

## Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics: Concepts of reading, understanding and interpretation

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### Abstract

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is a popular qualitative research interpretive method aiming to explore the meaning of individual experiences in relation to understanding human interpretation. Gadamer identifies that authentic engagement with reading requires awareness of the inter-subjective nature of understanding in order to promote a reflective engagement with the text. The main concepts of Gadamer's view of reading and understanding are explored in this paper in relation to interpreting text. Concepts such as; inter-subjectivity, Being, authenticity, fore-structure, pre-suppositions, prejudice, temporality and history are all help to enhance health and social science researchers' understanding of his theory and its application.

**Keywords:** Gadamer, Philosophical hermeneutics, Reading, Understanding, Interpretation, Qualitative research

### Introduction

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) was an influential German philosopher of the twentieth century, inspiring a variety of scholastic disciplines from aesthetics to theology. In suggesting understanding *was* interpretation and vice versa, Gadamer identifies language acting as the medium for understanding and a means of sharing the complexities of human experience (Gadamer 2004a). From the ground breaking work of his teacher and friend Martin Heidegger, Gadamer wrote about human subjectivity and developing a critical and dialogical

approach to philosophical hermeneutics in his magnum opus *Truth and Method* (2004a) first published in 1960.

### **The purpose of this paper**

This paper aims to articulate Gadamer's work in relation to reading, understanding and interpretation for health and social science researchers'. Gadamer's key concepts are of particular concern for qualitative researchers' intending to use philosophical hermeneutics for interpreting research participants' narrative and findings. The researchers' own experience of reading and understanding are important when relating concepts of pre-supposition (bias, fore-structure), inter-subjectivity, authenticity (being reflective), temporality (time affecting understanding/ emotion), tradition and history (culture) to interpreting the written word. These concepts are significant because of the central interpretive relationship of the researcher within the qualitative research process. The terms researcher and interpreter are used interchangeably due to the cyclical nature of interpretation.

### **Hermeneutic phenomenology**

Gadamer's concepts will be defined to make explicit the working terms in use. Phenomenology underpins the philosophy of Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics (2004a). Firstly, the word phenomenology comes from the Kantian *phenomenon* meaning "...that which shows itself in itself..." when entities become manifest as the first signification of the word shows itself (Heidegger 2003, 51). First, the *semblance* of *what* phenomenology shows conceptualises the word and what it signifies to the interpreter (Heidegger 2003, 51). Second, *logos* means *language* (Gadamer 2004b, 59) and relates to Heidegger's *discourse* and letting "...something be seen through speaking..." (Heidegger 2003, 56). The vocal signification of a named object connects language as a shared medium of expression (Gadamer 2004a, 408; Gadamer 2004b, 59). Phenomenology focusses on explaining how the primordial thing-in-itself is 'rooted' in the events of life and understanding what is signified by logos through the "...name by which

something is called...” (Gadamer 2004a, 407). Heidegger and Gadamer’s phenomenological inquiry into Being (human existence in the world) therefore enabled a rigorous and critical questioning of something that had been largely taken for granted in philosophy, the primordial understanding of Being (Gadamer 2004a).

Hermeneutics is a term derived from the Greek ‘hermeneutikos’ meaning to *interpret* (Palmer 1969). Hermeneutics promotes human potential for understanding the meaning of *language* to expand the infinite possibilities of human thought (Palmer 1969). Developed from theological interpretations and meaning of the Christian Bible hermeneutics aimed to confirm God’s authority over the thinking process (Palmer 1969). The early hermeneutics exercised a discriminating power over texts suitability to carry the message of a transcendental wonder (Dilthey) demonstrating, rather than human empowerment, that interpretation with an ideological bias has the capacity to restrict human potential for understanding more fully (Alexander and Numbers 2010). What is significant about Gadamer’s hermeneutics is his ontological focus (Being) and capacity to not only interpret human understanding but misunderstanding as a mechanism for effective communication.

### **Understanding language**

As previously mentioned, the key to investigating Gadamer’s concept of understanding is through *logos* (Gadamer 2004b, 59). Logos is the vehicle for communicating with others, and when we think and speak we “...make what is not present manifest through ...speaking...communicat(ing) everything that he means...” (Gadamer 2004a, 391; Gadamer 2004b, 60-61). This means that the *word* triggers a denoted name given to an object and a resulting mental image (Gadamer 2004b, 62). When thinking of any object we unconsciously join up our internalised thoughts within the shared, externalised medium of communicating with other people (Gadamer 2004b). Therefore the commonality of language ensures a shared acceptance of meaning and ability to vocalise thoughts when alone or when with other people. That relates to the problem of language; we learn to think and use language from the first steps of

cognisance, a familiarising engagement experientially with the world and it with us (Aristotle in Gadamer 2004b, 63). This allows the interpreter to develop ways of knowing and predicting the world through the use of their senses of conformity, cohesion and survival within the world (Flinn 2006). Such predictive abilities mean we are always biased in our understanding of the spoken and written language as we become consciously aware of language only in unusual circumstances (Gadamer 2004b).

Gadamer suggests three inter-relational points of relevance to language and understanding: Firstly, the *universality* of language; every dialogue has the potential for 'inner infinity,' an ability to reason, project understanding onto another and read between the lines. This dialogue may be in the form of a reflective journal entry, a research participants narrative or everyday dialogue in the health and social sciences. A questioning mind ensures that language fills in any gaps towards a shared understanding (Gadamer 2004b, 68) opening up human potential for infinite dialogue with others in a *fusion of horizons*. Secondly, Gadamer refers to the essential *forgetfulness* of language; when losing the meaning of *what* is said there is potential for the "...real Being of language to unfold..." to be reduced (Gadamer 2004b, 64). Gadamer develops the ontological (life experiences of the world) reflexivity of language as a means of communicating the meaning of what others say and write. As will be shown, this ontological freedom encompasses *historicity*, *temporality* and *authenticity* through hermeneutic analysis. Lastly, what Gadamer called *I-lessness*. When we speak we speak to someone and to our inner selves. When naming the word (in text or visually) we enable the unifying effect of language and communicating with others (Gadamer 2004b, 65). Gadamer suggests there is a presence of spirit evident when using language, for example; projecting hesitancy, anxiety, intention and attitude. Gadamer refers to this as *play in the hermeneutic game*, a dynamic process of buoyancy, freedom potentiating reality and fulfilment of each players understanding. The play continues in the subjective inner world of thought and the motivation of the interpreter to play the game, to make sense of

language as a key factor for understanding experience (Gadamer 2004b, 66). I will now expand on these conditions.

### **Language and text**

The role of the interpreter within Gadamerian hermeneutics has a specific characteristic in understanding human potential, through the ontic-ontology of Heidegger's notion of *Being* (Heidegger 2003; Gadamer 2004a). The word *ontology* comes from the Greek language meaning the study of Being, reviewed by Heidegger for contemporary philosophy by situating Being into the average everydayness of life (Heidegger 2003). To Heidegger and Gadamer, understanding the concept of Being and 'what it is to be' human meant that by analysing this most fundamental of concepts *we* can then and *only then* begin to understand how we live and engage in the world through the medium of language (Gadamer 2004a; Gadamer 2004b). Language delivers pointers to the truth concealed within word meaning and reveals that something exists in a (hermeneutic) circle of ontological possibilities (Gadamer 2004a).

Fundamental to Heidegger's hermeneutic is the notion of the human as an existential (worldly) 'Being,' referred to as 'Dasein,' always spelt with a capital D, 'da' meaning 'there' and 'sein' meaning 'to be,' or 'there-being' (Heidegger 2003). The concept of Dasein lies therefore in the face of something *that is*. Something inevitably has to exist first before it can be investigated and Heidegger's analysis enabled the first step towards human understanding of Dasein (Heidegger 2003, 27). This complex but also intuitively familiar concept relates to when a human being becomes aware of themselves as an existent located temporally in time "...Dasein (therefore) always understands...its existence in terms of the possibility of ... be(ing) itself or not itself..." (Heidegger 2003, 33). Hence, we are aware and yet unaware of ourselves, 'forgetting' as we go about our daily lives, a pre-ontological awareness of existing through the experiences of everyday life (Heidegger 2003). Heidegger's question enabled a single minded attempt to analyse the human life experience as ontologically explicit and objectifiable as possible (Gadamer 2004b).

Back in those “heady days” of Heidegger’s radical 1920’s lectures, Heidegger’s work was a “...summons of existence itself...” towards authenticity (Karl Jaspers in Gadamer 2004b, 139). This new kind of philosophy aimed to remind humans of the choice of authenticity as an antidote to ‘falling’ (and ‘thrownness’) which relates to being superficial when with other people. We risk becoming just one of many, a risk that reduces human self-awareness and understanding of our potential. By being reminded of the possibility of authentic choice we may search to objectify the habits of everyday life by revealing what may otherwise remain hidden consciously or unconsciously within language and dialogue (Gadamer 2004b, 140).

Gadamer suggests hermeneutics is not a method but a fluid set of guiding principles aiding the human search for truth in the concealed forgetfulness of language. The analytic of Dasein means that research participants’ narrative of their life experience, of say cancer care is in a sense not only their individual experience but also experience valued in relation to the universality of the Dasein concept. Hence, the interpreting researcher too is analysing the universality of experience applied into Dasein’s analytic which they too share as a fellow human beings (Creswell 2007). Asking obvious yet profound questions of Dasein reinforces a reflective philosophy. However a difficulty is that despite humans being the only entity able to study and name itself ontically, our unique complexity means we aren’t like other entities at all, because we have language (Heidegger 2003).

### **Fusion of horizons – the hermeneutic circle**

It is the naming phenomena within language that places restrictions on language which Gadamer (2004a) endeavours to illuminate, arguing interpretations derived from such understandings always involve a *fusion of horizons*. From the familiar to the foreign all interpretations are derived from a basic level of understanding or pre-judgment. When accepting the inner world of subjectivity and searching for the meaning of interpretation Dasein inevitably conceals the truth of language and about life (Gadamer 2004a; 2004b). Hence, the reader is part of this fusion.

Gadamer's dialogical approach to hermeneutic text is suggested to go *beyond* the author's (or research participants transcribed narrative) meaning (2004a). Gadamer agrees with Chladenius that the reader and author "...doesn't have to know the real meaning of what he has written..." because it is the process of interpretation that counts in the search for meaning of the written word (Gadamer 2004a, 296). The text is re-awakened by the interpreter making sense of what has been written (2004a). The interpreter, however, needs to be aware of the hermeneutic circle, not merely to understand what the author (or research participant) meant; life experience (history) and use of language, but also asking how the words resonate with the interpreter. The issue therefore is not about finding the truth the author wrote about but realising the truth it has for the reader, how it becomes alive for the interpreter (Gadamer 2004a).

The process starts when text changes the spoken language into an "...enduring and fixed expression of life..." the experience of making sense of text always includes application; listening, observing, testing, judging, challenging, reflecting and looking for any bias whilst being-with-others (Gadamer 2004a, 389).

When reading the interpreter is helped by humans shared capacity to deal with more than one perception at a time, experienced in parallel with each other *before* the *most* likely idea is grasped and gains clarity (Gadamer 2004a, 293). It is this constant cycle of new projections and movement which enhances understanding and interpretation of the meaning of language (Gadamer 2004a, 293). When reading, our eyes need to be open to the newness of the text in order to search for meaning (2004a). The hermeneutic circle runs along the text like a *rhythm*, open to my anticipation, my pre-conceptions, prejudices and judgements (2004a). The reader needs to be aware what guides their understanding and anticipation of the completed speech and text, challenging hasty conclusions in order to be open to more possibilities. Therefore, the language used within the narrative acts as a middle ground between a search for understanding and agreement between the text and the interpreter (2004a).

Gadamer suggests all interpretations are derived from a basic level of understanding or pre-judgment and accepting the inner world of subjectivity (Gadamer 2004a,b). People rarely know about other people's views unless asked and instead will guess or make assumptions. Gadamer's view of the shared human experience as an 'application in the moment' of the hermeneutic circle was preceded forty years earlier by Walter Pater's observation "...for the grave reader...the word...reference is rarely content to die to thought precisely at the right moment...linger(s) awhile, stirring a long brainwave behind it of perhaps quite alien associations..." (Iser 1972, 212). Wolfgang Iser's reception theory relates to Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics; the act of reading enables an inevitable consciousness raising activity. The interpreter's expectation of the text gives them the chance to 'formulate the unformulated' and by being motivated to read they remain open to reveal the unexpected even if alien to the interpreter because the surprise of the text challenges the illusion of pre-supposed expectations (Iser 1972, 212).

### **The alien and familiar information**

In parallel with the early examples of hermeneutic application, what is crucial is the process of identifying and linking the *alien* with the *familiar* information, selectively focussing the interpreters search for new perspectives (2004b, 4). This depends on his enthusiasm to be open to new possibilities (Gadamer 2004b, 4). The alien aspects of text are what is the unknown, challenging the interpreter's familiar worldly *horizons* that assimilates old knowledge into new understanding, even if difficult to understand, especially relevant when reading the technical language of philosophy. There is a process of suspension as the 'alien' and 'unfamiliar' text run side by side until new understanding emerges (Gadamer 2004a, 269). Gadamer (2004b, 4) refers to two modes of experiencing alienation in our concrete experiences; the aesthetic and historical consciousness. In both cases judgements are based on the validity of judgement, characterising our sense of art in general being dependant on time, cultural significance, resonance and authority. The

alienation of historical consciousness is the art of maintaining an objective and critical distance from events of the past. As soon as language is written down it becomes the ultimate form of self-alienation and overcoming it is the highest task of understanding (Gadamer 2004a, 392). For example; if I wrote about a reflective experience as a researcher or when returning to a participant's narrative account at a later date there would be a raised consciousness of my own history, experience and perception of language used. The sense of now being opened up to new interpretation and understanding gained through temporal distance; reading the text, identifying and revealing assumptions, the reader involved and observing the unfamiliar text held as fiction enabling the '...realities of the text as they happen...' to unfold (Iser 1972, 221). Understanding therefore oscillates between finding 'consistency' with pre-conceptions and new but alien ideas (Iser 1972). The interpreter has to lift the restrictions placed consciously or not onto the meaning of the text itself. In seeking balance, meaning and understanding of text needs to start out with certain expectations which allows for what is integral to the aesthetic experience and engaging surprise, frustration and challenge (Iser 1972).

### **Authenticity**

Gadamer opens up the enquiry by articulating the situatedness of Dasein and what is involved in the process of understanding. When human beings are 'being-in-the-world' Dasein is aware of the world and immersed within it, a unitary phenomenon of sharing the world *with* other people (the 'they-self'). We are 'thrown' into the world whether we like it or not, with a variety of resources (or not) for survival, competition and co-operation (Gadamer 2004a). This shared 'concern' for the world is by caring, thinking, doing, contemplating theories of understanding (presence-at-hand), and making use of something such as language (Gadamer 2004a).

An interpreter's reading and understanding of narrative falls against this backdrop of understanding due to the constant but necessary state of 'being-with-others.' Despite a human being orientated to develop their own potential the effects of being surrounded by other people relates to states of 'in-authenticity'

and 'authenticity' (Heidegger 2003; Gadamer 2004a). Aspects of life are embraced without question to differentiate Dasein from the masses (Gadamer 2004a). In so doing, in-authenticity refers to Dasein's un-awakened state and sense of themselves in the world, in particular when accepting social norms, personal traits, habits, beliefs, values and prejudices of society (2004a). Authenticity becomes relevant whilst searching for meaning and interpretation of life resulting in fundamental questions being raised when attempting to understand the individual self; what values, beliefs, pre-suppositions affect Dasein's openness to engage with the text, even if their views are entrenched and ideological. The effects of other people on Dasein's worldview questions the state of authenticity and being motivated to continue in fear of exposure (2004a).

Gadamer challenges Heidegger's notion of Dasein's authenticity when removed from the distracting effect of other people or *mit-dasein* (with others) (2004a). His view of inter-subjectivity is that other people do not limit an understanding of Dasein (ourselves) which is evident when turning to other people for advice, feedback and ideas. First, Gadamer suggests testing ideas on other people, such as in the research process, is part of the process of learning to understand the prejudices informing our own judgements. Second, we realise through dialogue that others have good cause to disagree with us and we find new ways to accommodate new thinking (2004a). A central principle therefore of Gadamer's work is holding oneself *open* to conversation with others (Palmer and Michelfelder 1989). This may demonstrate not only where Dasein went right or wrong but also shows the true elements of Dasein itself (Gadamer 2004a).

### **Fore-understanding**

Gadamer suggests recognising the interpreting readers prejudice gives hermeneutics its "...real thrust..." (Gadamer 2004a, 272). The (interpreter) working out their own pre-suppositions (fore-having, fore-sight, fore-conception) should be the "...first, last and constant task..." when attempting to understand the relevant issues (Gadamer 2004a, 269). The romantic enlightenment brought with it the discrediting of

prejudice due to the Cartesian doubt of accepting nothing as certain and a ‘methodology to match’ (Gadamer 2004a, 274). Gadamer identifies the concept of prejudice or *praejudicium* as a good starting point to affect the hermeneutic circle, defining a temporal judgment that is “...rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined...” (Gadamer 2004a, 269). This is in contrast to health and social care practitioners professionally socialised to believe in the Rogerian notion of being non-judgemental, however it refers also to developing an objective awareness of belief systems. The term *praejudicium* refers to judgements, pre-supposition, bias, prejudices from cultural traditions, whether positive or negative (Gadamer 2004b, 31). They are necessary springboards towards better understanding where even vague notions of a text’s meaning are important because they ensure the familiarity of words and ‘construal’ of its meaning (291). The ‘expectation’ of what has been experienced before gives the interpreter a working hypothesis from which to further develop understanding (291).

When returning to the text (as an interpreting researcher), understanding may be heightened by the temporal distance and time to think about how the text makes sense with what one already knows. Gadamer suggests therefore that understanding is ultimately self-understanding and any unchallenged pre-suppositions only serve to maintain a restrictive interpretation of the text (Gadamer 2004a, 251). The search for understanding requires the interpreter’s awareness of their own bias and pre-conceptions affecting the habit of projecting a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as initial meaning is grasped (Gadamer 2004a, 269). The main issue therefore identifies that in order to read a text the interpreter has to have an understanding of their own expectations about what a word or phrase means in relation to the parts and the whole of meaning (2004a).

The constant task of understanding is being aware of pre-conceptions, naïve hypothesising, self awareness, whilst being simultaneously open to other options which “...emerge side by side...” until the meaning becomes clearer (Gadamer 2004a, 269). A search for understanding is therefore the *working out* of pre-conceptions, the openness of the hermeneutic process

overcoming the limitations of bias (2004a). Gadamer recalls the hermeneutic rule inspired by ancient rhetoric "...that we must understand the whole in terms of the detail..." and vice versa (291). In doing so the reader initiates the hermeneutic circle (Schleiermacher in Gadamer 2004a, 291). The engagement of the hermeneutic circle therefore has objective and subjective resonance to the interpreter as the single word connects to a sentence belonging to the context of the author's whole life and work (Schleiermacher in Gadamer 2004a, 291). The text is more like a real conversation between the author and reader and like any real conversation hermeneutics binds both together, not because the text is a tool for reaching understanding but because of the interpreter's motivation to engage in the conversation until understanding is satisfactorily accommodated (Gadamer 2004a, 389). If one fails to understand the nuances of narrative meaning, then the hermeneutic conversation fails to reach its full potential to grasp the whole of meaning, with the interpreter's own understanding remaining at a fixed level (2004a).

### **Habermas and Gadamer**

Gadamer suggested enhancing human objectivity and understanding Dasein can be found in the pre-requisite conditions of historicity and prejudice (Piercey 2004, 260). This was questioned by Jurgen Habermas (1971) suggesting it was naïve to claim that the hermeneutic circle could reveal all fore-structures of prejudice affecting new interpretations (Ricoeur 1991; Gadamer 2004b, 31). For Habermas enquiry should not be subject to the restrictive authority of tradition (historicity) because humans are conditioned by a variety of interests and "...basic orientations rooted in specific fundamental conditions of the possible reproduction and self-constitution of the species..." (Habermas 1971, 176). Enquiry is essentially the working out of ideological illusions through the notion of tradition [historicity] which reduces the ability for critique (176). To Habermas the "...legitimacy of prejudice...validated by tradition...conflicts with...the power of reflection...which ...reject(s) the claim of traditions...authority and knowledge do not converge..." (Habermas 1980, 170). Ricoeur entered into the

debate by suggesting Habermas's critique of ideologies and theory of interests hinged on the same pre-suppositions as hermeneutics and tradition. Habermas's critique was rather incoherent and hypocritical by wrongly assuming Gadamer meant tradition as an acceptance of what is past without critique, the objectification of prejudice the "...profoundest aim of discourse..." (Ricoeur 1991, 299). Gadamer's response was to suggest that some pre-suppositions are actually accurate, so it is up to the reader to identify the fusion of horizons and shared understanding of text or speech and issues are entirely dependent on engaging openly with text and dialogue within the hermeneutic circle.

### **Historicity**

To Gadamer, tradition and history are never settled or correctly interpreted but understood by the interpreter's ever changing horizon (2004a). The profound concept of *historicity* and understanding is that we are *thrown* into a world that has a historical context, which becomes better understood as Dasein matures in time (2004a). We are composed of this world and context, our essence is already in this all surrounding and ancient world, temporally and unavoidably not of our own making (2004a). We are born with a past even as we begin to know we exist and have the ability to think and wonder adapting to the world as it is. This is evident by the phrase the 'biological clock' which ticks away long before we are aware of our own mortality. Therefore, we study history in so far as we ourselves are historical (2004a). This reduces the risk of being self absorbed and forgetting about history whilst also allowing us to remain naive and re-present the past into the present and future (Gadamer 2004a).

Dasein's thrownness into historicity ensures the past as potential leads at all times to Dasein's futurity with the sharing of cultural information and learning from others ensuring a sense of belonging in the high stakes of social competition (Gadamer 2004a, 252; Flinn 2006). Cultural information is what Heidegger and Gadamer refers to as Dasein's historicity (2004a). However, Gadamer disagrees with Heidegger by suggesting the real purpose of Dasein is to co-operate for

mutual benefit with other Dasein [mitsein] (Gadamer 2004a). Dasein's awareness of tradition; the individual and shared historical past, present and future identifies Dasein's innate need for protection in the human family in the form of intense parenting; learning through developing social relationships, being taught how to care and love, taught how to predict risk and threat from others (Flinn 2006). This is evident in the phenomenon of plastic neural pruning (an infant's brain changes) when adapting to the local community, such as its language, to name a few (Flinn 2006). The linguistic tradition enables the 'handing down' of traditional information of relevance to the interpreter's frame of reference and how what is read, written, spoken or heard is interpreted (Gadamer 2004a). Language therefore enables the information process to become ontologically specific to the interpreter, depending on the culture (*Bildung*) to be shared, learnt and accommodated (2004a).

### **Temporality**

Gadamer proposed that the interpreter's own historicity and temporality affects all interpretation of speech and text (2004a). The transient nature of speech pragmatically moves on when the message is revealed with *meaning* resonating within the interpreter's own existing temporal understanding (2004a). What (information) is handed down culturally needs to be meaningful in order to be accommodated for future use (2004a). Perhaps the naivety of using the 'superiority' of the present to view the past means there is no such thing as the present perspective but a constantly changing horizon of future and past (2004a). Here and now time resonates due to the effect of immediacy and only when it fades into the past can true meaning be acknowledged (Gadamer 2004a). What has gone before and how the present is interpreted affects Dasein's temporal future and being authentically aware means engaging with past reflective experiences and opening up retrospective analysis to inform not only Dasein's past but the present and future life (2004a). This parallels the experience of reading Gadamer's body of work being more clearly understood through subsequent readings and over time revealing the temporal field

of historicity itself (Ricoeur 1991). Temporality, therefore becomes the supportive ground in which the process of the past and present are rooted; ‘time’ the productive possibility of custom and tradition aiding understanding by illuminating what presents itself (Heidegger 2003; Gadamer 2004a).

Contrary to contemporary ideas of memory recall, Gadamer (2004a, 290) suggests the passage of time actually promotes understanding and objective analysis of experiences by a process of ‘temporal distance,’ when feelings and phenomena associated with an experience become more distant. An example may be when returning to a reflective diary entry after a difficult experience and issues become clearer with the distance of time without the added distraction of emotion. This is what Gadamer refers to as the “...hermeneutic significance of temporal distance...” (Gadamer 2004a, 290). The process therefore reciprocates through the hermeneutic circle, as a thread runs along the text as fore-meaning becomes manifest in relation to what is read (Piercey 2004, 260).

## Playing

In order to address criticism of hermeneutics inadequacy in dealing with entrenched ideology (Habermas 1980), Gadamer referred to the concept of *play*, taken from aesthetics of experiencing art (Gadamer 2004a, 102). What is important in this process is the mode of Dasein in *play* itself, play fulfills its purpose if the player “...loses himself in the play...” and is not a ‘spoilsport’ (102-3). Playing is Dasein’s motivation to be open to possibilities and suspend disbelief and still read on. Notably, Gadamer (2004a, 103) reinforces the metaphorical use of the word play with the everyday meaning of “...language...perform(ing) in advance the abstraction...that is the task of conceptual analysis...” The next process involves time to think and reflect with the concept of play occurring as both interpreter and author wish to play whilst both knowing about the game in motion. The author produces work to be read (or transcribed narrative), as a dialogue with others risking scrutiny, agreement or otherwise. It is his work as it goes to print, his opinion temporally and historically informed, with the understanding that his future opinions may change or

reinforce the importance of the game itself over the subjectivity of the players (Gadamer 2004a; 2004b). Aware of the subject, the players as in any game have a choice when, where, with whom and for how long to play it, returning freely to it in future engagements (temporally) with the text. If a player comes from another game, they are filled with their own ideas (tradition); they may be resistant or even hostile (ideologically) but become motivated by the game itself. In time, disbelieving ideas may dissolve so long as there is game on (Gadamer 2004a). Play therefore has a personal and scholastic resonance, opening up the possibilities to shape new understanding.

### **In conclusion**

Gadamer's concepts of pre-supposition, inter-subjectivity, authenticity, temporality, tradition and history have been discussed in relation to reading, understanding and interpretation. The centrality of the health and social care researcher in qualitative methodology ensures that the same methods are employed when interpreting Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and research participants' narrative. Gadamer's work has been criticised as phenomenological description by the legal historian Emilio Betti (Gadamer 2004a, 512) but the response was clear and precise. Seeking to analyse and articulate not what *ought* to happen as a methodology but what *does* happen and 'is the case' of hermeneutic analysis. The conditions Gadamer expands upon can all be applied in the reflective actions of an interpreter's experience with the spoken word and (transcribed) written language. Gadamer realised "...something crooked should be straightened..." namely the folly of scientific methodology which does not take into consideration the human conditions of historicity and prejudice (Gadamer 2004a, 559). In contrast to a method of certainty, Gadamer proposed that out of the interpreter's uncertainty and notion of play; prejudice, fusion of horizons and temporal distancing to name but a few key concepts, the interpreter/ researcher needs to work out any pre-suppositions they may have as the "...first, last and constant task..." of the hermeneutic method (Gadamer 2004a, 269). In doing so the process opens up interpretation to the many

alternate possibilities of the text and towards new understanding.

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