

Discussion

The role of Philosophical Hermeneutics in contributing to an understanding of physiotherapy practice: a reflexive illustration



Rob Stenner^{a,*}, Theresa Mitchell^b, Shea Palmer^c

^a Orthopaedic Assessment Service, Somerset Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, 48 Parkfield Drive, Taunton, Somerset TA1 5BU, UK

^b Institute of Health and Society, University of Worcester, St John's Campus, Henwick Drive, Worcester WR2 6AJ, UK

^c Faculty of Health & Applied Sciences, University of the West of England, Glenside Campus, Blackberry Hill, Bristol BS16 1DD, UK

Abstract

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

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

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Introduction

The landscape in which physiotherapists practice continues to evolve, bringing with it new and exciting challenges, which include developing a greater understanding and appreciation of both patients' and clinicians' care experiences. In research a qualitative methodology is appropriate when the aim is to gain insight into the ways that people perceive, interpret and explain their world. Within physiotherapy the amount of qualitative research published has steadily expanded in line with the increasing acceptance that the physiology of the human body cannot be separated from the

psychosocial factors contributing to the experience of pain, illness and disability [1]. There are many philosophical orientations and methodologies available to researchers within the 'qualitative' research toolbox, but ultimately, the choice depends upon the research question and the skills and position of the researcher in relation to research processes.

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

* Correspondence: Tel.: +44 01823 331710; fax: +44 01823 253148.
E-mail addresses: robert.stenner@sompar.nhs.uk (R. Stenner),
t.mitchell@worc.ac.uk (T. Mitchell), shea.palmer@uwe.ac.uk (S. Palmer).

pre-understandings (prejudices), dialogue, and the contribution of the concept of ‘Fusion of Horizons’. Finally it considers how rigour (trustworthiness) can be achieved in this type of research.

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

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

Background

Phenomenology, which can refer to a philosophy with a set of principles which can be used to underpin a methodology has two different philosophical traditions; descriptive and interpretive. ‘Descriptive’ phenomenology seeks to describe rather than explain, and starts from a researcher perspective free from preconceptions [6,7]. In contrast, a researcher using ‘interpretive’ phenomenology aims to describe, consider and interpret participants’ experiences [8]. This involves gathering context-specific, in-depth accounts of perceptions using inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, participant observations and other bespoke creative methods to present an interpretation of the meaning of the experiences of research participants. Phenomenological approaches have previously been adopted within physiotherapy [9,10] although as Walsh [11] found with nursing research, the particular philosophical tradition within these studies is often not explicitly defined or apparent.

The marriage of phenomenology and hermeneutics was introduced into modern philosophy by Heidegger in opposition to Husserl’s Transcendental Phenomenology [6,12]. The discovery of the ontological significance of understanding formed the foundation of Heidegger’s ‘new’ phenomenology which was a major turning point in hermeneutic theory, and Gadamer’s work can be conceived as an attempt to work through the implications of it. All deliberate interpretation takes place on the basis of historicity, that is, on the basis of a pre reflective understanding of ‘being’ in relation to the interpreter’s past and future [2].

Phenomenology therefore becomes hermeneutical when its method is taken to be interpretive. As a contemporary philosophy and research methodology, hermeneutics is concerned with the thick description which emanates from people’s detailed stories of their experiences in their everyday understanding of ‘Being-in-the-world’. Hermeneutics is described as a method which facilitates interpretation of texts within certain contexts, where ‘texts’ refers to sources of information in addition to the written or spoken word

[13]. The ‘hermeneutic circle’ is a metaphor used to describe the dynamic movement which occurs between parts and the whole of the text whilst seeking ‘verstehen’ (understanding). The researcher constantly weaves in and out of data sets whilst conducting the research reflexively, so that the researcher’s ‘self’ is central to understanding and interpretation using Gadamerian Hermeneutics.

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

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

The Hermeneutic Circle

Gadamer used Heidegger’s Hermeneutic Circle as the central organising concept in hermeneutics [12]. The idea of the Hermeneutic Circle (see Fig. 1) is that the understanding of a piece of text always modifies the whole and the constituent parts. Tuohy *et al.* [15] described this ‘circularity of understanding’ as the manner in which interpretation is achieved by the reciprocal process of questioning with the aim to discover the true meaning of experience for that person. However, a circle has no end point, implying that existing interpretations can be challenged, and more meaningful insights may come along. In some qualitative methodologies data saturation is required to recognise the

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