Hermeneutics: Interpretation, Understanding and Sense-making

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Abstract

Gadamer (1989: xxxiii) describes hermeneutics as 'a theory of the real experience that thinking is'. In this chapter, we explore two main aspects of this experience of thinking - interpretation and understanding. We draw on the work of Schleiermacher (1768-1834) to review the origins of modern hermeneutics as an activity of interpretation, and on Heidegger (1889-1976) and Gadamer (1900-2002) for hermeneutics as a philosophy of understanding. We consider the ways in which Ricoeur (1913-2005) and Habermas (1929-) move hermeneutics towards critical theory, challenging the trustworthiness of text and the possibility of understanding, and urging reflection on their ideological construction and motivation. We use the most famous idea in the hermeneutic canon, the hermeneutic circle, as a leit-motif for the chapter. This illuminates a range of mutually constitutive relationships between context and text, whole and parts, general and particular, anticipation and encounter, familiarity and strangeness, presence and absence, and sense and non-sense. We discuss how hermeneutics has influenced contemporary organization and management research, inspiring an array of interpretive methods and inviting critical reflection on personal and organizational sense-making.

Key words

Hermeneutics, interpretation, understanding, sense-making, hermeneutic circle

Introduction to Hermeneutics

In general terms, the field of hermeneutics has two main branches; one concerned with the activities of interpretation, the other concerned with the philosophy of understanding (Palmer, 1969). The first of these addresses the practical issue of how to interpret text; the second is more abstract and conceptual, and explores questions such as what we mean by understanding, and how understanding comes about. The first tends to generate rules and standards; the second tries to articulate principles rather than procedures. Therefore, the first exerts a direct influence on methodology; the second exerts a more indirect influence on methodology. Although many discussions of hermeneutics use these two notions of interpretation and understanding interchangeably, we attempt to maintain a distinction between them to enable the implications of this difference to emerge.

Many of the central motifs of hermeneutics can be traced to classical antiquity, and to ancient Greek philosophy, in particular. For instance, the idea of a hermeneutic circle owes much to Plato's theory of recollection, that is, that we learn about the unknown only by recognising its relationship with something already known. For many readers, however, the origins of hermeneutics are probably more closely associated with biblical exegesis, especially the interpretation of the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity. For biblical hermeneutics, the challenge is to try to make sense of religious texts despite being distanced from their original meaning, inspiration and reception by hundreds, if not thousands, of years (Jasper, 2004).

The issue of historical distance is worth dwelling on for a moment. Although biblical hermeneutics is concerned with the chronological gap between the reader and the originator of the gospel, this is not the way the concept of 'historical' is normally used in the hermeneutics of the human and social sciences. Here, the idea of historicity does not mean that something belongs to the past. Instead, it means being part of history, that is, situated in a certain

time and place, and having one's way of seeing the world influenced by such grounding in very profound ways. In the sections that follow, history-as-context is woven into the very act of interpretation and the very possibility of understanding.

Hermeneutic Circles: The 'How' of Interpretation and Understanding

One of the most appealing ideas in hermeneutics is that of the hermeneutic circle. The circle is a simple yet powerful symbol, usually taken to signal a move away from linear towards more iterative, integrative thinking. The circle emphasises understanding as relational and referential; we understand something by connecting it with something we already know, whether through comparison, contrast or juxtaposition. There is no single definition of this circle in the hermeneutic corpus, that is, no such thing as *the* hermeneutic circle. Instead, different theorists work with circles to emphasise their own particular interests and concerns.

Whole and Parts

Schleiermacher, the father of modern hermeneutics (Palmer, 1969), uses the notion of the hermeneutic circle to connect whole and parts, making them mutually dependent and co-constitutive. The whole can only be understood as it relates to the parts, and vice versa, the parts can only be understood as they relate to the whole. He explains, for instance, that 'the vocabulary and the history of the era of an author relate as the whole from which his writings must be understood as the part, and the whole must, in turn, be understood from the part. Complete knowledge is always in this apparent circle, that each particular can only be understood via the general, of which it is a part, and vice versa' (Schleiermacher, 1998: 24).

There are several points of interest in Schleiermacher's words here. Not only is he connecting whole and parts, he is also suggesting that the whole relates to the whole context - culture, customs, discourse, conventions, and personal circumstances, etc - from which the author of the text is writing. Context here is no mere back-drop or scene-setting, it is an integral aspect of hermeneutic understanding. The specific text created by the author - the part - is not just influenced by context, it is constituted by that context. And vice versa, the context is constituted by the production of that text. Hermeneutic experience is therefore inseparable from the cultural and discursive setting in which - and from which - it emerges. Indeed, we need only to consider the common etymology of 'text' and 'context' to see this interweaving.

Moreover, Schleiermacher is also suggesting an important relationship between the general and the particular by relating whole to general and part to particular (there is an obvious etymological connection between 'part' and 'particular'). Schleiermacher elaborates this relationship thus; 'the whole is provisionally to be understood as an individual of a genus, and the intuition of the genus, i.e., the formal understanding of the whole, must precede the material understanding of the particular. One can admittedly also only come in the first place to the knowledge of a genus via knowledge of an individual case which belongs under it' (Schleiermacher, 1998: 232).

This casts an interesting light on the hermeneutic relationship between the specific understanding of an individual case and the broader understanding of the category (genus) into which the case appears to fit. It suggests that, for Schleiermacher, general and particular (or nomothetic and idiographic, as we might think of these things in methodological terms) are not 'either/or' approaches, but instead, they are intimately interrelated; we cannot have one without the other. Relatedly, if inductive approaches are seen as the route from the particular to the universal, and deductive approaches are the route from the universal to the particular, Schleiermacher's hermeneutic circle encourages us

to see these as mutually dependent and co-constitutive. Together, not separately, they fuel hermeneutic interpretation.

So, Schleiermacher's work presents several aspects of hermeneutic circling; interpretation involves a mutually referential and productive relationship between whole and parts, and between the general and the particular. These operate at a number of different levels; for instance, whole can refer to the whole setting of a text's production, to a whole work, and to a whole sentence, whilst the concomitant parts refer to a specific work, a specific passage within a work, and a specific word within the sentence, respectively. Thus, whenever we consider any particular thing, we should also reflect on the whole - the general thing - to which this particular part belongs. And vice versa, whenever we consider what type of thing we are dealing with, i.e., when we find ourselves putting some sort of label on it, we should also reflect on how our appreciation of that category is brought about by our exposure to specific instances of it. For instance, we know what rain is because of our experiences of actual rainy days; and vice versa, we understand the implications of rainy days because of our more general grasp of what rain is.

Although often seen as conservative, even old-fashioned, Schleiermacher's writings have profound implications for how we see the research endeavour. His hermeneutic circling encourages us away from the confines of the bounded categories to which we have been accustomed - idiographic versus nomothetic and inductive versus deductive. It challenges us to re-think some of our normal conceptions of intellectual inquiry and to question the taken-for-granted assumptions that guide it.

Hermeneutics in Action:

The idea of a co-constitutive relationship between 'text' and 'context' is a core feature of organizational and management research which draws on the hermeneutic tradition, irrespective of whether this is in the Schleiermacher mould or the framing of more recent, critical hermeneuticists such as Ricoeur or Habermas. For instance, Lee's (1994) analysis of email communication examines relationships between the text of individual message fragments and the broader culture and practice of corporate information exchange. Prasad and Mir (2002) present a hermeneutic analysis of CEO correspondence to shareholders as both reflecting and constituting the political and economic context of the global oil industry in the 1970s and 1980s. Genoe McLaren and Helms Mills (2010) examine the problematic relationship between the management textbook as 'text' and the contextual influence of feminism and the civil rights movement on our understandings of management. In these papers, the specific text takes on a particular complexion within the broader institutional and political context; and vice versa, that broader context comes alive through the prism of the specific text.

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Pre-understanding, Understanding and the Circularity of Being

Moving on to Heidegger (1962), we see the notion of hermeneutic circling used differently and more radically. Heidegger shifts the emphasis away from what takes place *within* understanding - and from relatively concrete and practical concerns about whole and parts - towards the question of how any sort of understanding is possible in the first place. Heidegger's philosophy marks a

decisive shift in the hermeneutic tradition from the procedural to the existential - from method to ontology.

In Heidegger's view, before we come to understand anything explicitly we already have a pre-conception or pre-supposition of it - a fore-having (*Vorhabe*). This fore-having conditions and is conditioned by any fore-sight (*Vorsicht*) and fore-conception (*Vorgriff*) that we may have in perceptual or cognitive experience. As Heidegger explains, 'an interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us. If, when one is engaged in a particular concrete kind of interpretation, in the sense of exact textual interpretation, one likes to appeal to what "stands there", then one finds that what "stands there" in the first instance is nothing other than the obvious un-discussed assumption of the person who does the interpreting' (Heidegger, 1962: 191-2). Thus, Heidegger's most procedurally-orientated definition of hermeneutic circling involves manoeuvring between pre-understanding and understanding, between our assumptions about, and our actual encounter with, a text. This means surfacing, interrogating and revising one's pre-conceptions and assumptions as one gathers more information about the object or phenomenon of inquiry.

As Gallagher (1992) suggests, there are useful parallels between this version of Heidegger's hermeneutic circle and the concept of schemata from cognitive and developmental psychology, and the work of Piaget in particular. The concept of schemata holds that our knowledge is organised into patterns and structures which we access and use in the acquisition of new knowledge; we draw on processes of assimilation to incorporate new information when it fits easily with our existing schemata, and processes of accommodation to alter these schemata when new information challenges our existing patterns of thinking. A Heideggerian *Vorhabe* is a schema involving a set of predictions - not fully or consciously formalised - about the object or phenomenon of inquiry, which are either confirmed or challenged in the process of interpretation.

Hermeneutic circling appears in several guises in Heidegger's work, perhaps most significantly in his reflections on the circular structure of *Dasein* or the philosophical question of Being. The circularity of *Dasein* illustrates the notion of historicity that we trailed in our introduction. Our nature as historical beings involves three interwoven qualities of engagement with the world, namely *Verstehen* (understanding), *Befindlichkeit* (attunement) and *Verfallen* (absorption), and their corresponding temporal emphases of future, past (having been) and present. Our lives have a forward thrust because our pre-understandings fuel our understandings (*Verstehen).* They are inextricably infused with the conventions and patterns of thinking that have been handed down to us in tradition (*Befindlichkeit),* and with which we are now concerned in our day-to-day relations with others (*Verfallen).* Our lives have meaning precisely within this triple-aspect temporal context. As human beings we cannot *but* interpret what it means to exist within our particular setting, with our particular heritage and with our own ongoing possibilities to make sense of our lives.

So, with Heidegger's circles we have a primordial relationship between pre-understanding and understanding, and a view of human existence as inextricably relational, worldly, temporal and historical. Heidegger's circles are less obviously useful from a methodological perspective, perhaps, but then his aim was a philosophical exploration of how understanding is possible, rather than a normative project of what steps to follow to unpack a text. In a sense, the shift from Schleiermacher to Heidegger is a shift from the search for meaning of a text-in-context to the quest for meaning of a life-in-context.

Anticipation and Encounter

Gadamer (1989) develops the theme of temporality to reveal Schleiermacher's and Heidegger's circles as mutually illuminating, rather than contradictory. For Gadamer, hermeneutic circling is a process whereby 'the anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged becomes actual understanding when

the parts that are determined by the whole themselves also determine this whole' (Gadamer, 1989: 291). Thus, Schleiermacher's whole and Heidegger's pre-understandings are connected by a temporal sense of anticipation; we anticipate the whole and we encounter the part. In Gadamer's view, the most foundational of hermeneutic elements is the interpreter's pre-understanding (like Heidegger), which comes from being concerned with the same subject or genus (like Schleiermacher). We have an assumption (whether or not it is explicitly articulated) that we know roughly what we are dealing with when we approach a text, that is, what category of thing it concerns.

This assumption that we basically know what we are dealing with gives us a sort of confidence. Indeed, our anticipation with any textual encounter is that we will be able to make sense of it, and that we can rely on the text being coherent (we will look at what happens when this expectation is dashed in the next section). This anticipation of intelligibility comes from the way in which author and interpreter are connected in a shared tradition, in a community of understanding. As Gadamer (1989: 292) sees it, 'the task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning'. When we approach a text, we assume that the world of the interpretation of a text (our world) is connected with the world of the production of the text - whether this connection is across the passage of time, as with ancient texts, or across any differences that arise just because author and interpreter are separate human beings with different perspectives, as with contemporaneous texts. The space between author and interpreter is not a gap, but a bridge.

With Gadamer, therefore, we move from the meaning of a text-in-context and a focus on the text's originator (as per Schleiermacher), through the understanding of a life-in-context and a focus on the person living, i.e., interpreting, that life (as with Heidegger), to an emphasis on what happens to connect these, that is, to the space in-between. Gadamer famously calls this a 'fusion of horizons' whereby 'one intends to understand the text itself. But this

means that the interpreter's own thoughts too have gone into re-awakening the text's meaning... I have described this as a "fusion of horizons"... this is what takes place in conversation, in which something is expressed that is not only mine or my author's, but common' (Gadamer, 1989: 390). Gadamer's hermeneutic circling expresses a fundamental intersubjectivity and sociality of understanding.

So, we have seen several hermeneutic circles in this introduction to Schleiermacher, Heidegger and Gadamer, some with more practical implications for interpretation than others. In the next sections, further aspects of hermeneutic circling will emerge in the work of both these and other theorists in the tradition, underscoring the claim that the circularity of understanding is the most fundamental of all hermeneutic principles (Gallagher, 1992; Palmer, 1969). The hermeneutic circle is not like a clock, with fixed and mutually exclusive points around a rigid circumference, which make it impossible, say, for it to be both 3pm and 8pm simultaneously. Instead, it is an expansive and productive way of thinking about the constitutive relationships between things, steering us away from abstract, 'either/or' thinking which strips human phenomena of contextual richness. The more circular our movements in interpretation, the larger the circle will become, embracing more contexts, more perspectives, and more possibilities of understanding.

Meaning, Significance and Sense: The 'What' of Interpretation and Understanding

In the previous section, we sketched out various versions of the hermeneutic circle in terms of different emphases in the quest for meaning. We suggested that Schleiermacher's quest is first and foremost for the meaning of a text-in-context; that Heidegger's project is the meaning of a life-in-context; and that Gadamer explores the ways in which both, indeed all, sorts of meaning are only possible because of our embeddedness in shared traditions which allow for

continuity and development of understanding. In their various ways, these philosophers see the search for meaning, whether textual or existential, as a living process that is only possible from *within* the world of ideas, objects, debates, possibilities and challenges. Despite their different emphases, they all propose that understanding can never come from nowhere. Even if it feels like a sort of Eureka moment of sudden insight, the ground has always already been prepared, and its potential significance always already traced. Thus, meaning is contextually and historically constructed, discovered, absorbed and resisted.

What Is Meaning?

Despite the centrality of the notion of meaning in hermeneutics, there is no straightforward definition or agreement over its status beyond this shared emphasis on context and historicity. The meaning of any given text lies in a web of influences and factors, including: the intentions, motivations and style of the author; the grammatical construction and genre of the text itself; and the interests, assumptions and concerns of the interpreter. All these factors are in play irrespective of whether author and interpreter are separated by hundreds of years or are contemporaneous but separated by their individual subjectivities. Within such a complex web, different theorists emphasise different elements, resulting in vibrant debate about what we mean by 'meaning'.

The hermeneutic debate over the status of meaning is usually expressed as the question of reproduction. If the original meaning of a text is reproducible, as Schleiermacher would insist, then this implies that meaning has a sort of objectivity, that is, there is a true or essential meaning latent in the text, waiting to be uncovered if the interpreter uses the right tools and works with appropriate rigour. The notion of objectivity here is not the same as that found in the natural sciences, i.e., it is not about absolute, universal, a-historical fact. Rather, objectivity here means not arbitrary. There are criteria for establishing the greater accuracy or validity of some interpretations over others, the most crucial of which is an interpretation's correspondence with the author's intention. Thus,

interpretive work in the Schleiermacher mould involves re-living the author's intuition and inspiration in order to recreate what he or she intended to impart, trying to feel the connections between the author's thoughts and words at something close to first-hand. This approach sees interpretation as an inversion of the creative process; if creation moves from inspiration to finished product, interpretation moves in the opposite direction, from finished product back to its inspiration. Thus, interpretation is a restorative process which returns and reconnects the author's words 'to their source in the interior life which gave them birth, from which they have become detached' (Betti, 1987: 248).

For Schleiermacher, the aim of hermeneutics was indeed to work back towards the true meaning of a text and the interior life that gave birth to it. His ambition was to rediscover how early Christianity appeared to those receiving the oral gospel in its original setting, and he argued that we must peel away the layers of misunderstanding that have built up over time, preventing us from connecting with the gospel in its originary life force. A striking suggestion in Schleiermacher's thesis is that it might be possible to transpose oneself into the original lived experience so successfully that insights *beyond* the original author's conscious intention emerge. As he explains, 'the goal of hermeneutics is understanding in the highest sense...to this also belongs understanding the writer better than he understands himself' (Schleiermacher, 1998: 228). In this view, meaning is not only recoverable and reproducible; it is something that might shine more brightly for the interpreter than for the author.

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Hermeneutics in Action:
The question of reproduction of meaning marks one of the main dividing lines between researchers drawing on different strands in the hermeneutic tradition. As we will see later, most contemporary research in organization and management directs its focus away from authorial intention, especially

research with an explicitly 'critical' emphasis. However, Schleiermacher's interest in authorial intention finds a contemporary expression in hermeneutic research in psychology which explores the subjective, lived experience of a particular organizational or work-based phenomenon. Examples of work in this genre include Gill's (2013) hermeneutic analysis of the emotional experience of status anxiety amongst management consultants, and Cope's (2011) work on the insider experience of entrepreneurial failure. Both these papers use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) - a hermeneutic method which is heavily indebted to Schleiermacher. With this method, there is assumed to be a reasonably direct connection between what the author of a text, i.e., the research participant, says and what he or she actually means, feels or intends. The job of the interpreter is to try to feel one's way into the author's experience and explore these connections between words and intentions at something close to first-hand.

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Schleiermacher's emphasis on the reproduction of meaning is challenged by Gadamer. Gadamer resists the proposition that we can get inside the original experience to recapture the author's intentions and inspirations. For Gadamer, hermeneutic understanding is more about production than reproduction, that is, its power lies in its ability to create, not simply restore, meaning: 'Understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning. Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one's own thinking on the subject' (Gadamer, 1989: 368). Here understanding is not the recovery of the past or the recreation of another person's experience, so much as mediation or dialogue between our sense of ourselves and our sense of the author and his/her worldview. This creates the possibility of

expanding our range of understanding and thereby changing ourselves and our outlook, that is, of 'being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were' (Gadamer, 1989: 371).

Returning to Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons', the path towards understanding lies not in merging the perspectives of author and interpreter, but rather, in connecting them but acknowledging them as different. This is why Gadamer denies Schleiermacher's claim that hermeneutic interpretation might mean understanding the author better than he/she understands him/herself. As Gadamer argues, 'perhaps it is not correct to refer to this productive element in understanding as "better understanding"... Understanding is not, in fact, understanding better, either in the sense of superior knowledge of the subject because of clearer ideas, or in the sense of fundamental superiority of conscious over unconscious production. It is enough to say that we understand in a different way, if we understand at all' (Gadamer, 1989: 296).

Meaning and Significance

A useful way of framing the debate between Schleiermacher's focus on reproduction and Gadamer's emphasis on production is by differentiating between meaning and significance. Meaning is quasi-objective, embedded in the text and interwoven with the factors influencing the text's original production. Significance, on the other hand, belongs more to the life-world of the interpreter, and is imbued with the contextual influences of the text's interpretation. In this definition, meaning is said to be unchanging (if not always accessible), whereas significance changes according to the circumstances of the interpreter. Thus, different interpreters could derive different kinds of significance from a text with a putative single meaning.

This is not to suggest a strict 'either/or' division between Schleiermacher's focus on original meaning and Gadamer's interest in significance. Rather, it is the relationship between the two that is important. In the Schleiermacher mould,

Betti (1987) argues that meaning is the necessary pre-condition for all understanding, that is, that one cannot discern the significance of something unless one first knows its meaning. The inversion of the creative process highlighted earlier, i.e., the reconstruction of the author's original intention and inspiration, is simply not possible without the basic building block of meaning itself.

Gadamer, on the other hand, denies the possibility of tracing meaning and significance as independent entities. Understanding 'does not mean that the text is given for him as something universal, that he first understands it per se, and then afterward uses it for particular applications. Rather, the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal, the text... In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand it at all' (Gadamer, 1989: 321). In this view, significance rather than meaning is the inescapable pre-condition for understanding. Understanding cannot *but* take place within the interpreter's own hermeneutic horizon of significance. This is why, for Gadamer, all understanding is ultimately self-understanding.

As well as not being sufficient, meaning is not even necessary for understanding in Gadamer's work, for he sees potential significance even where there is no readily discernible meaning. The distinction between meaning and significance therefore helps to frame discussion of what happens when problems are encountered and we cannot get a handle on a text. This is an important issue, because we have an expectation - usually unconscious - when we approach a text that we will be able to make something of it. In the following sections, we explore barriers and disruptions to understanding using the notion of 'sense' as an umbrella term to encompass both constant, quasi-objective meaning - a text's sense-per-se - and contingent, reflexive significance - its sense-for-us. This allows different perspectives to emerge on what happens when sense eludes us.

Barriers to Sense: The Status of Prejudice

In a Schleiermacher-inspired quest for meaning, barriers to sense are obstacles to be overcome mostly through the application of technique; 'misunderstanding is either a consequence of hastiness or of prejudice. The former is an isolated moment. The latter is a mistake which lies deeper. It is the one-sided preference for what is close to the individual's circle of ideas and the rejection of what lies outside it. In this way one explains in or explains out what is not present in the author' (Schleiermacher, 1998: 23). If we do not understand what the author of a text is trying to say, this is either because of sloppiness or because we are filtering the text in terms of what is familiar to us. If we become aware of this, we should re-double our efforts to examine the text itself, perhaps drawing someone else into the interpretive endeavour in order to 'triangulate' and hence objectify our textual readings.

We saw earlier that Heidegger and Gadamer took a different view of an interpreter's pre-conceptions. Gadamer, in particular, sees anticipation of a text's meaning as a necessary condition for interpretation. In other words, without assumptions, expectations and prejudices, there is no way into the hermeneutic circle, no way of gauging or even intuiting what the text might be about. This is not to imply that one applies or deploys prejudices in a conscious decision to enter the hermeneutic circle as if from outside, but rather, that we cannot *but* have prejudices by virtue of already being in the midst of the world of ideas, that is, always involved in a cultural conversation that has already started. As Gadamer (1989: 278) explains, 'long before we understand ourselves through the processes of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live'. In this view, prejudices are not blockages to interpretation, they are its enablers. They are the very scaffolding of understanding.

The desire to rehabilitate the notion of prejudice lies behind Gadamer's charge against the Enlightenment and the scientism it inspired for their 'prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power' (Gadamer, 1989: 273). This is not to say that Gadamer is anti-science, but rather, that he believes the quest for scientific objectivity masks the prejudices with which all human inquiry is both necessarily and productively interwoven. The 'prejudice against prejudice' obscures the way in which even the most rigorous scientific experiment is a historical event which only has salience because of what has come before, what tools and techniques have been established for the purpose, and how the scientist hopes to apply his findings. Thus, for Gadamer, the hermeneutic task is not to try to rid oneself of biases and assumptions, but instead, to acknowledge them and learn to distinguish between those that are productive and those that are non-productive. Productive prejudices help us to expand our horizons and reach out to others, in person and in text. Non-productive prejudices keep us locked in solipsism and single-mindedness.

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Hermeneutics in Action:
The hermeneutic interest in the historicity of science can be traced in several papers which problematise the professions which are assumed to be very technical, scientific and objective, e.g., accountancy, auditing and information systems. For instance, Francis (1994) draws on Gadamer to argue that 'good' auditing practice emerges not from applying objective standards and methodologies, but rather, from seeing auditing as lived experience, in which understandings of, enablers of, and barriers to, 'good practice' are embedded in tradition. Llewellyn (1993) invokes Ricoeur for her analysis of accounting practice, suggesting that periods of organizational change lend themselves especially powerfully to hermeneutic reflection, because they expose the contingency of, and competing claims for, legitimacy of meaning. Klein and Myers (1999) examine

the historicity of information systems strategy, suggesting that a
hermeneutic approach can shed light on the crucial question of
why so many IS implementations fail. In their various ways,
these papers all challenge the 'prejudice against prejudice'.
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Disruptions to Sense: Encounters with Non-Sense

So, prejudices mould our experience of a text into something more-or-less
intelligible, that is, into something which is coherent in itself, but not necessarily
consistent with the original meaning of the text or intention of the author.
Prejudices are more likely to be seen as a barrier to understanding if one's
emphasis is on meaning and as an enabler of understanding if one's focus is on
significance. A similar pattern emerges when we turn to the question of
disruptions to sense, that is, when no such intelligibility or coherence seems
possible, in other words, when sense breaks down.

For hermeneutic theorists interested in meaning, the absence of sense is a
problem to be resolved, that is, it is a failure of interpretation. For those more
concerned with significance, on the other hand, breakdowns of sense are not
only inevitable, they are constructive. Thus, Gadamer sees value in being
surprised, befuddled or pulled up short by a text. Because we assume when we
approach a text that we will find some sort of sense in it, we get lulled into a
false sense of security which works *against* understanding. It is only when the
attempt to engage with a text fails that we are jolted into having to work at
understanding it. It is the shock of not understanding, not finding sense, which
alerts us to the presence of our own preconceptions and the importance of
placing these within a larger web of possible understandings. In short, we need
disruptions to sense to trigger hermeneutic reflection (Gadamer, 1989).

From Gadamer's perspective, disruptions are valuable because they alert us to a tension between text, author and interpreter which might not lend itself to easy resolution. The task of hermeneutics is not to try to cover up this tension but rather, to consciously bring it out as a way of reflecting on the differences between horizons, the very fact of otherness, and the interplay between familiarity and strangeness which is essential to understanding. Thus, a further kind of hermeneutic circling emerges between what we can capture and thematise and what seems to elude such capture and thematisation. Those seeking quasi-objective meaning in the Schleiermacher tradition will engage in this circling in the hope of eventually privileging sense over non-sense, resolution over irresolution of meaning. Those interested in the contingencies and fluidities of significance in the Gadamer mould are more likely to view this circling as a way of keeping the non-sense in play and the tensions alive; for without them, the prospects for understanding remain limited to what we already know.

Motivations and Interests: The 'Why' of Interpretation and Understanding

In the discussion so far, we have assumed, not problematised, the historical embeddedness of text, author and interpreter. In defining both meaning and significance as accessible only from within the world of ideas, discourses and conventions, the theorists we have focused on share a concern for assimilation within tradition.

However, there is a more critical strand in hermeneutics which challenges this view from within tradition, suggesting that such an emphasis on assimilation and accommodation simply reproduces existing power relations, many of which are inimical to human flourishing. Critical hermeneutics is interested not only in the 'how' and the 'what' of sense-making, but also in the question of 'why' we engage with texts, including exposing the interests, motivations and implications of such engagement. So, in this section, we move on from the distinction

between meaning and significance to approach the issue of interpretation from a different angle, namely the question of whether our basic motivation is to believe or distrust, that is, to reinforce or unsettle meaning. One way to approach this question is through the distinction between a 'hermeneutics of faith' and a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'.

Faith or Suspicion?

The importance of faith in hermeneutics owes much to its roots in biblical exegesis. Thus, a 'hermeneutics of faith' involves a fundamental motivation to believe (and suspend disbelief) in textual pronouncements, whether holy or secular. Faith motivates the kind of hermeneutics advocated by Schleiermacher and his followers, with their reliance on methodology and intellectual self-discipline, and their relative confidence about the reproducibility of meaning. Faith also underpins Gadamer's work with its optimism about the possibility of productive and mutual understanding. Gadamer's faith is in the connective and creative potential of human beings, rather than the enduring meaning of a text, but it is faith nonetheless.

The distinction between faith (*la foi*) and suspicion (*le soupçon)* is elaborated especially powerfully by Ricoeur (1970), although it appears in the hermeneutic canon long before his time (Jasper, 2004). Faith assumes the possibility of bringing meaning into the realm of conscious reflection, whereas suspicion aims to expose and reduce the lies and illusions of consciousness. For Ricoeur (1970: 28), the 'hermeneutics of faith' brings a kind of naïvete into the hermeneutic circle; 'believe in order to understand, understand in order to believe'. Here, Ricoeur uses the notion of faith in a similar way to Gadamer's anticipation of what a text is about; but Ricoeur nudges us to consider the motivation, not just the content, of such anticipation.

Much of Ricoeur's work concerns the interpretation of symbols, including those appearing in myths, dreams and ideological narratives, that is, he is interested

in meanings as they are both concealed and revealed, both absent and present. This interest in the sense *beneath* the sense aligns Ricoeur with a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', which challenges the trustworthiness of text and urges us to reach behind surface meanings to try to tease out other hidden meanings. For Ricoeur, the task of interpretation is to expose these multiple meanings, not in order to resolve conflicts of understanding between different belief systems, but rather to highlight the contingencies, motivations and implications of their construction.

There are interesting points of connection between Ricoeur's interest in the direct and indirect meanings of symbols - the sense beneath the sense - and Gadamer's elaboration of foregrounding. For Gadamer, foregrounding 'is always reciprocal. Whatever is being foregrounded must be foregrounded from something else, which, in turn, must be foregrounded from it. Thus all foregrounding also makes visible that from which something is foregrounded' (Gadamer, 1989: 304). Both Gadamer and Ricoeur encourage us to consider human phenomena in terms both of what they are and of what they are not. So, to our list of definitions of the hermeneutic circle, we now add circling between presence and absence.

For Ricoeur, the three foremost practitioners of suspicion are Freud, Marx and Nietzsche (Ricoeur, 1970). In their various ways, these theorists argue that meaning is not reducible to the immediate or straightforward consciousness of meaning, and they see symbol as the representation of false consciousness, that is, of distorted sense-making. For Freud, false consciousness manifests in dreams and neurotic symptoms as signs of repressed libido; for Marx, it is economic alienation and the ideological disguise of class domination; for Nietzsche, it is the apparently timeless concepts of value and reason masking hidden strategies of the Will to Power. For these three practitioners of suspicion, 'to seek meaning is no longer to spell out the consciousness of meaning, but to decipher its expressions' (Ricoeur, 1970: 33). This kind of sense-making involves cracking the codes of the systems of contemporary life,

whether moral, institutional or psychological. It means being distrustful of whatever appears to us in consciousness, whether this is explicit knowledge or more tacit intuition, for *both* modes are potentially manifestations of false, not true, consciousness. In this way, the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' mounts a radical challenge to what we think we know, feel and believe, that is, to subjectivity itself.

Compliance or Emancipation?

With this emphasis on the enigma and unreliability of meaning, hermeneutics moves towards the domain of critique and brings us to the work of Habermas. We do not have space to do justice to Habermas here; but we include him in this overview to show the development of hermeneutics towards a more political, ideological take on sense-making. With Habermas (1967), we find a radical critique of the role of tradition in shaping our understandings of both self and world. Connection or assimilation within tradition is effectively just compliance or conformity with tradition, and thereby allows ruling power structures to go unnoticed and unchallenged. Habermas criticises Gadamer for failing to recognise the way in which interpretation is distorted by compulsion and coercion. Whereas Gadamer sees misunderstanding as basically a failure of dialogue (which can be corrected and used constructively), Habermas sees misunderstanding as the result of consciously perpetrated falsities such as propaganda and political rhetoric. Whereas Gadamer sees understanding as our historical heritage, shaped by the discursive fabric of family, society and state before it becomes personal reflection, Habermas sees *mis*understanding as our historical heritage, *distorted* by the power relations of family, society and state which need to be exposed and undermined in critical reflection.

Habermas proposes a 'depth hermeneutics' to decipher the deceptions of sense-making. This approach supplements personal reflection with 'meta-hermeneutical' explanation, which seeks to highlight sources of distortion and manipulation, such as economic status, social class and gender relations. For

Habermas, every interpretation must come under suspicion for being inspired by such material relations, which shape both interpretation and understanding in ways that go beyond conscious reflection and linguistic sense-making; 'the linguistic infrastructure of a society is part of a complex that, however symbolically mediated, is also constituted by the constraint of reality... behind the back of language' (Habermas, 1967: 361). Critical reflection is required to stand back from the processes of tradition in order to evaluate the constraints to which it subjects us. The 'deep' meaning to be discovered by the critically suspicious interpreter will not only be enlightening, it will also be emancipating.

<box starts>

Hermeneutics in Action:

An interest in power, discourse, resistance and compliance has directed the majority of contemporary hermeneutic researchers of organization and management towards the philosophies of Ricoeur and Habermas. A particular strand of this work considers organizational communication, and the way in which corporate stories and accounts both reflect and construct a particular view of events. For instance, Gopinath and Prasad (2012) use a critical hermeneutic framework to analyse accounts of Coca Cola's exit from India, suggesting that critical hermeneutics has a particular relevance in international studies where accusations of cultural insensitivity expose competing and contradictory versions of events. Gabriel (1991) invokes Ricoeur to explore the subterranean aspects of organizational culture and highlight the sense beneath the sense of our constructions of organizational life. These and other works in this critical strand of hermeneutics are uninterested in and/or suspicious of the author of a text's original intention, and focus instead on the multiple interpretations that organizational phenomena both invoke and reveal.

Gadamer argues that such a desire to move outside the constraints of tradition is untenable, suggesting that Habermas' concept of emancipation is as historically- and contextually-bound as the power relations it seeks to unmask, i.e., that it is blind to its own ideology. The notion that one could stand outside one's historical setting to conduct an ideological critique simply masks the ways in which resistance is as culturally and discursively mediated as compliance - just as revolution tends to substitute one regime for another, rather than ushering in a genuinely different way of life. As Gadamer (1987: 573) puts it, the nature of critical reflection is that 'in dissolving the old ends, it concretizes itself again in new ones... It would become vacuous and undialectical, I think, if it tried to think the idea of a *completed* reflection...so as to achieve an ultimate, free and rational self-possession'. Trying to think oneself out of the hermeneutic circling of tradition, context and relationality - whether in the service of emancipation from repression or any other purpose - 'would be like trying to step outside of our own skins' (Gallagher, 1992: 87).

The critical strand of hermeneutics is a good place to bring our overview of these key motifs to a conclusion, or rather, a provisional resting point. For it is with Habermas' arguments, in particular, that we begin to see the hermeneutic circle collapse, or at least buckle significantly. We have discussed several aspects of hermeneutic circling in this chapter - whole and part; general and particular; pre-understanding and understanding; anticipation and encounter; familiarity and strangeness; sense and non-sense; belief and understanding; and presence and absence. But with Habermas' emphasis on the material factors which distort our linguistic, reflective sense-making, we need some sort of 'bird's eye view' to be able to distinguish between compliant and emancipatory understanding. Thus, it is here that the circle is no longer able to contain the experiences of understanding. It is here that we start to move away from the world of interpretation and into the domain of explanation - that fundamental distinction between hermeneutics as the universal methodology of

the humanities and causal epistemology as the universal methodology for the natural sciences (Dilthey, 1958). It is here that hermeneutics confronts its own limits.

Hermeneutic Influences on Organization and Management Studies

The most concrete way in which hermeneutics has influenced organization and management studies is by inspiring various approaches to the interpretation of text. In this context, 'text' can be something developed specifically for research purposes, such as a transcript of an interview with a participant, or it can be something that appears more naturalistically which is then analysed for research purposes, such as a leader's public speech or an organization's press releases. Most of the time, 'text' refers to something linguistic, whether the written or the spoken word. However, one also finds 'text' used to refer to non-linguistic phenomena, such as organizational practices. Nevertheless, the written script remains the paradigm 'text', and 'reading' is the paradigm interpretive activity.

Interpretive Methods

The results of such interpretive 'readings' can take a number of forms, that is, the content of texts can be abstracted and shaped into themes, discourses, narratives, moments, incidents, etc. It is interesting to consider how prevalent the theme has become as the basic building block of interpretive research, as evidenced by the wealth of thematic analysis techniques (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Hermeneutics invites us to reflect on whether the theme is necessarily the most appropriate foundation-stone of human inquiry. It raises the question of how we might shape and structure our interpretations in terms of values, textures or relations, or indeed, by dimensions of hermeneutic circling, such as presences and absences.

The distinctions between meaning and significance and between faith and suspicion find their way into the choices we make between individual interpretive methods. For instance, one of the methods we have used, IPA (Smith et al., 2009), is a psychological approach in the Schleiermacher tradition. IPA focuses on meaning as the pre-condition of understanding, and defines its quality and validity metrics accordingly. It is basically inspired by a hermeneutics of faith, in that empathy, connection and attunement guide the interpreter towards an understanding of a particular phenomenon through the participant's eyes, encouraging a sense for the participant's intended meaning through a kind of reliving of experience.

As we have seen in this chapter, such emphasis on an author's intention and inner life-world is relatively unusual in organization and management studies (Prasad, 2002). This is due to the field's concern for the dynamics of power and institution and its relative disinterest in first-person experience (Nord and Fox, 1999), at least until recent 'turns' to emotion and embodiment. Critical hermeneutic explorations of organization and management are, therefore, more likely to position the interpretive endeavour as an act of suspicion than of faith (Genoe McLaren and Helms Mills, 2010; Gopinath and Prasad, 2012).

For instance, Phillips and Brown (1993) analyse corporate advertising by focusing on hermeneutic 'moments', encompassing the social-historical moment, the formal moment of the text itself, and the interpretation-reinterpretation moment. The social-historical moment incorporates questions about who produced the text, who was the intended recipient, what the text is supposedly about, and where the text fits in the broader social and historical context. The formal moment incorporates questions about the syntactical and lexical conventions of a text, and the way in which belonging to a particular genre encourages a certain kind of reading.   The interpretation-reinterpretation moment unfolds in the interplay between these issues of production, interpretation and situation.   Thus, this method has elements of Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons', Habermas' concern for ideology and Ricoeur's emphasis on

multiple meanings, as well as the core hermeneutic theme of reciprocity between 'text' and 'context'.

An alternative approach to critical hermeneutics is outlined by Klein and Myers (1999). This describes guidelines for critical hermeneutics in terms of the interdependency of parts and whole; critical reflection on the social and historical background of the research setting, so that the intended audience can see how the situation under investigation emerged; the principles of reflexivity and interaction between researchers and participants so that the nature of data as collectively and socially constructed can emerge; the role of dialogical reasoning and sensitivity to possible contradictions of interpretation; and finally and explicitly, the principle of suspicion, and the importance of seeing past what participants *say* to examine the work that their speech does to reinforce or undermine certain versions of events. This emphasis on suspicion reveals this particular method's sympathy for the work of Ricoeur and Habermas over those writers in the hermeneutic tradition who are motivated more by faith.

These interpretive methods in organizational research connect with the crucial constitutive importance of context in human understanding. This is context as discourse, ideas, habits, practices, norms, systems, etc, and it directs the hermeneutic gaze to the public as well as the private ways in which sense is generated, shaped, experienced and resisted, including the ways in which both researchers and participants are enmeshed and complicit in promoting some versions of sense over others. Researchers reach for different methodological options, depending on whether they are primarily interested in capturing and crystallising a participant's life-world or exposing and exploring the contingency, vulnerability and ideology of sense-making. Despite their different emphases, these methods are all fundamentally 'historical' in the way we have defined historicity in this chapter.

Revisiting Sense-making

At the outset of this chapter, we suggested that hermeneutics encompasses two things which are interrelated but different; the activities of interpretation and the philosophy of understanding. In its definition as the activity of interpretation, hermeneutics becomes one of a number of different methodologies for qualitative inquiry, one of the items in the bottom left hand corner of Burrell and Morgan's (1979) classic taxonomy. This locates hermeneutics in the quadrant which represents (a) subjectivity on the subjective versus objective dimension and (b) regulation on the regulation versus radical change dimension. Given our discussion of the meaning/significance debate, of course, we would challenge the suggestion that hermeneutics is *only* concerned with subjectivity; and with the faith/suspicion framing, we would argue against its characterisation as *only* regulatory. We might even want to argue, with Dilthey (1958), that hermeneutics is *the* overarching method for inquiry into human and social phenomena, that is, that it should be present in all the boxes in any taxonomy of qualitative methods.

In its second definition as a philosophy of understanding, however, hermeneutics seems to defy such allocation into boxes, because boxes imply that human phenomena can be disentangled and categorised into things that make *sense*. In this chapter, we have seen several arguments for there being more to understanding than sense, that is, more than what we can capture, encapsulate, describe and control. These include acknowledging a role for intuition in interpretation; the elusiveness of meaning hidden behind symbol; the role of the pre-conscious, including the constitutive power of public meanings that pre-date private ones; the role of strangeness and unfathomability in the dynamic of hermeneutic circling; and the radical challenge to consciousness for its ideological distortions. Thus, in several ways, hermeneutics takes us beyond sense and our attempts to harness it.

We see fascinating connections between this challenge to the primacy of sense and Weick's (1995) organizational sense-making approach. Indeed, Weick's description of sense-making as 'a frame of mind about frames of mind' (Weick, 1995: xii) has distinct Heideggerian overtones. Recent forays with Weick's work have downplayed the primacy of sense, if by sense we mean our efforts to resolve and settle things, and to order our worlds into coherent, manageable entities. Holt and Cornelissen (2013) suggest that we have turned organizational sense-making into an almost exclusive focus on what is practically and instrumentally desirable, retrospectively orientated, and driven by the need to control events and lessen cognitive dissonance. Returning Weick's sense-making to its Heideggerian roots, they argue that we should redefine sense to encompass a broader range of experiences. These include our moods of dislocation and unease, which signal some kind of shift or disconnect between self and world. For instance, in their different ways, boredom and anxiety both signal that the world is not anchoring us; and feelings of awe can be read as a sign that the world may be overwhelming us (Holt and Cornelissen, 2013). Moods suggest that there is more to understanding than what we can grasp and intellectualise. They invite an engagement with hermeneutics as philosophy, and as 'reflection on the non-epistemological conditions of epistemology' (Ricoeur, 1981: 75).

A Hermeneutic Orientation

This kind of philosophical reflection on where 'sense' fits within our overall experience of ourselves and our worlds is less obviously useful from an applied perspective than the more concrete explorations of method inspired by the Schleiermacher school. Or rather, it suggests a different kind of application, one directed at the orientation of research as much as its methods. It is inspired by the Heideggerian insistence that interpretation is not necessarily carried out verbally or thematically, but rather in the way we relate to things within the field of our concerns.

A hermeneutic orientation towards research is one which emphasises the mutually productive and illuminating relationships between things; the presence of other possibilities and perspectives; the value of dialogue and reflection; and a tolerance of ambiguity, inconsistency and disjuncture in meaning. It involves reflecting in depth about the very nature of our research questions because, as we have seen in this chapter, different hermeneutic solutions are helpful for different kinds of problems. As Gadamer suggests, one of the cornerstones of hermeneutics is this particularity, for 'we can understand a text only when we have understood the question to which it is an answer' (Gadamer, 1989: 363).

The hermeneutic orientation that we have in mind draws on a range of ideas from the theorists we have discussed. It attempts to incorporate their differences as well as their commonalities, that is, to make use of the dialogue, even tension, between positions and possibilities. It engages with both faith and suspicion, and with the relations between them. Thus, we are able to be suspicious of X only because we have faith in Y, where Y might be only our ability to ask the right questions (Gallagher, 1992). We think such an integrative hermeneutic instinct has an important role to play in contemporary organization and management studies, especially in relation to bridging the gulf that sometimes appears between functionalist and/or psychological approaches and more critical alternatives.

Perhaps more than anything, a hermeneutic orientation involves a respectful, reflexive participation in tradition, both in terms of what we inherit and in terms of what we might pass on. In a phrase used by both Gadamer and Ricoeur, hermeneutic reflection entails joining a conversation which has already begun, and which none of us individually can conclude. Understanding is as much experience as achievement, as much participation as clarification, as much tone as method. It is an ongoing project; we will never reach completion or total synthesis, but this does not mean disintegration, fragmentation or

pointlessness, either. In this spirit, we give the remaining space to Gadamer (1989: 581):

> 'I will stop here. The ongoing dialogue permits no final conclusion. It would be a poor hermeneuticist who thought he could have, or had to have, the last word.'

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