leary, 2004, p. 60). From this perspective, the potential convergence of MMR and hermeneutics provides overlapping methods "in such a way that the weakness of one is compensated by the strengths of another" (Guba, 1981, p. 86). Further, "the hermeneutic circle, fusion of horizons and dialogue, integrated into the hermeneutic spiral assist the researcher to *consistently*[3] address the interpretation of a phenomenon" (von Zweck et al., 2008, p. 131). Despite these

---

[2] Emphasis present in original text.
[3] Emphasis not present in original text.

methodological advantages, an *audit trail* would further ensure dependability through checks by external sources. Auditable documents include referential adequacy materials, including interview notes, concept maps, and research journals. Finally, to achieve *confirmability*, a separate audit may be used "to attest that the findings, interpretations and recommendations are supported by data" (Loh, 2013, p. 5). Indeed, following the recommendation of Guba (1981), this will "be performed at the same time by the same external agent commissioned to perform the dependability audit" (p. 88). Ultimately, however, the most impactful step for aiding confirmability–and overall research quality–is the practice of reflexivity, with introspections tested through regular peer debriefings, member checks, and reflexive journal entries.

Strengths, Limitations, & Conclusions

Incorporating a hermeneutic methodological-philosophical stance provides several benefits to the intercultural researcher. Most prominent is enhanced triangulation, which serves to strengthen consistency and verisimilitude. Further, through a longitudinal *fusion of horizons*, the hermeneutic process recognizes researcher pre-understandings, critical reflections, and situated histories "as a constructive contribution to the research process" (VanLeeuwen et al., 2017, p. 3), with this being noticeably advantageous to cross-cultural inquiry. Through a reflexive, non-dualist approach, hermeneutics facilitates in-depth exploration of complex and dynamic relations so that asymmetrical power relations are acknowledged and, with proper care taken, mediated, ensuring that day-to-day understandings of research subjects are interpreted and presented in an epistemically just process. Further, in bringing awareness to researcher positionality, the recognition of etic interpretations "creates opportunities for understanding human experiences from multiple and comparative perspectives" (VanLeeuwen et al., 2017, p. 3). Though the hermeneutic method rejects the negative etic-emic dualistic connotation, it also presents several noticeable limitations to be accounted for through ethical and transparent quality control procedures. While the personal and social characteristics one calls upon to interpret their research findings are not *strictly* disadvantageous, they remain inevitable and a source of potential discord.

As with researchers and participants, readers, too, bring predetermined horizons during their interpretations of the themes and conclusions emerging from the text. Thus, it is your responsibility to present findings in such a way that, while "readers may not share the author's interpretation, they should be able to follow the pathway that led to the interpretation given" (Whitehead, 2004, p. 513). Ultimately, the contexts, philosophies, theoretical perspectives, and methods presented here communicate the criticality of acknowledging the histories influencing one's background, research procedures, data analysis, and conclusions. In seeking a fusion of horizons, it is understood that human experience remains both finite and subject to constant alteration. By emphasizing researcher reflexivity, the direct communication of context, and longitudinal interpretation, it is hoped that findings generated by the hermeneutic spiral remain not only accessible but transferable to alternative domains. Indeed, moving progressively through the spiral, pre-existing knowledge and emerging interpretations of research context integrate into a holistic whole, leading to a deeper understanding of observed phenomena amongst researchers, participants, and readers alike.

Section One: Featured Paper

References

Alsaigh, R., & Coyne, I. (2021). Doing a hermeneutic phenomenology research underpinned by Gadamer's philosophy: A framework to facilitate data analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Research*, *20*,1–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406921104782

Anderson, B.J. (2020). *Developing organizational and managerial wisdom* (2nd Ed.). Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

Barthes, R. (1985). *The responsibility of forms*. Hill & Wang.

Bates, R. (2004). A critical analysis of evaluation practice: The Kirkpatrick Model & the principle of beneficence. *Evaluation & Program Planning*, *27*(3), 341–347.

Bhaskar, R. (1978). *A realist theory of science* (2nd Ed.). Harvester Press.

Bhaskar, R. (1998). Philosophy and scientific realism. In M. Archer, R. Bhaskar, A. Collier, T. Lawson, & A. Norrie (Eds.), *Critical realism: Essential readings* (pp. 16–47). London: Routledge.

Blackburn, S. (2005). *The Oxford dictionary of philosophy*. Oxford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1968). Structuralism and theory of sociological knowledge. *Social Research*, *35*(4), 681–706.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Polity.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th Ed.). Oxford University Press.

Chang, Q. (2022). The contribution of a hermeneutic approach to investigate psychological variables in second language acquisition. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1055249

Cohen, L., & Manion, L. (2000). *Research methods in education.* Routledge.

Costas Batlle, I. (2017). *Re-shaping personhood through neoliberal governmentality: Non-formal education, charities, and youth sport programmes* [Doctoral dissertation, the University of Bath]. The University of Bath Research Portal. https://researchportal.bath.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/re-shaping-personhood-through-neoliberal-governmentality-non-form

Creswell, J.W. (2009). *Research design* (3rd Ed). SAGE.

Creswell, J.W. (2011). Controversies in mixed methods research. In Denzin, N., Lincoln, Y. (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 269–284). SAGE.

Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd Ed.). SAGE.

Creswell, J.W., & Plano Clark, V.L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd Ed.). SAGE.

Crossley, N. (2001). The phenomenological habitus and its construction. *Theory and Society*, *30*(1), 81–120. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1011070710987

Denzin, N.K. (2006). *Sociological methods: A sourcebook* (5th Ed.)*.* Aldine Transaction.

Dieleman, H. (2017). Transdisciplinary hermeneutics: A symbiosis of science, art, philosophy, reflective practice, and subjective experience. *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies*, *35*, 170–199.

Downward, P., & Mearman, A. (2006). Retroduction as mixed-methods triangulation in economic research: reorienting economics into social science. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, *31*(1), 77–99. https://doi.org/10.1093/cje/bel009

Egitim, S. (2022). Voices on language teacher stereotypes: Critical cultural competence building as a pedagogical strategy. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2022.2070847

Fletcher, A.J. (2017). Applying critical realism in qualitative research: Methodology meets method. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *20*(2), 181–194. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2016.1144401

Fusch, P.I., Fusch, G.E., & Ness, L. (2018). Denzin's paradigm Shift: revisiting triangulation in qualitative research. *Journal of Social Change*, *10*(1), 19–32. https://doi.org/10.5590/JOSC.2018.10.1.02

Gadamer, H.G. (1976). *The historicity of understanding*. Penguin.

Gadamer, H.G. (2004). *Truth and method* (2nd Ed.) (J. Weinsheimer, & D.G. Marshall, Trans.). Continuum. (Original work published 1960).

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of culture*. Basic Books.

George, T. (2020). *Hermeneutics*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/

Greene, J.C., & Caracelli, V.J. (2003). Making paradigmatic sense of mixed methods practice. In A. Tashakkori and Teddlie (Eds.), *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioral Research* (pp. 91–110). SAGE.

Groenewald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methodologies*, *3*(1), 42–55). https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300104

Guba, E.G. (1981). Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries. *Educational Resources Information Center Annual Review Paper*, *29*, 75–91.

Hair, J.F., Black, W.C., Babin, B.J., & Anderson, R.E. (2018). *Multivariate Data Analysis* (8th Ed.). Cengage.

Heidegger, M. (2010). *Being and Time*. State University of New York Press.

Herda, E.A. (1999). *Research conversations and narrative: A critical hermeneutic orientation in participatory inquiry*. Praeger.

Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE.

Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (2003). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues* (2nd ed., pp. 253–291). SAGE.

Loh, J. (2013). Inquiry into issues of trustworthiness and quality in narrative studies: A perspective. *The Qualitative Report*, *18*(33), 1–15.

Mayoh, J., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2015). Toward a conceptualization of mixed methods phenomenological research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, *9*(1), 91–107. https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689813505358

Migiro, S., & Magangi, B.A. (2011). Mixed methods: A review of literature and the future of the new research paradigm. *African Journal of Business Management*, *5*(10), 3757–3764.

Neubauer, B.E., Witkop, C.T., & Varpio, L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, 8, 90–97. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-019-0509-2

O'Leary, Z. (2004). *The essential guide to doing research*. SAGE.

Paterson, M., & Higgs, J. (2005). Using hermeneutics as a qualitative research approach in professional practice. *The Qualitative Report*, *10*(2), 339–357. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2005.1853

Patterson, M.E., & Williams, D.R. (2002). *Collecting and analyzing qualitative data: Hermeneutic principles, methods, and case examples*. Sagamore publishing.

Raduescu, C., & Vessey, I. (2009). *Methodology in critical realist research: The mediating role of domain specific theory*. Proceedings of the Americas Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS), 433.

Romm, N.R.A. (2013). Employing Questionnaires in terms of a constructivist epistemological stance: Reconsidering researchers' involvement in the unfolding of social life. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *12*(1), 652–669. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691301200136

Schütz, A., & Luckmann, T. (1973). *The structures of the lifeworld, Vol. I*. Northwestern University Press.

Scott-Villiers, P. (2014). Hermeneutics. In D. Coghlan, & M. Brydon-Miller (Eds.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research* (pp. 403–405). SAGE.

Secomb, J.M., & Smith, C. (2011). A mixed method pilot study: The researchers' experiences. *Contemporary Nurse*, *39*(1), 31–35. https://doi.org/10.5172/conu.2011.39.1.31

Smith, N. (2004). Taylor and the hermeneutic tradition. In R. Abbey (Ed.), *Charles Taylor* (pp. 29–51). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511610837.002

Smith, J.A., & Osborn, M. (2003). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J.A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology* (pp. 53–80). Sage.

Smith, M.D., & Colpitts, B.D.F. (2022). Japan's Pursuit of Meritocracy, Cosmopolitanism, and Global Rankings in Higher Education: A Bourdieusian Interpretation. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2022.2086102

Sparkes, A. (2002). *Telling tales in sport and physical activity: A qualitative journey*. Human Kinetics.

Susen, S. (2017). Hermeneutic Bourdieu. In L. Adkins, C. Brosnan, & S. Threadgold (Eds.), *Bourdieusian Prospects* (pp. 132–159). Routledge.

Taylor, C. (2007. *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press.

Tesch, R. (1990). *Qualitative research*. Falmer Press.

Van Manen, M. (1997). *Researching lived experience* (2nd Ed.). Althouse Press.

Vandenberghe, F. (1999). "The real is relational": An epistemological analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's generative structuralism. *Sociological Theory*, *17*(1), 32–67. https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00064

Vandenberghe, F. (2022). Critical realist hermeneutics. Journal of Critical Realism, 21(5), 552–570. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2022.2106026

VanLeeuwen, C.A., Guo-Brennan, L., & Weeks, L.E. (2017). Conducting hermeneutic research in international settings: Philosophical, practical, and ethical considerations. *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*, 7. https://doi.org/10.11575/jah.v0i0.53309

Vessey, D. (2009). Gadamer and the fusion of horizons. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, *17*(4), 531–542. https://doi.org/10.1080/09672550903164459

Von Zweck, C., Paterson, M., & Pentland, W. (2008). The use of hermeneutics in a mixed methods design. *The Qualitative Report*, *13*(1), 116–134.

Whitehead, L. (2004). Enhancing the quality of hermeneutic research: Decision trail. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *45*(5), 512–518. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2003.02934.x

Zimmermann, J. (2015). *Hermeneutics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.