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Method and Interpretation: Gadamer and the Limits of Methods in Qualitative Research

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ABSTRACT

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Qualitative modes of research have been working their way into the mainstream of psychological research. Unfortunately, social psychology has largely resisted this trend, despite the particular utility of qualitative research for investigating social phenomena. Curiously, as qualitative research becomes more widely accepted in psychology, much of the discourse surrounding these approaches has revolved around the procedural dimensions of qualitative inquiry. Specifically, it has focused on developing, describing, and defending various codified approaches to qualitative data analysis. Recently, this methodological paradigm has come under some criticism, with scholars critiquing codified methods as leading to shallow, superficial, and formulaic research. Others have noted that qualitative research requires a type of reasoning that does not fit well with codified methods. To analyze this latter point, this paper appeals to the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer to identify the type of reasoning required by qualitative work (i.e., interpretive understanding) and show how this type of reasoning relates to codified methods. Through this analysis, it is shown that methods are unable to function as specific procedures or concrete rules in qualitative practice, and that there are substantive disadvantages in using them as general guidelines as well. An alternative mode of practice is described, focusing on the cultivation of hermeneutical imagination.

Keyword: qualitative research, hermeneutics, Gadamer, methodology

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Recent decades have shown a dramatic uptick in interest among psychologists in qualitative approaches to research, strongly suggesting that qualitative research is becoming more widely accepted in the discipline. Evidence for this can be seen in a recent explosion of outlets for qualitative work in psychology (including an APA journal: *Qualitative Psychology*), a proliferation of textbooks and handbooks teaching qualitative methods (including a handbook published by the APA: Camic et al., 2003), and the establishment of professional organizations and conferences for qualitative researchers in psychology (see, e.g., Gough & Lyons, 2016; Wertz, 2011; Wertz et al., 2011).

Indeed, in their review, Carrera-Fernandez et al. (2014) found that the number of qualitative studies published in psychological journals has increased steadily since the 1990s from 12 published studies in 1990 to 171 in 1999 to 529 in 2010. More recently, the APA reporting standards working group published a landmark article in the APA flagship journal *American Psychologist* outlining reporting standards for qualitative research (Levitt et al., 2018). As the authors note, the article marked "a historical moment" for the APA: "the first inclusion of qualitative research in APA Style" (i.e., the style guide which is the basis for the APA publication manual; p. 26).

Qualitative Research and Social Psychology

Curiously, social psychology has largely resisted these trends. Indeed, as several scholars have pointed out, the field continues to privilege "quantified data and statistical analysis over qualitative data" (Power et al., 2018, p. 360; see also Fine & Elsbach, 2000; King, 2004; Marecek et al., 1997). To verify this, I searched four top-tiered social psychology journals (i.e., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Social Psychological and Personality Science,*

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin) for qualitative research published since 2011. Following Marchel and Owens' (2007), I searched these journals for terms associated with qualitative work[1] and reviewed the abstracts of articles revealed by the search, noting articles that clearly included qualitative elements.

While my initial search produced 65 hits, a small minority (7) of these articles mentioned qualitative modes of analysis in their abstracts. Furthermore, of these seven studies, only three were qualitative in a strong sense; that is, only three of the articles were mainly qualitative rather than merely using interviews to corroborate experimental findings or develop a psychological instrument (for more in-depth analyses of the uptake of qualitative work in mainstream psychology journals see Carrera-Fernandez et al., 2014; Kidd, 2002; Rennie et al., 2002).

While this review has its limitations (e.g., it is possible that some of the rejected articles included qualitative elements but failed to mention them in the abstract or keywords), it gives a rough sense for the relationship between qualitative methods and the mainstream of social psychology, and it corroborates Power et al.'s (2018) assertion that "qualitative and mixed-methods research is rarely featured in premier social psychology journals" (p. 359).[2]

Social psychologists' reticence to embrace qualitative research is unfortunate, considering the benefits qualitative modes of inquiry could bring to social psychological research

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[1] I used the same 11 search terms used by Marchel and Owens (2007) in their review: *qualitative*, *ethnography*, *discourse analysis*, *action research*, *grounded theory*, *phenomenology*, *ethnomethodology*, *life history*, *case study*, *participant observation*, and *autoethnography.* These terms were searched for in article titles, abstracts, and keywords.

[2] This is not meant to imply that qualitative research has had no part in the development of social psychology. To the contrary, as Marecek et al. (1997) note, social psychology has *always* included qualitative work. Indeed, much of the groundbreaking work of luminaries like John Dollard (e.g., 1937), Kurt Lewin (e.g., 1948), Phillip Zimbardo (e.g., Zimbardo et al., 1974), and Leon Festinger (e.g., Festinger et al., 1956) was qualitative and descriptive. The point of this analysis is to show how, despite the influence of these researchers and their work, qualitative research is still undervalued in social psychology.

and theorizing. Indeed, researchers have long argued that qualitative research should be a central element of psychological science (see, e.g., Allport, 1942; Gergen et al., 2015; Gough & Lyons, 2016; O'Neill, 2002; Riley et al., 2019; Wundt, 1900), and others have described how social psychology in particular would benefit from a greater emphasis on qualitative work (see, e.g., Brown & Locke, 2017; Fine & Elsbach, 2000; Gantt, 2005; Henwood & Parker, 1994; Marecek et al., 1997; King, 2004). While these scholars describe many benefits qualitative research might bring to social psychology, I will highlight and expand on three.

Qualitative Research Makes Social Psychology More Scientific

One reason social psychology has been reticent to embrace qualitative methods is psychologists' preconceptions about the nature of properly scientific methods. As scholars have shown, social psychologists, perhaps more than other sub-disciplines of psychology, associate the scientific method with quantification and laboratory experimentation (see, e.g., Brannigan, 2002, 2004; Danziger, 1992; Danziger, 2000; Jahoda, 2016; Michell, 2003, 2010; Stam et al., 2000). Indeed, as Rozin (2001) notes, early social psychologists fixated on becoming "a formal, precise, and experimental science" (p. 3) patterned after the natural sciences and sensory psychology. The presumption of many social psychologists has been that "experimentation is the key to objective knowledge, and is superior to rival methodologies, at least in principle" (Brannigan, 2004, p. 1).

However, as Rozin (2001) argues, social psychologists' association of the natural sciences with experimentation, quantification, and hypothesis testing is a "misinterpretation of the approach of the basic natural sciences" (p. 3). Indeed, while many of the more established natural sciences *do* include experimentation and hypothesis testing, Rozin (2001) argues that "in the more advanced sciences that social psychology would like to emulate, there is much more

emphasis on phenomena and ‘description’ than there is in social psychology, and there is less reliance on experiment” (p. 3). Indeed, for Rozin (2001), social psychology is less than it could be because it became “prematurely formal and experimental” without having taken sufficient time to discover and describe its basic phenomena (for similar critiques, see Asch, 1952/1987; Brannigan, 2004; Gantt, 2005; Gantt, et al., 2017; Greenwood, 2004). As Gaddis (2002) has noted:

> Social scientists seem to have concluded that the only way they can both explain the past and anticipate the future is to imitate the laboratory sciences. ... They feel that they've not done their job until they've separated independent variables from dependent variables. But they do so only by separating these variables from the world that surrounds them. (p. 60)

Ultimately, the epistemological requirements of the experimental/quantitative approach to social psychological study demand that researchers search out a world of variables and constructs operating behind the manifestly meaningful world of ordinary human experience that “surrounds them.” However, as Gantt and Williams (2020) observe, “a long-standing requirement of scientific inquiry is that science must ‘save the phenomena’ or else it fails as legitimate science and devolves into little more than an ideological exercise” (p. 93). Unfortunately, mainstream social psychology’s rigid adherence to the strictures of experimental method and quantitative analysis may seriously inhibit its ability to fruitfully and faithfully investigate its primary subject matter (i.e., human social action and relationships) as well as render its theoretical accounts impotent and misleading.

Thus, for many critics, the way forward for social psychologists is to follow the example of the natural sciences by beginning with "careful description and establishment of functional relationships" (Rozin, 2009, p. 438). In a similar vein, Gantt and Williams (2020) argue that by

> opening ourselves up to possible alternative epistemological possibilities, alternatives that would permit us to engage the saturated phenomena of meaningful human experience as lived more directly and sensitively, rather than forcing such phenomena to fit into overly restrictive and distorting pre-selected conceptual boxes, we might then perhaps begin to provide richer and more fertile accounts of lived-experience – accounts that might accord more deeply with the experiences of actual persons. (pp. 99-100)

Obviously, qualitative approaches to research are not the only approaches suited to this task—exploratory and descriptive work can be quantitative too—however, as Yarkoni (2019) notes, "given that the theories and constructs psychologists are interested in usually have qualitative origins, and are almost invariably expressed verbally"[3] it makes sense that qualitative research would be an indispensable element of the type of research that Rozin recommends. Ironically, rather than making social psychology *less* scientific as some psychologists might suppose, the incorporation of more descriptive qualitative research would bring the field more closely in line with the more well-established sciences. Indeed, as Michell (2010) shows, "the use of qualitative methods in psychological research is not only justified [but] that qualitative methods are, on purely scientific grounds, not to be preferred any less than quantitative methods" (p. 64).

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[3] For example, in their "native habitat," phenomena like opinions are qualitative, that is, they are not experienced or expressed in terms of numerical quantity. If one were to ask someone their opinion of the current president, for example, it is highly unlikely that they would respond with a number.

Qualitative Research and External Validity

As noted above, social psychology has historically associated the scientific method almost entirely with experimental research. Indeed, as Stam et al. (2000) describe, "by the 1960s experimentation had become such an identifying feature of psychological social psychology that the acceptability of ideas in the field came to depend largely on the ability of authors to couch them in the language of the experiment" (p. 365). However, as many scholars have noted, experimentation has both strengths and weaknesses (see Mortensen & Cialdini, 2010; Power et al., 2018; Diener et al., 2022).

As Mortensen and Cialdini (2010) describe, laboratory experimentation gives researchers precision and control, but this often comes at the expense of real-world applicability. More specifically, although laboratory research "allows social scientists to carefully remove or control variables," clarify relationships between variables, and better understand mediating processes, none of this "[serves] to indicate the strength or prevalence of phenomena in natural settings." Furthermore, statistical significance "[does] not indicate the real-world significance," and effect sizes only measure the size of effects "within the specific conditions set up in a lab" (p. 54).

Traditionally, psychologists have conceptualized this (i.e., the relation between research findings and the real world) in terms of external validity—the extent to which findings generalize beyond the setting in which they were found. Thus, a good experiment has the potential to clarify relationships between variables in a laboratory setting, however, this often comes at the expense of external validity. Given the field's overreliance on experimentation, for some time now, social psychologists have worried that the field might be gaining precision and control at the expense of *relevance*. Indeed, going back to the 1960s and 70s, social psychologists have worried "whether social psychology research can be relevant to anyone but social psychologists" or whether it can

"create solutions to real-world social problems" (Giner-Sorolla, 2019, p. 1; see also, Silverman, 1971). More recently, Diener et al. (2022) have argued, citing concerns with external validity, that "experiments are overused and overvalued in the behavioral sciences to the detriment of scientific progress" (p. 1).

Recently, scholars have argued that qualitative research might help address these shortcomings. Specifically, they have argued that, used *alongside* traditional quantitative experimental work, qualitative research can help to overcome the limitations inherent in laboratory research. Mortensen and Cialdini (2010), for example, argue for what they call a "full-cycle approach" to social psychology research (see also, Cialdini, 1980). In a full-cycle approach to research,

> researchers use naturalistic observation to determine an effect's presence in the real world, theory to determine what processes underlie the effect, experimentation to verify the effect and its underlying processes, and a return to the natural environment to corroborate the experimental findings (p. 53).

Mortensen and Cialdini assert that this mode of research is a model that can guide researchers to produce "ecologically valid basic research" which can go on to be applied to solve real problems (p. 54). The sort of naturalistic observation for which they advocate need not be exclusively qualitative; however, as stated above, given the qualitative nature of many psychological phenomena, qualitative methods would be well-suited to this type of work.[4]

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[4] It is also worth noting the ways in which Mortensen and Cialdini's (2010) ideas are an extension of how many psychologists go about their research in the first place. That is, social psychologists often get ideas for their work from observations of the natural world (see, e.g., Festinger et al., 1956). Mortensen and Cialdini merely advocate more rigorous and systematic descriptive work on the front end of research and extending this practice onto the back end of research, completing the cycle by "looking back to naturally occurring situations to assess the match between the characteristics of the effect as it appeared in our studies versus how it appears in the real world" (p. 55).

Power et al., (2018) have also argued along these lines, advocating for what they call a "synthetic approach" to social psychology research which "continually and consistently uses different methodologies [i.e., quantitative and qualitative] to check assumptions, research questions, findings, and interpretations" (p. 362). They go on to assert that by doing so, "answers to pressing questions can be triangulated… [and] the limitations of a single method can be overcome" leading to "more nuanced, replicable, and ecologically valid research findings" (p. 362).

Qualitative Methods and Social Phenomena

Another side effect of social psychologists' over-reliance on experimentation has been a contraction of the types of phenomena to which the field attends. As Rozin (2001) has noted, "almost the entire field is devoted to studying a modest subset of the domains of social life with a limited range of salient methodologies" (p. 3). Indeed, he argues that the field has tended to focus on "what are purported to be general processes" like motivation and cognition and has largely neglected "the normal flow of life, that is, what people actually do" (Rozin, 2006, p. 365). Thus, social psychology textbooks often include sections on subjects like attitudes, persuasion, and aggression but often neglect subjects like art, music, drama, literature, eating, sex, war, and religion (p. 366).

Rozin (2006) notes that this neglect is partially due to the tendency of psychologists to organize research around broad domains of mental processes, a tradition inherited from British empirical philosophy. But it is certainly also due to the methodological restrictions placed on social psychology by its commitment to "the experiment as *the* primary research method" of the field (Stam et al., 2000, p. 365). As Danziger (1985) notes, "methodological rules" enable certain

types of research (e.g., experimentation), but they also limit the types of phenomena available for research: "such rules mean that only certain kinds of observation will ever be made" (p. 1).

Thus, restricting social psychological research to controlled laboratory experiments means that only certain types of phenomena will ever be studied by social psychologists because only certain phenomena are amenable to that mode of research. As Danziger (2000) describes, historically, this has meant that social psychologists have tended to study phenomena that are "local, proximal, short-term, and decomposable" (p. 334) because these are the only types of phenomena that lend themselves to short-term, laboratory experiments.

In contrast, as Gergen et al. (2015) describe, opening the field to greater methodological diversity simultaneously opens it to a broader range of phenomena: "as we enrich the range of research practices" accepted by psychologists "we simultaneously expand the arena of theoretical ideas and their associated values" (p. 6). Such an expansion might be particularly important given the persistent critique that the social psychology's emphasis on experimentation has forced social psychologists to focus almost exclusively on processes contained within *individuals*.[5] Indeed, as these scholars note, most of the phenomena studied by modern social psychologists are only marginally social because these are most easily isolated and manipulated in the laboratory (see, Danziger, 1992; Danziger, 2000; Gantt & Williams, 2002; Stam, 2006). In contrast, as Wilhelm Wundt (1900) has argued, qualitative modes of inquiry would enable psychologists to study *truly* social, trans-personal phenomena like religion, mythology, and customs.

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[5] Indeed, Gordon Allport's (1985) famous definition of social psychology is explicitly individualistic: he defines the discipline as "an attempt to understand and explain how the thought, feeling and behavior of *individuals* [emphasis added] are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of other human beings" (p. 5).

An example of this type of research can be seen in recent work on the relationship between socio-physical context and aggressive behavior in an urban nightlife setting (Kalinauskaité et al., 2018). As Kalinauskaité et al. note, historically, social psychologists have mainly studied aggression in controlled laboratory settings, conceptualizing the environment wherein aggression occurs as a "conglomeration of isolated stimuli and events" rather than a holistic "ecological backdrop against which aggression is to be understood" (p. 223). Through their work, Kalinauskaité et al. show how aggression in natural settings is affected by what they call atmosphere—"a dynamic and mood-like, but extra-individual state of the socio-physical setting" (p. 223).

This study is illustrative because it shows how methods correlate with findings. In this case, researchers were able to discover and describe a truly social (i.e., communal, trans-personal) phenomena *because* their methods facilitated such. By asking researchers and participants to recount their shared experiences, Kalinauskaité et al. (2018) were able to triangulate on something (i.e., atmosphere) that was experienced by all but would have been impossible to isolate in a laboratory experiment. Thus, incorporating more methodological diversity into social psychology, including qualitative methods, would allow psychologists to study truly social phenomena.

If the above analysis is correct, then social psychology would be well served to embrace qualitative approaches to research. Doing so would bring the field more in line with the more established sciences, facilitate greater external validity, and open the doors for research on a wider range of phenomena. Clearly, part of embracing qualitative research will be fostering and encouraging qualitative researchers and qualitative studies. However, social psychologists should not just be interested in the *quantity* of qualitative work; they should also care about increasing

its *quality*. And improving the quality of qualitative research would mean not just encouraging researchers but encouraging methodological work to help researchers better understand the nature of qualitative inquiry, how it works, and how to do it well.

My purpose in this dissertation will be to perform this work—to help psychologists, especially social psychologists, to better understand the nature of qualitative research, how to do it, and what matters in the research process. And while my discussion in the following sections will refer to qualitative research in general, as a social psychologist, I am primarily interested in these arguments in the context of improving qualitative work in social psychology.

Qualitative Research and Codified Methods

One area where further methodological work needs to be done is in the relationship between qualitative research and codified research methods. Curiously, as qualitative research moves into the mainstream of psychological research, much of the discourse surrounding these approaches has revolved around the procedural dimensions of qualitative inquiry. That is, psychologists seem to have conceived of qualitative work as a mode of inquiry to be approached via "explicit, generalizable formulae, procedures, or rules" (Dunne & Pendlebury, 2002, p. 197), and most of the methodological work has focused on developing, describing, and defending various codified approaches to research. Indeed, some scholars, noticing the "superordinate position" codified methods have played in qualitative inquiry, have declared that psychologists seem to think of method as "the founding ground of qualitative inquiry" (Tanggaard, 2013, pp. 409, 411; see also Brinkmann, 2015).

This procedural approach to qualitative work is a relatively new phenomenon, however. Psychologists have not always approached qualitative research in this way. Indeed, while qualitative research has been omnipresent throughout the history of psychology, it has not always

been associated with explicit and systematic methods. For example, while founding fathers like Wilhelm Wundt (e.g., 1900), Sigmund Freud (e.g., 1899/2010), William James (e.g., 1902/1982), and Abraham Maslow (e.g., 1971) engaged in qualitative forms of inquiry, none of them spent much time outlining explicit rules or procedures by which they gathered and analyzed data.

As Wertz et al. (2011) describe, early qualitative researchers tended to be intuitive and flexible rather than methodological: they collected and analyzed data "unconstrained by any how-to manual or clear-cut procedural steps" (p. 18), adopting and discarding methods based on their "fit" with the phenomena they were investigating rather than by referring to procedural recipes. In fact, to the extent that these scholars discussed their methods at all, it was usually retrospectively—describing what they wound up doing rather than laying out the rules or steps that guided their research. This mode of practice was the norm for qualitative research in psychology well into the 1960s: "qualitative research was practiced and even developed, but the vast majority of researchers who continued to use these methods did so without accounting systematically for [their] procedures or asserting their scientific value" (p. 8).

It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that scholars shifted away from this approach and began conceptualizing qualitative research in terms of discrete procedures for collecting and analyzing data. During this period, qualitative scholars began releasing methodological works which attempted to systematize and codify the research practices employed by past researchers (Wertz, 2014; Wertz et al., 2011). Unlike previous qualitative work, though, these new

"qualitative traditions" (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 69) focused on standardized, repeatable procedures rather than flexibility and intuition.[6]

Qualitative psychology is currently dominated by these qualitative traditions and their procedural approaches to qualitative research; the older paradigm, where researchers crafted unique approaches for specific projects, is hardly remembered. Instead, new researchers are taught to think of qualitative work as structurally the same as statistical modes of analysis: they are instructed to decide on their research question, select an analytic procedure that will allow them to answer that question, and then follow the concrete steps of that procedure to complete their analysis.

And while it is true that some scholars present their methods as flexible heuristics rather than hard and fast rules, even scholars who emphasize flexibility often present qualitative research in meticulously defined steps. For example, after explaining that Content Analysis is "a flexible method for analyzing text data," Hsieh and Shannon (2005) outline three approaches to the method in minute detail, describing how researchers should highlight their data, how many clusters of codes researchers should produce (ideally between 10 and 15), and how they should display their categories and subcategories (ideally with a tree diagram). A similar level of granularity can be found in descriptions of Template Analysis (Brooks et al., 2015), Generic Qualitative Research (Percy et al., 2015), and, counterintuitively, in descriptions of a method called Intuitive Inquiry (Anderson, 2004).

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[6] Halling et al.'s (1994) dialogal phenomenology is an interesting exception to these trends. Their method emphasizes an approach to data analysis characterized by collaboration and open and ongoing conversation, rather than "by following predefined procedures or steps" (p. 111; see also, Beck et al., 2003).

This way of teaching and presenting qualitative research is ubiquitous in both textbooks (e.g., Camic et al., 2003; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lyons & Coyle, 2016; Wertz et al., 2011; Willig, 2013) and handbooks of qualitative research (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Richardson, 1996; Willig & Rogers, 2017). It is also common in qualitative professional development seminars, which offer workshops to teach "practical steps" that will enable researchers to complete projects using the various established methodologies (see, Research Talk Inc., n.d.).[7]

Also, while most qualitative research textbooks, handbooks, and workshops focus on teaching a small subset of qualitative methods, recent years have seen an explosion of new approaches to qualitative research, each with its own research philosophy and set of procedures. For example, in their review, Madill and Gough (2008) identified 32 distinct qualitative research methodologies, including Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, and Narrative Inquiry, but also Conversation Analysis, Metaphorical Analysis, Repertory Grid Analysis, Process Evaluation, and Q-Methodology. As Madill and Gough note, this list is not exhaustive.

Given the emphasis on approaching qualitative research via these codified methods, it is perhaps unsurprising that most modern qualitative research is performed using one of these "off-the-shelf approaches" (Larkin, 2015, p. 254). Carrera-Fernández et al. (2014) have recently confirmed that this is the case. Of the 6,283 studies they identified in psychological journals, almost all were performed using a codified approach: 1,827 were performed using Content Analysis, 743 used Grounded Theory, 668 used Discourse Analysis, 404 used Action Research methods, 308 used ethnographic methods, 306 used Task Analysis, and 304 used

[7] Some of the organizations responsible for putting on these trainings have even developed their own proprietary qualitative research methods which are taught exclusively at their seminars or by their consultants (see, Odom Institute for Research in Social Science, n.d.).

phenomenological methods like Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Furthermore, in a survey of United Kingdom dissertation chairs, Thompson et al. (2011) found that half of the dissertations using qualitative methods were carried out via IPA.

Questioning Codified Methods

Recently, some scholars have argued that this procedural approach to qualitative research is wrongheaded—that it encourages a mechanical, unreflective mode of practice and leads to shallow, superficial, and formulaic research (see, e.g., Brinkmann, 2012; 2015; Chamberlain, 2000; 2012; Cheek, 2008; Janesick, 1994; Kvale, 1996; Tanggaard, 2013; van Manen, 2016). Others have argued from a different direction, suggesting that the modern procedural approach is based on a misunderstanding of what it is to do qualitative research. These critics suggest that, given the type of reasoning required to analyze qualitative data, qualitative research cannot be a methodologically controlled activity as methodologists seem to suggest. Brinkmann (2015), for example, has argued not only that rigid methods produce bad outcomes, but they do so because qualitative research depends on "emergent and imaginative" processes that "simply cannot be rendered predictable" or captured in "rules and procedures that can be made completely explicit and transparent" (pp. 167-168). In a similar vein, Kvale (1996) has argued that, as in artistic endeavors, qualitative research (in this case, interview research) "*cannot* [emphasis added] … be produced by merely following methodological rules" (p. 106).

As qualitative approaches to research become mainstream in psychology, there is a growing need to clarify these issues. Indeed, if the type of reasoning at work in qualitative research is emergent, unpredictable, and informulable in the way these scholars suggest, this would be highly consequential for qualitative psychology. It would require psychologists to rethink their approach to qualitative research or at least how they conceived of the methods they

use. But before this could happen, more work needs to be done to (a) show which aspects of qualitative work resist being reduced to rules and procedures, (b) demonstrate what this informulability consists of, and (c) establish what this implies about the practice of qualitative work.

Fortunately, much of this work has already been done; scholars of hermeneutics—the philosophical study of understanding and interpretation—have long argued that the human sciences require a type of reasoning that cannot be reduced to rules and clear-cut procedures. Indeed, a significant portion of Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1960/2004) magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, is dedicated to an extended critique of what he calls "the methodologism of the human sciences" (p. 493). The tenor of this critique is that the processes of understanding and interpretation central to studying human phenomena (e.g., texts, artifacts, actions) "[resist] any attempt to reinterpret [them] in terms of scientific method" (p. xx). In other words, Gadamer argues that the ability to understand texts and offer interpretations is not one that can be reduced to sets of rules or procedures that can be made completely clear and transparent. In *Truth and Method,* Gadamer describes what this implies for disciplines like history and philology, but scholars have since sketched out how his ideas apply to practices in other fields (e.g., education; see, Nixon, 2017). However, thus far, no one has shown how his critique of methodologism applies to methodological practices in psychology.

This is not to say that psychologists have neglected Gadamer's significance for the discipline. On the contrary, philosophically minded psychologists have long noted the relevance of hermeneutic philosophy for psychological research and practice (see, e.g., Martin & Sugarman, 2001; Messer et al., 1988; Packer, 1985; Packer, 2017; Packer & Addison, 1989; Polkinghorne, 2000; Yanchar, 2015), and many qualitative research textbooks include at least a

cursory discussion of hermeneutic philosophy (see, e.g., Frost, 2011; Howitt, 2016; Smith, 2015; Willig, 2013; Willig & Rogers, 2008). Some psychologists have even discussed Gadamer's ideas in the context of qualitative research (see, Barak, 2020; Debesay et al., 2008; Hekman, 1984; Manton, 2019; Moules et al., 2015; Shelley, 2000). None of these authors, however, have shown in detail how Gadamer's critique of methodologism applies to research practices in qualitative psychology. When scholars have mentioned Gadamer's critique of methods, it has primarily been in passing, or their analysis has focused on sketching out the implications of his ideas rather than unpacking his argument and showing how it applies to research practices (e.g., Martin & Sugarman, 2001; Moules et al., 2015; Polkinghorne, 2000;).

The purpose of this dissertation will be to perform this work by working through Gadamer's ideas about methodology and showing how it applies to qualitative research practices in psychology. Drawing from Gadamer's phenomenological ontology of understanding and interpretation and grounded in a close examination of what occurs in the process of qualitative research, I will attempt to (1) show how the processes at the heart of qualitative research (i.e., understanding and interpretation) cannot be successfully directed or controlled by rules and procedures spelled out in advance of inquiry, and (2) sketch out what this implies for the practice of qualitative research and the training of researchers.

The argument I will be making, following Gadamer, is that qualitative research—*all* qualitative research—is always hermeneutic in the way that Gadamer describes (i.e., it involves understanding and interpretation and cannot be reduced to rules and procedures), yet, for a variety of reasons, psychologists have failed to recognize this, they have failed to recognize what this implies about qualitative methods, or they have been unclear about the functions of their

methods. This seems to be the case even among psychologists who acknowledge the hermeneutic nature of qualitative research.

The second point I will make is that psychologists' lack of clarity regarding the hermeneutic nature of qualitative research has led scholars to misunderstand what codified methods can and cannot do for qualitative work. In some cases, this has manifested in approaches to research that assert that methods can guide practice in ways they cannot. In other cases, it shows up in vague and confusing discourse around the purposes of research methods.

Finally, I will argue that the mismatch between the nature of qualitative research and the "methodological self-consciousness" (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. xxii) of researchers has had consequences for qualitative psychology—it has misdirected researchers' attention, guiding them away from the things that really matter in qualitative research and misleading them about the nature of qualitative practice. However, I will show that properly understanding the hermeneutic nature of qualitative work can help scholars see the types of principles and practices that really *can* make a difference for qualitative researchers.

Before getting to those arguments, however, it will be necessary to start by mapping out the different ways qualitative methodologists seem to conceive of research methods. As Moules et al. (2015) have noted, when discussing how research methods relate to qualitative inquiry, "it all comes down to what is meant by the term method" (p. 55). Once I have clarified the roles methods are supposed to be playing in the research process, I will then examine whether methods can actually perform these functions, given the inescapably hermeneutic nature of qualitative research.

Method

Gadamer's (1960/2004) critique of the human sciences revolves around what he (rather indiscriminately) describes as "the problem of method" (p. 3). However, despite the centrality of the concept of method to his book, as Weinsheimer (1985) notes, "Gadamer does not begin by defining method, enumerating its presuppositions, or elaborating its implications" (p. 1). Consequently, it is easy to misread what Gadamer is attempting to accomplish in *Truth and Method.* Indeed, the term method is polysemous, and obviously, Gadamer's critique is not directed toward every sense of the term.[8] In fact, Gadamer (1960/2004) even describes his work as following a particular method ("it is true that my book is phenomenological in its method," p. xxxiii). Thus, clearly, Gadamer's critique is not directed towards the concept of method per se but rather at particular theories of method—what I will call *models of method*.

Models of method are conceptualizations of the nature of methods: what methods are, how they function, what role they are meant to play in research, and what benefits they are supposed to offer researchers. As described above, Gadamer's work shows how certain models of method are inapplicable to hermeneutic tasks like qualitative research. But before getting to this, it will be helpful to indicate which models of method are at work in modern qualitative psychology so I can then show which of these models Gadamer finds objectionable.

Three Models of Method

Psychologists tend to be vague about the nature of methods and the roles they are supposed to play in research. Indeed, qualitative methodologists primarily focus on describing and defending their various methods, but they spend comparably little time explaining the role

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[8] As Buchler (1961) notes, it makes sense to talk about "mathematical methods, choreographic methods, mining methods, methods of playing second base, military methods, manufacturing methods" (p. 55) but clearly the term method is being used differently in all these cases.

their methods are meant to play in research practice. Thus, typically the models of method that inspire methodological work are implicit and mostly only appear in the context of other methodological discussions. For example, Giorgi's views on method—that qualitative research must proceed via clearly defined methods, that good methods function as rules that direct researchers' consciousness as they analyze data—appear most explicitly in his critiques of other researchers' methods (see, Giorgi, 2006; 2010; 2011). In other cases, models of method can only indirectly be inferred, typically by reading through introductions to methods texts where authors describe the benefits their methods are supposed to bring to the research process (see examples below).

Nevertheless, if one reviews the methodological literature, it is possible to identify three distinct models that seem to be animating psychologists' discussion of methods. Importantly, these models typically reflect how qualitative methodologists think about their own methods; for the most part, models of method are not prescriptive. That is, most models of method acknowledge that there are multiple types of methods, and not all methods need to adhere to the same standards. Nevertheless, scholars who hold to the models below assert (at least implicitly) that at least *their* methods function in the ways these models describe.

Method as Effective Procedures, Recipes, or Maps

The first and most common way psychologists conceptualize their methods is as clear, specific, and repeatable procedures that reliably lead researchers to successful research. This is the sense of method that seems to be at work among scholars who describe their methods as step-by-step guides (Smith, 2015, p. 1) or "set[s] of steps that can be followed" (Lyons & Coyle, 2016, p. 27).

The strongest version of this model is captured by the metaphor of a recipe (see e.g., Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 20). There are two features of recipes that are central to the metaphor. First, a recipe implies a specific end known in advance. A recipe is always a recipe to make something specific—a cake, say, or a pot-roast. Second, a recipe provides clear and distinct directions for how to produce the end product. Significantly, these features are linked: it is because the final product is already known that the recipe can provide such specific guidance regarding how to make it. And while it is true that recipes are often vague in their directions—they instruct the baker to mix the ingredients, but they do not specify for how long or using which implement—this imprecision is mainly due to convention. With a proper recipe, because the end result is so clearly understood, directions can be almost infinitely specific. If the author of a recipe desires, she can tell the prospective baker *precisely* what to do: which brands of ingredients to buy, which implements to use, or even how to stand and hold the bowl when mixing.

This is the model of method applicable to many types of statistical analyses. As with baking, methods in statistics direct researchers on how to produce known products (e.g., a regression or a latent factor analysis), and because statisticians already know about these products—they know what questions they answer and how they are calculated from raw data—statistical methods can be highly specific.

The main benefit of methods, according to this model is control. Whereas it might be possible to bake a cake without a recipe or to identify the mean of a data set without using a method (e.g., by "eyeballing it"), doing so leaves much to chance. The purpose of method, according to this view, is to overcome chance, and it accomplishes this by laying out a clear path that researchers can follow to reach their goals. Thus, this model aligns with Melanchthon's

(quoted in Ong, 1958) description: method "finds and opens a way through impenetrable and overgrown places, through the confusion of things, and pulls out and arranges in order the things pertaining to the matter proposed" (p. 237). Therefore, according to this model, when the proper method is employed results are nearly guaranteed, almost without regard to the character or experience level of the actor.

Most descriptions of qualitative methods draw upon this model to varying degrees. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), for example, describe their methods as recipes (see, e.g., p. 20) and assert that, while it can be challenging to discover patterns in a qualitative data set, "by using our coding method you *will* [emphasis added] be able to discover patterns that you cannot see directly" in the data (pp. 31-32). As Auerbach and Silverstein see it, their method functions as a recipe: it describes a specific end product (i.e., a grounded theory analysis) and lays out concrete steps to produce that product. And because they believe they have laid out their steps so clearly and specifically, they describe their method as enabling the researcher to overcome their natural limitations as it relates to qualitative analysis (see, pp. 31-32).

Others are less comfortable with the level of control implied by the method-as-recipe metaphor or the implication that qualitative research could be reduced to a mechanical following of steps (e.g., Larkin, 2015; Willig, 2013). Many of these authors use cartographic metaphors instead, for example, methods as "maps" (Larkin, 2015, p. 255), "road maps," "routes" (Lyons & Coyle, 2016, pp. 27-28), or "path[s] of inquiry" (Applebaum, 2011, p. 6). The method-as-map metaphor might imply a less constricted mode of analysis; however, the underlying idea is the same. The metaphor implies that methods can provide clear-cut, step-by-step directions for producing research, and those directions bring predictability and control to the research process.

And as with the methods-as-recipes metaphor, describing methods as maps or routes presupposes knowledge of ends; maps are only helpful if one already knows where one wants to go, and maps can only be produced by people who know a place. Thus, as with recipes, it is because scholars have knowledge of ends—they have traveled the path of research and arrived successfully—that they can produce methods that provide "a clear sense of where to begin and how to move an analysis forward" (Lyons & Coyle, 2016, p. 27).

Importantly, scholars who hold to the methods-as-maps (or recipes) model do not necessarily maintain that methods are *essential* for qualitative research. Parker (2004), for example, describes his text as setting out concrete "steps towards creative and imaginative qualitative research" but acknowledges these steps can be "kick[ed] away" (preface) once the researcher has more experience and confidence. Lyons and Coyle (2016) likewise describe their methods as "useful initial routes for novice researchers" that can eventually be adapted or transcended (p. 28). For these scholars, it is possible, in principle, to do qualitative research without set methods, just as it is possible for experienced chefs to make a familiar dish without a recipe. However, given the efficacy of tried-and-true methods, these authors often recommend them to inexperienced researchers.

the Cartesian Model: Method as Rules for Directing Consciousness

The second way psychologists think of methods in qualitative research is as rules and procedures to guide researchers towards correct conclusions or objective findings. This model of method shares much with the first theory: it holds that methods are sets of concrete rules and procedures that can reliably guide researchers in their work. Unlike the first model, though, scholars in this camp hold that the primary function of methods is to enable researchers to overcome bias and subjectivity, avoid error, and arrive at certain conclusions. Whereas scholars

in the first camp assert that what is produced by their methods is "only one of several 'right ways' in which the data can be interpreted" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 32), scholars in this second group maintain that methods, if properly followed, should lead researchers to the same conclusions.

This model of method has its roots in Descartes' philosophy; thus, I will refer to it as the Cartesian model. As Descartes (1985) describes in *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, proper methods imply "reliable rules which are easy to apply, and such that if one follows them exactly, one will never take what is false to be true or fruitlessly expend one's mental efforts" (p. 16). The heart of Descartes' method is finding the proper foundation for investigation, a starting point that is "perfectly known and incapable of being doubted" (p. 10). Once this starting point is achieved, the investigator can build step by step from this foundation to conclusions that must then be indubitably true:

> as long as one stops oneself taking anything to be true that is not true and sticks to the right order so as to deduce one thing from another, there can be nothing so remote that one cannot eventually reach it, nor so hidden that one cannot discover it. (Descartes, 1637/2006, p. 18)

The guiding metaphor for this model is mathematics (see, Descartes, 1985, p. 17). The main idea is that methods can structure research so that it can be carried out with the same rigor and exactitude as mathematics. They do this by helping scholars identify clear and distinct starting points and then showing them how to work from those starting points to certain conclusions, much like mathematicians develop complex proofs based on sets of foundational axioms. While the methods-as-recipes/maps model depends on a clearly defined end known in advance, this Cartesian approach requires a clear and distinct beginning. Once this beginning is

obtained, however, Cartesian methods are supposed to show how to build on that foundation and extend knowledge to new arenas without introducing error.

As with the first model, the main advantage methods are supposed to offer is control; Cartesian methods are supposed to make research more accessible and predictable. But unlike the former model, in the Cartesian model, methods are also supposed to make research more objective and certain. If beginning axioms are known to be true or correct or clear, and if the steps of the method are followed faithfully, then the foundation's clarity or truth or correctness should be evident in the conclusion as well. This model also aims to facilitate intersubjective agreement; if the starting point is sufficiently clear and the rules for proceeding are clear, then a skeptical scholar should be able to work through the analysis himself and come to the same conclusions.

This model is rare in qualitative research. Its primary advocate is Amedeo Giorgi, who has argued for it in his methodological writings (see, Giorgi, 2009; 2012) and in his critiques of other methods (see, Giorgi, 2006; 2010; 2011). According to Giorgi (2010), phenomenological methods (at least those based on Husserl's phenomenology) provide researchers with a clear and distinct starting point, and they also provide "rules to guide the conscious processes of the researcher" (p. 10) to insulate the research process from bias, subjectivity, and error.[9]

The key to this clear and distinct starting point is what Giorgi (2011) calls a "purifying reflective method" (p. 201, quoting Scanlon, 1977, p. xiv). For Giorgi, this purifying reflective method starts with the researcher adopting the attitude of the phenomenological reduction by (1)

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[9] While Giorgi does not invoke Descartes directly in his methodological writings, his theory of method is based on Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, which was heavily influenced by Descartes' philosophy (see, MacDonald, 2000).

setting aside past experiences, beliefs, or theoretical perspectives and (2) withholding existential consent and thus viewing the phenomenon experienced precisely as a phenomenon. When properly accomplished, Giorgi maintains that the adoption of this attitude "means that biases are eliminated" (Giorgi, 2006, p. 310), and the researcher can view their data clearly and objectively—that is, they can view the phenomenon precisely as it presents itself in the data. Then, by following the remaining steps of the method, the researcher is led to produce an objective description of the essential structure of the experience. Significantly, because the method began with the researcher adopting the proper attitude and thus finding a clear and distinct starting point, if the researcher follows the method correctly, Giorgi maintains that the results of the analysis are an objective, interpretation-free description (see, Giorgi, 2011, p. 212).

Method as Guidelines

Finally, a third group of scholars describes their methods not as concrete procedures or formal rules but as general guidelines which guide researchers in their research without telling them specifically what to do. According to this model, methods might consist of general principles, rules of thumb, examples from past research, advice, suggestions, or cautions, but none of these function as a decision procedure meant to supplant the researcher's judgments. Instead, general principles require judgment for their successful application to the case at hand; whether and how a principle applies to *this* data set and *this* research question is something decided by the researcher rather than by the method. According to this model, methods are still meant to help researchers, but they do not help them by telling them what to do. Rather, as Chamberlain (2012) describes, "methodological ideas and concepts… are there to stimulate, to be drawn on and utilized, to be adapted in context" (p. 6).

This is the sense of method at work in Willig's (2013) textbook. Rather than viewing qualitative research as the mechanical application of research "recipes," Willig conceptualizes the research process "as a form of adventure" and thus something fundamentally creative and unpredictable (p. 177). Because of this, for Willig, research methods "are best thought of as ways of approaching a question" rather than formal rules or concrete procedures (p. 177).

Moules et al.'s (2015) description of "hermeneutic or interpretive inquiry" (p. 2) also holds to this model. In their guidebook, they explicitly argue for an approach to research based on guidelines rather than "methodological imperatives" (p. 61). Guidelines are different from methodological imperatives, according to Moules et al., because they do not attempt to tell researchers "how to respond to an encounter" or how to interpret particular cases (p. 61). Instead, guidelines "orient the researcher, to help them make responsible, reliable, and defensible decisions" (p. 61). Furthermore, unlike formal rules, guidelines require attributes like "good judgment," experience, skill, or character to be adequately applied (p. 61).

These three models seem to capture the sense of method that animates most methodological work in qualitative psychology. Significantly, as noted above, these positions are not often worked out with much rigor or specificity. Consequently, scholars are often vague or inconsistent in their statements about their methods. For example, in her description of Grounded Theory, Charmaz (2015) claims that "grounded theory demystifies the conduct of qualitative inquiry" by outlining specific analytic strategies (p. 54). However, several pages later, she clarifies that "beyond a few flexible guidelines, grounded theory is indeterminate and open-ended" (p. 59).

It is also true that scholars might describe their methods as maps or recipes without subscribing to every implication of those metaphors. The point of the preceding analysis is to

identify several *ideal types* of theories about method so that they can be discussed and evaluated. My intent is not to make claims about the methodological beliefs of specific scholars (except insofar as those scholars have made their beliefs explicit themselves).

Method and Methodological Self-Consciousness

In the introduction to *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1960/2004) describes his philosophy as an attempt to uncover "what the human sciences truly are, beyond their methodological self-consciousness" (p. xxii). Gadamer's point in this statement is that it is possible for there to be a disconnect between, as Hinman (1980) summarizes, "what the human sciences inevitably are and what they think they are, between the human sciences and their self-interpretation" (p. 528). In the present case, this points to the possibility that there might be a disconnect between how scholars think about and describe their methods and how those methods actually relate to research practice. This might mean, for example, that scholars might portray their methods as recipes or maps that guide researchers with specificity, but in practice, their methods only provide vague guidance and function more like guidelines or general principles.

Such mistakes are not entirely unreasonable. Methods often consist of a mixture of rules, procedures, and general principles; consequently, it can be challenging to establish whether a method fits into one model of method or another. For example, Giorgi's (2009; 2012) Descriptive Phenomenological Method (DPM) instructs researchers to include every piece of the dataset in the analysis, and this is obviously a clear and specific rule. Likewise, a method might direct a researcher to sort their discovered themes alphabetically, and this would count as a concrete procedure, not a general principle.

However, what is relevant for our purposes is not whether qualitative methods contain *some* concrete rules or procedures. Instead, the question is whether rules and procedures relate to

the central processes of qualitative research or whether they merely direct peripheral elements of the analysis. In other words, a cooking method that provided specific instructions for arranging cooking utensils and sorting ingredients but provided no direction for which ingredients to use or how to combine those ingredients would not be a proper recipe because it left the central tasks of cooking undirected. Likewise, if a qualitative research method provided concrete directions for how to sort data (e.g., alphabetically) and display results, but it provided no specific direction regarding how to identify relevant material in the dataset or how to answer the research question, then it would not be functioning as a true method-as-recipe. Such a method would be providing concrete guidance for the superficial elements of the analysis but leaving the central task of the analysis (i.e., actually answering the research question) undirected.

One way to establish whether specific methods function as recipes, rules, or general principles would be to work through them line-by-line. Methods that rely on general principles, guidelines, or suggestions will lack specificity regarding the central elements of the analysis, and this would be evident in the text of the method. Percy et al.'s (2015) description of Inductive Analysis is an example of this. After instructing the researcher to read through their data and highlight passages that appear meaningful, the second step of their method is to "review the highlighted data and use your research question to decide if the highlighted data are related to your question" (p. 80).

Finding passages of text that address the investigator's research question is obviously a central task of the analysis, yet when it comes to this step of the process, Percy et al.'s (2015) method fails to give specific advice. What precisely should the researcher highlight in their data set? How does the researcher know whether highlighted data relate to their research question or not? On these fronts—which are the central tasks of the analysis—the method has nothing to say.

Thus, clearly, their method does not direct practice with the specificity of a recipe. At best, the instruction to "use your research question to decide if the highlighted data are related to your question" is a general guideline.

Thus, a line-by-line analysis of research methods could clearly help clarify the nature of these methods and how they relate to practice. However, Gadamer's philosophy implies that it is possible to establish *in principle* which models of method apply to hermeneutic endeavors like qualitative research. It is possible because, as Gadamer shows, hermeneutic processes like qualitative research necessarily require understanding and interpretation, and understanding and interpretation have certain features that make them compatible with certain models of method and not others.

Understanding and Interpretation

Thus far, I have outlined possible roles for methods in qualitative research: they could provide clear procedural direction, helping researchers know what to do next; they could guide researchers' consciousness as they analyze their data, helping them to avoid error, bias, or subjectivity; or they could function as general principles that researchers flexibly apply to their projects. However, as described above, whether and how research methods can guide researchers in the ways described depends on what type of process qualitative research is, that is, what kind of reasoning it requires. In this section, I will unpack Gadamer's ideas on this subject.

I will argue, following Gadamer, that the central tasks of qualitative research are inescapably hermeneutic—that is, qualitative work is centrally about understanding and

interpreting texts.[10] I will then sketch out Gadamer's ideas about the essential nature of understanding and interpretation, specifically focusing on those dimensions that relate to codified methods in the senses described in section two. Once this is accomplished, the next section (i.e., section four) will bring these domains together, and I will show what Gadamer's ideas imply about the possible uses of method in qualitative research.

Qualitative Research as a Hermeneutic Task

Qualitative researchers have not always conceived of their work in hermeneutic terms. As Willig (2017) points out, "qualitative psychologists have preferred to use the term 'analysis' to describe their activities," presumably out of a desire to "distance qualitative psychology from an association with the arts" (p. 274). Nevertheless, given that qualitative research always involves making sense of human speech or action, it is easy to see why hermeneutic scholars have argued that "qualitative research ineluctably is hermeneutical" (Rennie, 1999, p. 5; see also, Moules, et al., 2015; Schwandt, 1999; Willig, 2012). In short, this means that qualitative research always involves understanding texts—interviews, journals, responses to questionnaires, and so forth—and it always involves interpretation.[11]

To *understand*, in the hermeneutic sense, is to grasp the meaning, significance, or import of a text, speech, or action. As Grondin (2021) describes, "to understand (verstehen) is, in general, to grasp something ('I get it'), to see things more clearly (say, when an obscure or

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[10] Qualitative research can also center on other phenomena: non-written speech, behaviors, or artifacts, and the same hermeneutic structure described below would apply. However, for the sake of simplicity I will focus on qualitative research centered on written sources.

[11] The descriptions of understanding and interpretation below pertain to the (ontical) experiences of understanding something and offering an interpretation rather than to the ontological sense of these terms as worked out by Heidegger (1927/2008) in *Being and Time*.

ambiguous passage becomes clear), to be able to integrate a particular meaning into a larger frame" (p. 44). As Gadamer (1979) summarizes, "those who 'understand' a text… acquire through understanding a new liberty of mind" which involves "numerous and new possibilities, like interpreting a text, seeing the hidden relations it conceals, drawing conclusions, and so on" (p. 130). When we understand a text, that is, we see what the author is getting at or comprehend the experience they are describing; when we fail to understand, texts are murky or confusing, and we are unable to make sense of them. Significantly, understanding (in the sense relevant here) is not mere intellectual mastery; it is not the same as grasping that two and two make four. Rather, it is coming to grasp the intentions, purposes, desires, or meanings of an agent. As Gadamer (1995) describes, "the art of understanding is certainly above all else the art of listening" (p. 274)—thus, most essentially, understanding is hearing what people are saying to us.

Interpretation is intimately connected to understanding. *Interpretation* is the act of making explicit, working out, developing, or refining that which has been understood (see, Wrathall, 2021, pp. 425-428). In qualitative research, interpretation is most apparent in the results section, where qualitative researchers describe what they have understood after reviewing the data they have collected; however, as I will describe below, it also occurs throughout the process of understanding texts.[12] In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1960/2004) describes interpretation as similar to highlighting (p. 404). Highlighting a text brings certain passages to the fore with the purpose of making the purpose or meaning of the text more apparent to future

[12] Making an understanding explicit by expressing it with words is not the only way one can interpret, though. Reading a text message and acting on its instruction (e.g., by picking up a gallon of milk from the store) would also be an interpretation in this sense. Doing so is showing that one has understood the message in a certain way and is "putting that understanding to work" by running the errand. Other modes of making explicit, working out, developing, or refining would count as interpretation as well, according to this understanding of the term.

readers. Likewise, a good interpretation "bring[s] to light an underlying coherence or sense" (Taylor, 1971, p. 3), which makes texts more clear and easier to understand. Willig and Rogers (2008) describe this as an "amplification of meaning… an exploration and clarification of the many strands of meaning which constitute the phenomenon of interest" (p. 9). As Gadamer (1979) describes, the ultimate purpose of offering an interpretation is to "bring [the text] near so that it speaks in a new… [and] clearer voice" (p. 83).

This analysis has described understanding and interpretation as discrete acts, and for present purposes, this is mostly adequate. Gadamer (1960/2004) would clarify, though, that understanding and interpretation are more intimately connected than this analysis might suggest. Indeed, he maintains that "interpretation is not an occasional, post facto supplement to understanding; rather, understanding is always interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding" (p. 318). One reason for this is that interpretation always implies a prior understanding. If interpretation is making explicit what has been understood, then interpretation is, in a sense, always derivative of understanding.

But Gadamer points out that the relationship goes in the opposite direction as well: understanding always involves interpretation. This means that even in cases that do not call for an *act* of interpretation (e.g., writing up one's understanding), attempting to understand a text always involves at least making things clearer to oneself—a sort of internal, proto-interpretation. Understanding, in other words, always involves exploring, clarifying, and amplifying meaning, at least to oneself. Because of this intimate connection, I will not treat understanding and interpretation as discrete moments of the analysis in the analysis below. Instead, following Gadamer, I will refer to them together as interpretive understanding (e.g., p. 279) except where it makes sense to break them apart.

Based on these descriptions of understanding, it is clear why scholars assert that "hermeneutic theory… is central to qualitative inquiry in psychology" (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 192): qualitative research always involves understanding texts—interviews, diaries, responses to questionaires—and it always involves expressing, clarifying, and amplifying the meaning of those texts by interpreting them in light of the researchers questions and interests.

This does not mean, however, that all qualitative research aims at the same types of meaning. Some forms of qualitative research focus on explicit meanings—only those things directly intended by research participants—while others attempt to understand implicit dimensions of meaning, for example, by analyzing the functional or constructive dimensions of expressions (see, Willig, 2015). Additionally, the various methodological traditions in qualitative research direct researchers to different domains of meaning, say, by pointing them towards lived experience, narrative meanings, social representations of phenomena, or unconscious desires or purposes (see, e.g., the methods described in Willig & Rogers, 2017). In each of these cases, though, the hermeneutic dimension of research is maintained; all of these methods involve making sense of texts—perhaps with different purposes or from different perspectives—and they all involve clarifying and amplifying that meaning by offering interpretations.

"Non-Interpretative" Qualitative Research

Some qualitative scholars argue against this position, asserting that their approaches to research are not hermeneutic and that they avoid understanding and interpretation altogether. Giorgi (e.g., 1992, 2014), for example, argues that a properly Husserlian approach to research is not hermeneutic. Through his methodological writings, he argues that if a researcher adopts the right attitude (described below), that researcher can intuit phenomena directly and then describe their structure precisely as it shows itself in the data. Importantly, Giorgi asserts that the various

steps of this method avoid understanding and interpretation entirely: by adopting the proper attitude, the researcher directly perceives the phenomenon of interest without the mediation of understanding,[13] and by merely *describing* the structure of that phenomena precisely as it shows itself in the data, the researcher avoids any form of interpretation.

Exhaustively responding to this position is outside the scope of this paper (see Rennie, 2012 for a hermeneutic critique), but I will address several elements of Giorgi's claims in the following section. At present, it will suffice to point out that Giorgi's account does not seem to give enough thought to the difficulties of working with written descriptions of experience. While it might seem plausible that researchers could have direct, unmediated access to the content of their own experience, in the way Husserl describes, the idea that one could directly understand written descriptions of the experiences of others without interpretation appears far-fetched.[14]

Take, for example, Beck's (2013) phenomenological analysis of social anxiety, which he performed via the DPM (i.e., Giorgi's method). In their descriptions of social anxiety, Beck's participants provide nuanced accounts of social situations and their emotional reactions, and these descriptions seem to demand the clarifying work of interpretive understanding. For example, Beck's data includes detailed descriptions of social anxiety but also descriptions of uncomfortable sexual tension, self-condemnation, and regret, as well as insightful higher-order reflections on the causes of social anxiety. And, adding to this complexity, it is often unclear whether participants are relating what they felt in the moment or how they have made sense of

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[13] This type of intuiting of the phenomenon could be described as a form of understanding, but the important thing from Giorgi's perspective is that it is not understanding in a hermeneutic sense. That is, Giorgi claims that it is a form of unmediated understanding which bypasses the hermeneutic circle and apprehends phenomena directly.

[14] It is also worth noting that scholars debate whether Husserl's account of un-mediated access to the structures of one's own experiences is defensible (see, e.g., Caputo, 1984).

the experience subsequently (e.g., pp. 214-215, #71). Thus, it seems unrealistic to suppose that researchers could work with data like this without the working out, unpacking, and clarifying work of interpretive understanding.

Giorgi (2009) has argued that the DPM avoids the need for interpretation because it instructs researchers to merely "describe the ambiguity such as it presents itself" rather than clarify it (p. 127). But this is obviously a relative instruction. Ambiguity exists on a spectrum, and while it might make sense to instruct researchers to merely reproduce ambiguity in cases where it is insoluble, there are obviously cases where ambiguous passages can reasonably be clarified without the need for undo speculation. One need only examine an example of the DPM such as Beck's (2013) to see that this is the case. The point is that Giorgi's injunction that researchers avoid certain types of speculative interpretation does not purify his method from the inevitable hermeneutic complexity involved in bringing texts "from unintelligibility to understanding" (Palmer, 1969, p. 13). It does not obviate the necessity of interpretation.

The Structure of Understanding and Interpretation

If the above analysis is correct—if qualitative research is hermeneutic as I have described—then what type of processes are understanding and interpretation? As I have shown, this question is the key to understanding the relationship between qualitative research and codified methods. Fortunately, this issue is at the heart of modern philosophical hermeneutics, and hermeneutic philosophers, Gadamer in particular, have addressed it at length.

In his studies of interpretive understanding, Gadamer is heavily influenced by the philosophy of his teacher and mentor, Martin Heidegger. While early hermeneutic thinkers tended to focus on practical or normative dimensions of textual interpretation (e.g., how to make sense of difficult passages, how to interpret correctly), modern hermeneutics, following

Heidegger, have tended to focus on the meaning of understanding and interpretation in general—"[their] basic nature, scope and validity, as well as [their] place within and implications for human existence" (George, 2020, pp. 1-2). Specifically, in his magnum opus *Being and Time,* Heidegger (1927/2008) describes understanding not as merely "one kind of cognition among others," but rather as a "basic mode of Dasein's being" (p. 182)—an *existentiale*, in Heidegger's terminology (see, p. 71). Human existence as a whole is hermeneutic, according to Heidegger; human beings relate to their world understandingly by experiencing things in terms of their meaning, significance, and possibilities, and they make that understanding explicit by acting in the world in particular ways.

Gadamer's hermeneutics builds off this conception of understanding and interpretation. However, rather than directly continuing Heidegger's project, Gadamer's work focuses on working out the implications of Heidegger's philosophy for the human sciences (e.g., history and philology). Gadamer does this by describing the structure of interpretive understanding as manifested in experiences with phenomena like art or texts. However, while Gadamer (1960/2004) frequently references fields like history and philology, he is quick to clarify that his main purpose is philosophical rather than normative or practical; he clarifies that he does not intend to develop a procedure for understanding texts, nor to direct "the methodical practices of the human sciences" (p. xxv). Rather, in *Truth and Method,* he seeks to "clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place" (p. 306), describe what makes understanding possible (p. xxvii), or lay out "what always happens" in acts of interpretive understanding (p. 534). As Ibbett (1987) summarizes, Gadamer seeks "to give a general description of the necessary conditions of all acts of understanding" and, by doing so, to "show how we achieve an understanding of the texts we read" (p. 550).

Following Heidegger, Gadamer's (1960/2004) approach to these questions is phenomenological (p. xxxiii), although not in a strict Husserlian sense (see, Dostal, 2021). This means that Gadamer holds that the way to uncover the essence of interpretive understanding is to describe the *experience* of interpretive understanding and then to ascertain what conditions make it possible—that is, to ascertain "what always happens" when a person understands something (p. 534). To get at this, Gadamer analyzes experiences of interpretive understanding in fields like philology, history, law, and theology. He also describes how the structure of interpretive understanding is manifested in experiences with works of art or interpersonal conversation.

To make Gadamer's description of interpretive understanding clear, it will help to proceed by way of an example.My example will focus on an instance of interpersonal, conversational understanding. As Gadamer (1960/2004) argues, the experience of coming to understand a partner in a conversation is one of the places where interpretive understanding can be seen most clearly (see, e.g., p. 385). Thus, using a conversational example (rather than an example of interpreting a text) will help make some of the structures of interpretive understanding clearer and more apparent. Following this example, I will describe what this experience of interpersonal understanding reveals about interpretive understanding in general. I will then show how this same process applies to understanding and interpreting texts.

> Tim and Brian have met up to talk about Tim's relationship with his wife. When they get together, Tim begins by saying that he feels like he doesn't know who his wife is anymore. This description catches Brian off guard; he knew that they were having trouble, but he thought they merely argued a lot. He doesn't understand what Tim could mean by saying that he doesn't know who his wife is. As the conversation progresses, Brian listens and asks questions, and he slowly begins to see what Tim is getting at—how

> his wife feels distant from him, almost unreachable; how she feels like a different person from the woman whom he married; and how it feels like he is living with a stranger rather than a friend and a partner.

Understanding, Expectation, and Revision

The first thing Gadamer might point out from this example is how, paradoxically, understanding always starts with understanding. In the above example, Brian wanted to understand what was going on in Tim's marriage, but he came to the conversation already having a vague sense of what was going on. That is, he came to the situation already having an understanding of his friend's situation, albeit a sketchy, ill-formed understanding.

This is not just the case with Brian's approach to Tim, though. As Heidegger (1927/2008) describes, understanding "is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us" (pp. 191-192). Interpretive understanding never begins with a blank slate; rather, we always come to a conversation (or a text) with "expectations of meaning drawn from our own prior relation to the subject matter" (Gadamer, 1960/2004). Gadamer describes this preliminary understanding as a *fore-conception* (p. 280), a *fore-meaning* (p. 282), or, more colloquially, as a "rough draft" of meaning (Gadamer, 1979, p. 149). As Weinsheimer (1985) summarizes, this fore-conception is "what [the] interpreter understands already—that is, before beginning" (p. 166).

Next, Gadamer might point out how a fore-conception always projects out certain expectations regarding what the text will say (i.e., what it means). For this reason, Gadamer describes fore-conception as always entailing *fore-projection*. Brian thought Tim's marriage troubles consisted of constant bickering, and that fore-conception projected certain expectations about what Tim might say to him in their conversation. Unfortunately for Brian, his fore-

conception was only partially correct: he was correct that they were having trouble, but incorrect that it was primarily about fighting. Because of this, as Tim begins to describe his marriage, Brian initially has a hard time following what he is saying (how could Tim not know his own wife?).

Gadamer (1960/2004) describes this as "being pulled up short by the text" (p. 280). When this happens, either the text "does not yield any meaning at all or its meaning is not compatible with what we had expected" (p. 280). Pulled up short in this way, the interpreter necessarily revises his fore-conception and posits a new potential meaning of the text and procedes on the basis of this new fore-conception. Brian, for example, might try out another familiar possibility: maybe Tim is just saying that he and his wife struggle to communicate. This fore-conception then projects out new expectations regarding the meaning of the text, expectations which are either met by the text or challenged again, calling for another revision. Thus, understanding the meaning of a text "is nothing other than elaborating [i.e., working out] a preliminary project [i.e., a preliminary anticipation of meaning] which will be progressively corrected in the course of the interpretative reading" (Gadamer, 1979, p. 149).

Understanding is complete, for the most part, once an interpreter's fore-conception of a text is largely adequate to the text itself, and the interpreter is able to make sense of the text as a whole.[15] Thus, Gadamer (1960/2004) describes correct understanding in terms of harmony: "the harmony of all the details with the whole" (p. 302). (And vice versa, "the failure to achieve this

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[15] Gadamer (1960/2004) asserts this process is at work whenever we understand anything. But clearly, it exists in varying degrees. "Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness" (p. 306), he notes, and consequently, when one is confronted by a relatively familiar expression—a friend waving hello, for instance—one's fore-conceptions and fore-projections might be entirely adequate, and the situation might be more-or-less instantly understood.

harmony means that understanding has failed" p. 302.) Once Brian's understanding of Tim's situation is adequate, Brian can make sense of all the pieces of Tim's description: the metaphors he uses to describe his marriage, his descriptions of his feelings towards his wife, and so forth. He understands what Tim means when he says he doesn't know who his wife is anymore.

Prejudices as Conditions of Understanding

Gadamer's analysis, and the example of Brian and Tim, shows that we always approach texts or conversations with a host of pre-existing questions, beliefs, and expectations and that understanding occurs as we allow these to be revised by our encounter with the text. Put together, Gadamer (1960/2004) refers to these pre-existing elements as prejudices. Gadamer describes them as prejudices because they are, in essence, preliminary judgments of the meaning of the text—that is, they are judgments that are "rendered before all the elements that determine a situation [or the meaning of the text] have been finally examined" (p. 283).

Gadamer (1960/2004) acknowledges that in modern times the term prejudice has negative connotations and is often equated with an "unfound judgment" or even an outright "false judgment" (p. 283). However, his point is that understanding always presupposes this background of beliefs, questions, and expectations; he asserts that "all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice" (p. 283). But Gadamer does not hold that prejudices are merely regrettable constraints on understanding. Rather he maintains that prejudices are "conditions of understanding" (p. 289). And while erroneous prejudices that are stubbornly maintained can be barriers to understanding, Gadamer wants to show how the right prejudices (or relating to prejudices in the right way) can be fruitful for understanding.

Tim and Brian's example shows this. Obviously, and as was shown, Brian entered the conversation with his friend possessed of certain beliefs and expectations about his friend's

situation. And it is clear how these prejudices could obstruct Brian's understanding; if Brian stubbornly held onto his belief that Tim's problems *must* be about fighting, then Brian would have failed to understand his friend's situation. Gadamer (1979) describes this as "falling under the suggestion of [one's] own rough drafts" (p. 149).

However, it is equally easy to see how Brian's pre-existing knowledge enabled his understanding. Ultimately, Brian is able to understand what Tim is saying *because* he has a certain amount of background knowledge and thus certain prejudices. Brian knows what marriages are and has a sense of what it means for marriages to deteriorate, for example. In fact, the only way Brian would be able to entirely shed his prejudices would be to forget everything he knows about marriage, relationship problems, and his friend's biography. But clearly, this type of amnesia would not make it easier for Brian to understand; in fact, it would make his friend's statements incomprehensible ("what do you mean 'wife'?"). As Fehér (2016) summarizes, "such a suspension would amount to something like a total brainwashing, a point of no return to a conscious and reasonable mental state or judgment" (p. 285). Prejudices are thus essential elements of successful understanding.

The Hermeneutic Circle

These observations on the process of understanding and the role of prejudices in understanding are manifestations of what hermeneutic philosophers describe as the hermeneutic circle. The idea that circularity is involved in interpretation goes back to antiquity, and the hermeneutic thinkers have used the terms in different ways over the years (see, Grondin, 2016). In his writings, Gadamer uses the idea in at least two ways.

First, Gadamer (1960/2004) uses the hermeneutic circle as a shorthand to describe the *process* of coming to understand something (see, e.g., pp. 279-280). Thus, the hermeneutic circle can be thought of as how understanding occurs. Grondin (2016) summarizes this well:

> The process of understanding, [Gadamer] argues, is a constant back and forth between the whole and the parts: one's interpretation of the parts of a text cannot but be guided by a (pre-)understanding of the whole in which they stand, yet this understanding of the whole is constantly revised the more one advances in the understanding of the parts, which are then understood in light of a more accurate idea of the whole. (p. 304)

This process clearly describes the process of trial and error (projection and revision) that showed up in Brian's conversation with Tim. Importantly, Gadamer (1960/2004) is quick to note that this description is not meant as a methodological prescription but as a description of what understanding fundamentally *is*: "the circle of understanding is not a 'methodological' circle, but describes an element of the ontological structure of understanding" (p. 305)

The second way Gadamer refers to the hermeneutic circle is in reference to the *logical structure* of interpretive understanding. In this, Gadamer (1960/2004) reiterates the ideas of Heidegger (see, p. 279). The main idea is that, structurally, understanding always occurs on the basis of presuppositions, assumptions, or, in Gadamer's words, prejudices. As with Brian's approach to his conversation with Tim, interpreters always already understand *something* of what they are trying to understand; they never approach texts or conversations as an entirely blank slate.

Tradition and Language

If interpretive understanding always proceeds on the basis of fore-conceptions and prejudices, then where do these come from? Clearly, Brian's pre-judgments of his friend's

situation came partially from personal experience: they came from his personal history, his relationship with his parents, his relationship with his wife, and his knowledge of Tim's marriage. But Gadamer points out that prejudices also come through the medium of culture. Brian's context for understanding Tim's marriage troubles, in other words, has been shaped ahead of time by the culture Brian lives in. His culture has provided him with a basic understanding of the nature of marriage, of how marriages can deteriorate, of how husbands and wives relate to each other, and so forth. And these understandings prejudice Brian as he goes into his conversation, influencing him to expect certain meanings and not others.

Gadamer typically discusses this in terms of *tradition* rather than culture. Interpretive understanding is always guided in advance by prejudices that arise from the traditions interpreters find themselves in. As Gadamer (1979) summarizes, "understanding always implies a pre-understanding which is in turn pre-figured by the determinate tradition in which the interpreter lives and which shapes his prejudices" (p. 108). In other words, interpretive understanding always takes place within a tradition, and tradition provides the inescapable foundation from which interpreters approach that which they seek to understand. This is not optional, according to Gadamer (1960/2004): "one of the conditions of understanding in the human sciences is belonging to tradition" (p. 338). Tradition, Gadamer maintains, is one of the conditions that make interpretive understanding possible.

As in his discussion of prejudice, Gadamer is at pains to show that tradition is not a hindrance to understanding, as some Enlightenment thinkers supposed, nor is it merely a limitation to be tolerated. Instead, Gadamer maintains that tradition opens things up for understanding—that it can provide fruitful starting points for understanding. Indeed, as we saw, the tradition Brian came from shaped the prejudices by which he approached Tim's account.

While some of those prejudices were erroneous and needed to be revised, Brian's cultural (i.e., traditional) understanding of marriage and relationships also facilitated his understanding of Tim's situation. Were Brian coming from a Martian culture, which has no conception of marriage (Martians reproduce asexually), it would have been significantly more difficult for him to understand Tim's situation.

Gadamer would also point out the role that language plays in Brian's understanding of Tim. First, and most obviously, language provides the medium through which Tim communicates his situation to Brian. Second, and less obviously, Brian's understanding of Tim is also linguistic. As Gadamer (1960/2004) describes, "understanding of the subject matter must take the form of language" (p. 386). This means that Brian's ability to understand his friend is intimately connected with his ability to put Tim's message into his own words—even if only implicitly. As Dunne (1993) summarizes, "to understand something is to make it one's own… and there is no other way of making it one's own except by finding a home for it in the language in which one lives" (p. 142). Thus, when Brian really understands his friend, he can see the meaning of Tim's words. He can see how they make sense and how they fit the situation Tim is describing, and he can even find his own words to describe his friend's situation.

Application: Understanding for Oneself

Finally, Gadamer would note how Brian's attempt to understand is structured by the purposes with which Brian approaches his conversation with his friend. In a basic sense, this means that Brian typically has some sort of question that is guiding him in his conversation with Tim, maybe, "what is going on with my friend's marriage?" Understanding his friend, thus, would mean being able to apply what he is saying to the question Brian has, and understanding

would be incomplete unless Brian can see how he can relate Tim's speech to his animating questions.

Gadamer (1960/2004) describes this as *application* and maintains that it is an essential element of interpretive understanding: "understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter's present situation" (pp. 318-319). Understanding, interpretation, and application are thus "one unified process," according to Gadamer (p. 319). Therefore, when a judge understands a law, she does not merely understand it is a relic of the intentions of past legislators; she understands how it applies to modern life, to herself, and to the case she is adjudicating in the present. To understand the law without seeing how it applies to the present would be not to understand it at all. So too with other forms of understanding.

And while I emphasized above that Brian's understanding is structured by the question he brings into the conversation, that question is merely the tip of the iceberg of his purposes in understanding Tim. Brian also has *reasons* behind his question; he wants to understand based on certain interests. He is interested, for example, in being a loving friend and in living out his religious convictions, and he is interested because he wants to know how marriages work. And these interests are likewise grounded in his situation: Brian is animated by religious interests because he senses himself to be a spiritual being in the way his tradition describes, and he wants to understand how marriages work because he can feel the contingency of his relationship with his wife. Thus, Brian's understanding is not complete until he can see how his friend's description relates to his questions, interests, and situation. As Dunne (1993) summarizes, understanding thus always "contains within itself an application of the possibilities of the text to the interpreter's own position" (p. 105), and it is incomplete until the interpreter can mediate between the text he is reading and the reasons he has approached that text in the first place.

Understanding Texts

This analysis has shown (1) that interpretive understanding is a process involving (pre)understanding, expectation, and revision; (2) that it is always guided by prejudices that are shaped by tradition; (3) that it always occurs through the medium of language; and (4) that it always involves applying what is understood to the interpreter's questions, interests, and situation. Significantly, Gadamer (1960/2004) maintains that this account is not a prescription—that is, it is not guidance for how to understand texts. Instead, it is "a description of the way interpretive understanding is achieved" (p. 279)—that is, it is a description of what interpretive understanding *is*, of its essence or fundamental nature. In other words, Gadamer maintains that this structure is at play whenever an interpreter understands a text (or anything else) whether the interpreter is aware of it or not.

The above analysis was based on an example of understanding a partner in a conversation, but it is easy to see how this same structure is evident when an interpreter approaches a text. Indeed, as Gadamer (1960/2004) argues, understanding texts always involves "a reciprocal relationship *of the same kind as conversation* [emphasis added]" (p. 385). The main difference between the two is that while a conversation partner can answer questions directly, a text is comparably static in this regard. However, while a text cannot modify itself to answer an interpreter's questions, understanding a text still requires the hermeneutic circle of understanding, expectation, and revision that we described above, and it still presupposes the researcher's prejudices, the effects of tradition and language, and it still involves application.

And while the above example was conversational—an example of someone coming to understand the experience of a peer—it is not hard to see how qualitative research involves a similar type of interpersonal understanding. When researchers, for example, interview teachers

from former East Germany about their identities (Farouk & Camia, 2022) or collect narratives of recovery from schizophrenia (Davidson, 2003) or attempt to understand individual's experiences of being coached (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007) it requires the same type of teasing apart, unpacking, and clarifying that Brian experienced in his conversation with Tim. Once again, some features are different—collecting and analyzing data is different in a research context than it is in a conversation—but the underlying structure is the same.

If the preceding analysis is correct, then qualitative research is essentially a hermeneutic task that is carried out by a mode of reasoning that is distinctively, emergent, contingent, and unpredictable and never presuppositionless or a-historical. And if this is the case, then it remains to be seen what role codified methods might play in directing qualitative research practice. It is to this point that I will now turn.

Hermeneutics and Method

If qualitative research is hermeneutic in the way Gadamer describes, then what does this imply about the relationship between qualitative inquiry and codified methods? Can research methods tell researchers how to understand and interpret texts with the specificity of a recipe? Can they make qualitative research more predictable and controllable? Can research methods guide the consciousness of researchers so they will be able to understand and interpret texts objectively and without error? In this section, I will attempt to show how Gadamer's description of interpretive understanding, summarized above, answers these questions and clarifies how methods can relate to qualitative work.

Hermeneutics and the Limitations of Effective Procedures

As described above, one way that psychologists think of research methods is as effective procedures akin to recipes or maps. The main idea of this model is that methods consist of

specific and repeatable procedures that provide a clear path for researchers to follow. The main advantage methods are meant to provide, according to this view, is to make research more consistent, controllable, and repeatable.

However, as I argued above, if methods are to serve these purposes and offer these benefits, they would need to provide specific directions for the central tasks of the research process. That is, they would need to provide specific directions regarding how to work through, unpack, and clarify the data of the analysis and then communicate what was discovered to others. They would need to direct the practice of understanding and interpretation, in other words. And while general guidelines for these tasks might be helpful, methods based on guidelines would not function as recipes or maps, nor could they offer the predictability and control promised by this model.

However, as shown above, even methods which describe themselves as recipes or maps are often frustratingly vague when it comes to the central interpretive elements of the analysis. As noted, when Percy et al. (2015) get to the main tasks of Inductive Analysis (i.e., figuring out how the data answers the research question), they are unable to provide specific directions. And so too with many other qualitative research methods. The analysis of understanding and interpretation in the previous section, though, suggests why this is not just a failure of some methods; instead, as Gadamer's analysis shows, it is an inevitable limitation applicable to any hermeneutic task.

Thus, the reason recipes and maps can provide such concrete instructions and offer predictability and control is that they presuppose a high degree of knowledge about the ends of the processes they direct. It is because chefs already know about a specific food product (i.e., what it is, how it should taste, what it is made of) that they are able to provide such specific

directions; it is because cartographers already know about a location that they can give directions to get there.

But as shown in the previous section, when it comes to hermeneutic tasks, interpreters never know the specific end—the specific meaning, the correct interpretation, the answer to their question—before they begin their analysis. As Nixon (2017) summarizes, "when interpreting a difficult text, we do not know in advance the full meaning of the text" (p. 43). Hermeneutic tasks are similar to practical/moral tasks in this regard: in both tasks, "the ends themselves are at stake and not perfectly fixed beforehand" (Gadamer, 1979, p. 143; I will return to this connection in the concluding section). What this means in practice is that a method like Thematic Analysis cannot function as a recipe for how to understand and interpret a *specific dataset* because the method has no knowledge of that dataset or what it might say. The method, thus, is attempting to direct a task where the end results are unknown.

One might object that methodologists *do* have some knowledge of the ends of qualitative research. A thematic analysis, for example, is a certain type of analysis associated with certain types of questions that always has certain features. Consequently, the argument might go, it would make sense that methodologists should be able to create specific instructions to guide researchers to make a research product with those features.

However, the assertion that thematic analyses (or whatever method) always have the same features overlooks the substantive differences between different analyses. A thematic analysis of attitudes towards violent media and a thematic analysis of family responses to schizophrenia might superficially look the same—they both might have a similar write-up, use similar tables, or produce lists of themes and examples. Yet the central feature of each analysis is not the structure of the report; it is the specific research question, the texts to be analyzed, and

the meanings identified. And these are the precise areas where the methods are unable to provide direction.

This means that research methods in qualitative research are unable, *in principle,* to show researchers how to analyze and interpret their data with the specificity of a recipe or a map. And because of this limitation, qualitative research methods also fail to make research more predictable or controllable. For example, one way research methods might offer predictability or control is by helping researchers overcome difficulties with analyzing their data. If a researcher is performing an inductive analysis, they might struggle to "use [their] research question to decide if the highlighted data are related to [their] question" (Percy et al., 2015, p. 80)—perhaps because their participants were unclear in their answers or they used expressions unfamiliar to the researcher. Unfortunately, understanding the expressions of participants, although central to the analysis, is precisely one of the areas where research methods have nothing specific to say.

Indeed, the only way a research method might be able to offer specific instructions for how to understand and interpret a dataset would be if the method *already* had already understood the dataset. But in itself, even this would be insufficient; the method would also need to already understand the dataset in relation to the researcher's overall question and project—it would need to know how the data applies to the researchers' questions, interests, and situation. That is, the method would have to be a method for working through *this specific data* written by someone who already understood the data and the reasons the researcher wanted to understand it. But of course, this could hardly function as a general method applicable to any research question. Indeed, this type of method would serve more as a commentary on the dataset, an unpacking of what someone else understood in the data.

Thus, when it comes to hermeneutic tasks, methods are unable to "[find] and [open] a way through impenetrable and overgrown places," as Melanchthon describes (quoted in Ong, 1958). Each research project is directed towards unique ends that cannot be known in advance, and therefore each researcher must find and open a way through the "impenetrable and overgrown places" of the analysis himself. Methodologists might ease this burden by passing on wisdom won from their past research journeys, but they cannot lay out a clear path for researchers in advance, thereby making the success of the analysis a foregone conclusion.

The Hermeneutic Circle and the Cartesian Model

The second model of method described above conceived of methods as sets of rules that direct the consciousness of researchers. According to this model, the primary function of research methods is to guide and constrain researchers as they analyze their data, directing them towards logically sound decisions and away from subjectivity and bias. Typically, this is done by helping researchers identify a clear and objective starting point for their research and then showing them how to move step by step from this point to objective conclusions. Given the connection between this model and the methodological philosophy of Descartes, I have been referring to this model as the Cartesian model. As with the previous model, Cartesian methods are meant to make the research process more controllable and predictable, but, on top of this, they are also designed to make research more certain, objective, and unbiased.

As noted above, for methods to function in this way, they must (a) show researchers how to arrive at a sufficiently clear and objective starting point and (b) provide directions for how to maintain that clarity and objectivity in the subsequent steps of the method. If the starting point is not sufficiently clear and objective—for example, if a researcher's initial approach to a phenomenon is infected with bias and subjectivity—then the conclusion will be suspect,

regardless of how scrupulously the researcher has followed the other steps of the method. Similarly, if the various steps of the method allow prejudices to influence how the data is analyzed, then regardless of how clear and objective the starting point is, the result will not be trustworthy. Thus, Cartesian methods require that researchers find an objective, prejudice-free perspective on the research phenomenon; then, they require that researchers build on that foundation step by step, always scrupulously observing that bias or subjectivity does not enter the research process.

However, Gadamer's analysis challenges the concept of objectivity on which the Cartesian model depends. As Gadamer (1960/2004) shows, there is no method that would allow an interpreter of a text to avoid "mixing in [his] own judgments and prejudices" (p. 369). As shown above, an interpreter's approach to a text is *always* structured by what he already understands about a subject, and this, in turn, is shaped by the prejudices imparted to him by his tradition. And, as Gadamer argues, attempting to shed this background is not only impossible; it is not even desirable. If one were to approach a text without any presuppositions, it would not make the text appear more clearly; as described above, it would make it incomprehensible. Consequently, the Cartesian model does not accurately describe what occurs in qualitative research.

To see how this is the case, one need only examine how Cartesian methods work in practice. As described above, the Descriptive Phenomenological Method (DPM) is one such method. The DPM is clearly a method inspired by the Cartesian model of methods, both in its intellectual genealogy (it is based on the transcendental philosophy of Husserl, who was explicitly inspired by Descartes' theory of method) and in its structure. Specifically, the method is Cartesian because it attempts to show researchers how to obtain an objective and unbiased

vantage point on their data and then provides directions for maintaining that purity throughout the research process.

The key to this is what Giorgi (e.g., 1997) describes as the scientific phenomenological reduction—the attitude shift that enables researchers to obtain a clear and objective perspective on the phenomenon they are studying. The reduction facilities this clarity and objectivity by instructing researchers to "'[put] aside' or [render] 'non-influential' all past knowledge that may be associated with [the phenomenon being studied]" (p. 240) as they begin analyzing their data. For example, if a researcher were studying learning, before analyzing her data she would need to "put aside all theories of learning as well as all personal experiences of learning" (p. 244). By doing so, she would be able to see the phenomenon of learning freshly without the potentially biasing effects of past experiences or presuppositions. Thus, it is the reduction that is key to the Cartesian status of the method, because it is the reduction that provides researchers with a secure, objective, and unbiased perspective on the phenomenon being studied.

The reduction is also key to the non-hermeneutic nature of the method, according to Giorgi. If the researcher successfully brackets past experience or knowledge, then he approaches phenomena directly, without the mediation of prejudices, presuppositions, or other past ideas. This, according to Giorgi (2014), avoids the hermeneutic circle entirely; rather than the iterative, slowly refining process of interpretive understanding, the researcher *intuits* the phenomenon in the data such that the phenomenon is immediately and clearly given to his consciousness (p. 546; for a discussion of Husserl's concept of intuition see Hintikka, 2003). Thus, phenomenological research proceeds on the basis of a direct and unmediated seeing, according to Giorgi, and not the dialogic, mediated understanding arising from the hermeneutic circle.

Clearly, there is a sense in which the phenomenological reduction is sound advice, and it is easy to see how a version of it might be applied. As Giorgi (2009) clarifies, the reduction "is not a matter of forgetting the past"; it merely means "that we should not let our past knowledge be engaged while we are determining the mode and content of the present experience" (p. 92). Thus, if a researcher were studying social anxiety, he might be aware of psychoanalytic theories of that phenomenon while he analyzes his data, and he may even be aware of how descriptions in the data would be interpreted via that perspective. But when he analyzes his data, it is reasonable to expect that he could set those ideas aside, refusing to allow them to influence how he analyzes the data. For example, he could scrupulously avoid explaining participants' experiences by references to psychoanalytic concepts, or he could use plain language to describe the experience of social anxiety rather than psychoanalytic terminology.

The idea that one could set aside certain obvious fore-conceptions of the data (e.g., psychoanalytic fore-conceptions) is non-controversial. However, the claim that one could set aside or render "non-influential" *all* past knowledge or experience of the subject at hand when analyzing one's data is obviously non-sensical. Gadamer's description of descriptive understanding shows why this is the case.

First, as Gadamer shows, even the initial read-through of the data requires a pre-existing understanding of the research phenomenon. Were this not the case, as the researcher read the data, he would have no way of judging which elements of participants' descriptions were related to the phenomenon he was investigating. Giorgi (2012) recognizes this and therefore instructs researchers to adopt a "special sensitivity toward the phenomenon being investigated" (p. 5) alongside the attitude of the phenomenological reduction. The reason for this is obvious: any account will probably include many elements that could be the focal point of the analysis; a

description of a stressful first day at school could be viewed as an example of social anxiety or for what it shows about proper teaching praxis. Thus, it is clearly true that "a different psychological sensitivity is required" for researching different phenomena (p. 5).

Yet, it is hard to see how the sensitivity Giorgi recommends could direct researchers to attend to the correct elements of participants' descriptions without also pulling in what the researcher already understands about the phenomenon he is researching. In other words, it is unclear how this special sensitivity could exist independently of the researchers' experience and knowledge of the phenomenon. Thus, there is a profound contradiction between Giorgi's (1997) instruction that researchers "[render] 'non-influential' all past knowledge" of the phenomenon (p. 240) and the necessity of reading the data with the phenomenon in mind. If researchers really set aside their past knowledge of the phenomenon, then they will be unable to understand their data, yet if they read with a special sensitivity to the phenomenon, then their analysis will inevitably be influenced by at least some of their pre-existing beliefs and experiences.

This same problem also emerges with subsequent steps of the method. For example, following Husserl, Giorgi recommends that researchers engage in "free imaginative variation" in order to uncover the essential features of the phenomenon. Free imaginative variation involves imaginatively "varying specific dimensions of the given object" and observing whether that variation causes the object to phenomenologically collapse—that is, cease to appear as that type of object (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 246). Those dimensions that cannot be varied without the

object (or phenomenon) collapsing would then be considered "essential for the object to appear as whole" (p. 246). [16]

This can be a powerful technique for determining the essential attributes of an object or a type of experience; however, it is hard to see how it is not *entirely* dependent on past knowledge and experience. One cannot use this method to understand the essential features of, for example, a cup unless one *already* knows what a cup is and what it is used for. Likewise, one cannot imaginatively vary the features of depression to determine which are essential without already having a substantive conception of what it means to be depressed. And if this is true, it is unclear where this conception of depression could come from if not from past knowledge or experience.

For example, suppose a researcher was performing a descriptive phenomenological analysis of depression, and he had no experience with depression. How would someone in that position determine whether varying a dimension of depression causes the phenomenon to break down or not? Is agitation an essential element of depression or merely a symptom of a comorbid condition that often appears alongside depression? A researcher who did not *already* have knowledge and experience with depression would have no way to know.

Thus, it is not because the researcher *sheds* substantive knowledge of the phenomenon that she is able to uncover its essence; it is because the researcher approaches the phenomenon with one set of fore-conceptions or prejudices rather than another: a first-personal, experiential, phenomenological set of fore-conceptions, rather than, for example, a psychoanalytic set. But if

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[16] Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) demonstrate this using the example of a cup. As they demonstrate, a cup could be white or black, made of wood or ceramics, and be round or square, but a cup cannot be made of a porous material because the ability to hold liquids is essential to "cupness" (see, p. 246). Thus, when one imaginatively pictures a cup that is made of, for example, cotton candy, it becomes impossible to see that object as a real cup.

this is true, then the DPM does not avoid the hermeneutic circle, as Giorgi maintains; rather, the method is carried out within the circle from start to finish.

Furthermore, while the method might help the researcher bracket some cultural or historical perspectives that might affect the analysis, the background understanding that structures the analysis is always structured by history and culture to some extent. The researcher had to obtain his ideas about the phenomenon from somewhere, and, even if his understanding were based on first-person experience (e.g., an experience of having depression), that experience would still be structured by cultural (traditional) concepts, prejudices, ideals, and so forth. As Gadamer (1960/2004) clarifies, there is no bracketing out the effects of history and tradition because "history does not belong to us; we belong to it" (pp. 288-289). Indeed, the ideas passed to us by history and tradition structure our self-understanding and our experiences before we gain the capacity to reflect on them: "Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live" (p. 289).

Thus, as Gadamer (1960/2004) argues, when it comes to hermeneutic tasks, there is no way to "methodically [eliminate] the influence of the interpreter and his time on understanding" (p. 342). However, if this is correct, then Cartesian methods are unable to ground qualitative research in the ways they describe. Specifically, they are unable to provide researchers with a clear and objective starting point—that is, a starting point free of prejudices or assumptions. Thus, researchers using the DPM, or any other method, must always approach their subjects on the basis of what they already understand. As Gadamer describes, human science researchers "must reckon with the fundamental non-definitiveness of the horizon in which [their] understanding moves" (p. 381). Qualitative researchers, like all human scientists, must wrestle

with the fact that there is no sturdier foundation for their inquiries than the ground on which they already stand.

This analysis is not meant to deny the utility of phenomenological research methods, however. Phenomenological methods like the DPM can help researchers find, as Giorgi (1994) says, "a fresh and different way of experiencing a phenomenon" (p. 212), and this can lead to new insights, greater clarity, or deeper understanding. It is just that this "freshness" does not consist in viewing phenomena with a consciousness purified of prejudices or fore-conceptions. Instead, phenomenological methods help researchers see things anew by teaching them to attend to what they already know in new ways and make explicit the implicit understandings that already structure their experience.

The Hazards of Methods as Guidelines

The last model of methods described above conceptualized methods as general principles or guidelines that are flexibly adapted for different analyses. While general principles do not claim to offer the predictability, control, and objectivity of other models of method, it is at least clear that this model is viable for qualitative research. Qualitative methods *can* offer general guidelines, in other words. Indeed, based on the preceding analysis, it is now clear that qualitative methods can *only* function as general principles, at least when it comes to the central, interpretive elements of the analysis. As Macklin and Whiteford (2012) note, even relatively straightforward principles like "'always pursue maximum variation in your sample' or 'always use interview protocols to guide questioning'… can only ever be general guidelines" because such principles must always be "adapted to the particular demands of the research" (p. 95).

Nevertheless, in spite of their limitations, general guidelines can clearly be helpful for qualitative researchers. For example, William James' (1902/1982) counsel that focusing on

"exaggerations and perversions" of a phenomenon can "[lead] to a better understanding of a thing's significance" (p. 22) is obviously a general principle or guideline, rather than a specific rule or technique. Notwithstanding, this advice is insightful, and it could be profoundly helpful for certain types of analyses. Likewise, Braun and Clarke's (e.g., 2006; 2012) descriptions of Thematic Analysis provide an excellent schematic of the iterative, slowly refining process of uncovering and clarifying themes. The fact that their method cannot tell researchers *specifically* what to do or help them overcome obstacles particular to their projects does not render their methodological writings useless. Indeed, for an inexperienced researcher, their description of the way a thematic analysis is typically carried out can be very helpful.

But there are also downsides to following research methods, even if they merely consist of general guidelines. This is because even though methods cannot tell researchers specifically what to do, they *can* direct them towards some meanings of the text at the expense of others. For example, Thematic Analysis focuses on helping researchers identify, organize, and interpret "patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). As with other qualitative methods, Thematic Analysis cannot and does not provide specific direction for how to understand and interpret particular data sets. However, it does outline a general approach to data analysis which involves reading texts with an eye toward "patterned response[s] or meaning[s] within the data set" (p. 82), taking notes of emerging patterns, and collecting, naming, and sorting these patterns into themes and subthemes (p. 87).

But, while this general approach is entirely adequate for uncovering certain meanings, there are other types of meanings that it might cause researchers to pass over. For instance, sometimes, what might be most significant is what participants avoid saying rather than what they explicitly state. It might be significant, for example, if sexual assault survivors *failed* to

mention their assaulters when discussing their experience or if soldiers neglected to mention being injured when giving an account of battlefield trauma. In these cases, though, researchers might overlook meanings like these if they were merely following the method as prescribed.

In hermeneutic terms, the general guidelines of research methods function, as Hinman (1980) describes, as "a specific anticipation of meaning, i.e., a highly formalized foreproject of understanding" (p. 517). That is, they function as prejudices in Gadamer's sense of the term. With Thematic Analysis, the fore-conception is that meanings will be distributed across the dataset in certain ways (and not others) or that meanings will emerge in certain ways during analysis (and not in other ways). And, significantly, these fore-conceptions are compatible with certain meanings and not others. As Palmer (1969) argues, methods thus function to "[structure] in advance the encounter one will have with the work," and this can be problematic because it "runs the risk of closing to the interpreter the possibility of being led by the work itself" (p. 227).

This is not to say that codified methods necessarily close researchers off from noticing meanings not suggested by the methods. As with any other prejudice or fore-conception, the anticipations suggested by research methods can be revised during encounters with the texts. Indeed, a researcher might notice meanings in her dataset that are outside of what her methods tell her to look for, and she might find a way to work those meanings into her analysis. Codified methods do not *necessarily* lead to blinkered research.

But it also might be the case that qualitative psychology's current methodological paradigm—which emphasizes carefully choosing and carefully following prescribed methods—might lead researchers to hold onto the fore-conceptions suggested by their methods at the expense of being guided by the texts they are interpreting. Tanggaard (2013) hints at this danger when she suggests that the modern emphasis on methods "risks locking the researcher into using

only ascribed methods while more creative thinking, digressions and the simple following of the object of the research at the expense of procedure are not happening and/or are seen as something to hide" (p. 411). Chamberlain (2011) also suggests that this might be the case, arguing, for example, that "the codification of IPA… leads [researchers] to produce what the method suggests they should"—typically a list of themes illustrated by examples (p. 50). Chamberlain (2000) also suggests that psychologists' preoccupation with method-following is responsible for the shallow, formulaic, and un-reflective research that he observes in his field of qualitative health research. Other psychologists have made similar critiques (see, e.g., Brinkmann, 2012; 2015; Cheek, 2008; Janesick, 1994; Kvale, 1996; van Manen, 2016).

The risk that codified methods might narrow researchers' perspectives might be worth taking if methods guarantee control, efficiency, or objectivity, as some methodologists claim. However, if the preceding analysis is correct, then there is a distinct possibility that the utility of methods is less than their potential disadvantages. If this is the case, though, then psychologists might reasonably question how they are to pursue qualitative work at all, if not via established and codified methods. In the final section, I will attempt to answer this question by sketching out an alternative, non-methodological approach to qualitative investigation, and I will discuss what this approach implies about training and cultivating qualitative researchers.

An Alternate Vision: Cultivating Hermeneutical Imagination

Thus far, the burden of this paper has been mostly negative: I have attempted to show the limits of methods as they relate to qualitative work and to point out the negative consequences that can emerge from an overly codified approach to research. However, it is reasonable at this point to ask whether the implications of philosophical hermeneutics are merely negative in the ways I have described or whether Gadamer's philosophy has anything positive to offer to

qualitative researchers. In other words, does Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics have any positive implications for psychological research generally and social psychological research specifically, or does it merely suggest to researchers what *not* to do?

One response to this would be to point out that showing the limits and potential downsides of methods is beneficial in itself. As Gadamer (2007) describes, channeling an Aristotelian metaphor, one can help an archer hit the mark by making the target more clear and apparent and thus easier to aim at, even if it is not possible to draw the bow or aim for him. Thus, Gadamer's analysis might not make research easier by telling scholars specifically what to do, but it can aid "in making present for rational consideration the ultimate purposes of one's actions" and help researchers "consciously [avoid] certain deviations" (p. 263). In other words, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics helps make the essential task of research clearer by stripping away false targets that might distract researchers and cause them to focus on the wrong elements of research.

Nevertheless, the implications of philosophical hermeneutics for qualitative research are not merely negative. And while Gadamer does not work out alternate modes of practice in detail, his work points toward an alternative approach to psychological research and lays out what attributes make for a good qualitative researcher, as well as how those attributes might be developed, learned, and mastered. To conclude this paper, I will show what Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics implies about how to go about research, I will respond to several objections that might arise in response to the approach I am describing, and I will unpack Gadamer's ideas about what really makes a difference in qualitative research (if not methods).

Non-Methodological Qualitative Research

If codified approaches to qualitative research have the limits described above, then what might be an alternative mode of practice? How does one go about doing research if not by using an established methodology? The answer to this question is relatively straightforward. Rather than proceeding by selecting a pre-existing, off-the-shelf method to structure inquiry, a researcher might simply begin to engage with the subject matter she is drawn to and allow that subject matter to pose questions and orient her towards investigatory actions (e.g., modes of data collection). Once she has collected her data, she carefully reviews it until she feels like she has obtained an answer to her question, and she writes up what she feels she now understands so that she can share her findings with the scholarly community. If she gets stuck and cannot find an answer, she returns to a broad meditation on the subject matter—rereading her data or reading other sources on the subject—and either refines her question or identifies new data that needs to be collected and analyzed.

Methodological writings, including codified methods, still have a part to play in this approach. Learning codified methods, like learning specific techniques in journalism, can provide researchers with ideas for how to approach their phenomena. However, picking techniques in advance (as the mainstream methodological paradigm requires) would limit researchers' possibilities rather than open them up. A reporter might expect that a certain approach (e.g., combative or gracious) might work best for getting information from a source, but it would be both unnecessary and counterproductive to expect her to commit to this in advance or in all cases.

Methodological writings can also help researchers understand the logic of qualitative research, how to make a good argument, how to think about issues like sampling, or how to approach ethical dimensions of research. However, as Chamberlain (2012) describes,

methodological ideas, including codified methods, ought to be treated like "theoretical ideas and concepts"—they should be "drawn on and utilized" and "adapted in context" but should not be "followed slavishly" (p. 6).

This approach to research is not novel. Methodologists sensitive to the peculiarities of human science research have long argued that a flexible and emergent approach to research is appropriate for studying human phenomena (see, e.g., Chamberlain 2012; Chamberlain et al., 2011; Kvale, 1996; van Manen, 2016). This approach lines up, for example, with Moules et al.'s (2015) masterful description of what they call "hermeneutic or interpretive inquiry" (p. 2)—an approach explicitly grounded in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. This approach to research is also what was formerly the case in qualitative psychology. As noted above, scholars like Freud, James, and Maslow seem to have employed flexible, emergent, and intuitive approaches to research. Thus, as Brinkmann (2015) argues, the future of qualitative psychology might be best served by looking to its past:

> Perhaps the dream scenario for the future would be to return to what was previously the case: That psychologists could ask any relevant research question and use any methodology and technique that was needed in order to adequately address their research question. (p. 171)

As Moules et al. (2015) describe, while this non-methodological approach emphasizes flexibility and intuition, this does not necessarily lead to a haphazard, anything goes approach to research. They argue that qualitative research is akin to detective work: one allows the case at hand to determine what techniques are or are not appropriate, and procedures are adopted or discarded based on emerging features of the case (see, pp. 62-63). The flexibility of such an approach does not mean, though, that detectives can do whatever they want. In forensics, as in

qualitative research, one still must present one's findings to an audience that must be convinced, and people are not convinced by sloppy and unreasonable modes of practice. As Moules et al. describe,

> warranted courses of action, chains of evidence, and persuasive arguments have to be established in the course of the investigation, and all of this has to stand up to careful scrutiny and thorough going critique. 'Cases for' have to be made and subjected to rigorous argumentation. Clear, retrospective 'accounting for' is required [in forensics], as it is in hermeneutic work. (p. 62)

Thus, the presence of reasonable, skeptical interlocutors constrains one's procedural possibilities in qualitative work.

Beyond this, though, practice is also constrained by the features and contingencies of the phenomena one is studying as well. Thus, as Gadamer (1979) describes, "the object itself must determine the method of its own access" (324). Psychedelic experiences have different features than the life experiences of gang members and thus require different types of data collection and data analysis. And beyond this, studying psychedelic experiences of *this* group at *this* time will further structure the types of research practices that will be fruitful: some groups of users will need to be approached in particular ways, or they might have idiosyncratic habits of describing their experiences. Thus, as Moules et al. (2015) summarize, "practice is not so much driven by procedure as it is by substance (die Sache), by the subject that matters" (pp. 62-63).

This style of qualitative research is also still invested in objectivity; but it rejects the nonsensical "view from nowhere" model of objectivity common in the hard sciences—the view that to be objective, researchers must be entirely "detached, impartial, disinterested, unbiased" (Fine, 1998, p. 11). As Gadamer (1960/2004) notes, this view is based on "a false

methodologism" (p. 492) and does not reflect the type of objectivity the human sciences are able to achieve. Instead, as Fine (1998) notes, objectivity in research derives from procedures "tailored to the subject matter under consideration" (p. 19) and calculated to be defensible to readers and to produce trust in the results. Thus "insofar as its methods promote trust," a research approach is objective (p. 19), and which techniques or procedures are trustworthy is determined by the subject one is studying (see also, Kvale, 1994, p. 153).

This approach to research might appear to some to be less rigorous than an approach based on strict adherence to codified methods. However, as Dunne and Pendlebury (2002) note, "true rigor entails due appreciation of the kinds of rigor that are and are not available in disparate domains" (p. 201). Thus, as I have argued, given the type of inquiry qualitative research inevitably is (i.e., hermeneutic inquiry), some models of rigor apply, and others do not.

In the case of qualitative research, strict adherence to codified methods merely *appears* rigorous because of its association with the rigorous hard sciences (an association which is erroneous, as I will argue below). One need only peruse the qualitative research produced via codified methods to see that methodological rigor does not necessarily produce rigorous, thoughtful research. And on the contrary, one need only read the works of great qualitative researchers of the past to recognize that flexible, emergent approaches to research have their own type of rigor that is not reducible to rigid procedures.

To paraphrase Gadamer (1960/2004), I am "quite aware that [this approach is] asking something unusual of the self-understanding of modern science" (p. 320). Indeed, the association between codified methods and scientific practice is so strong among most psychologists that the approach I am recommending might be a non-starter for many researchers. Consequently, before

proceeding it might make sense to respond to two potential objections that might be raised against my position.

Without Methods it is Impossible to Establish Validity

The first objection might be that without codified methods, it would be impossible for psychologists to determine the validity of qualitative research. Giorgi (2010) seems to be arguing for this position when he asserts that the ability to "check the results of a study or to replicate it is a scientific criterion" (p. 7), and this is dependent on the methods used to produce the results. Thus, as with statistical modes of practice, researchers need to be able to see the processes by which the data were transformed in order to evaluate whether conclusions are valid. Unless one can establish that data transformations occurred without the introduction of error, one cannot show that findings are trustworthy.

This position is based on intuitions drawn from other modes of psychological research. As noted, statistical validity is dependent upon this type of checking. So too with experimental research; unless one can understand the precise procedures by which an experiment was run, it is impossible to establish whether experimental conclusions are valid inferences. However, Giorgi's arguments about extending this model of validity into qualitative work break down for at least two reasons.

First, this argument conflates flexibility with a lack of transparency. It is easy to see how a researcher could adopt a flexible and emergent approach to research and simultaneously describe their methods such that a skeptical researcher could "evaluate the adequacy of the methods employed" (Giorgi, 2010, pp. 6-7). Indeed, Levitt et al.'s (2017) recommendations for designing and reviewing qualitative research emphasize that methods must show "fidelity to the subject matter" and demonstrate "utility in achieving [research] goals" in order to produce

trustworthy findings (i.e., valid findings; p. 10); however, they maintain that it is possible to do this while "flexibly utilizing methods suited to the research questions" (p. 6).

Second, this position misunderstands the nature of validity in qualitative research and how it can be assessed. In qualitative research, validity is a property of particular interpretations—that is, it discriminates between interpretations that are "well grounded, justifiable, strong, and convincing" (Kvale, 1994, p. 166) from those that are unjustified or suspect. However, this is not established by reviewing the procedures by which the interpretations were generated. If the "the harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding" (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 302) as Gadamer says, then whether an interpretation is valid or not can be checked by comparing it against the texts it is meant to illuminate. Is it a fair interpretation? Does it clarify the phenomena? Does it leave important things out? Are there aspects of the data that seem to contradict this interpretation? Is there a better way to characterize these texts? These types of questions are central to establishing the validity of interpretations, not knowing the process by which interpretations were generated.

Importantly, as Taylor (1971) notes, if someone "does not 'see' the adequacy of our interpretation" all one can do is "try to show him how it makes sense of the original" text (p. 6)—that is, how it "makes clear the meaning originally present in a confused, fragmentary, cloudy form" (p. 5). As noted above, most essentially, this would involve directing the skeptical reader to the texts of the analysis so that he can see for himself that the interpretations are adequate. However, one might also critique the validity of interpretations based on other considerations, for example, the adequacy of the data collected or how the interpretation conflicts with other well-established understandings of the same phenomenon. In all these cases, though, validity is established by comparing interpretations against the texts they are meant to

clarify or by comparing them against what is known about the phenomenon in broader contexts; it is not established by reviewing the procedures by which the interpretations were produced.

Qualitative Research Needs Fixed Methods to be Scientific

A second objection that might be leveled against this approach is that science is a necessarily methodical activity and that the flexible, emergent approach to research described here would not be appropriately scientific. Giorgi (2011) has argued for this position, asserting that "there can be no science without the use of an established or fixed method" (p. 211) and proper methods "[have] to have fixed steps and a fixed order" (p. 208). Indeed, for Giorgi (2010), flexibility in research methods is not a virtue but a vice, "something to be corrected rather than fostered," and while it might be acceptable for researchers to work flexibly and creatively in the early stages of a science, "once a method is accepted, it is to be strictly followed" (p. 6). Thus, according to Giorgi's criteria, the approach outlined above would be essentially regressive—it would be unscientific and would plunge qualitative research backward into the days of pre-methodological obscurity.

Giorgi's analysis might seem plausible to some, based on a modern conception of science, which makes its essential feature its method. However, starting in the second half of the 20th century, philosophers of science have argued that this approach is misguided and that the essential feature of science is neither a unified "scientific method" nor rigid adherence to a fixed method at all (e.g., Bauer 1992, Feyerabend, 1975; McGuire & Tuchanska, 2000; Polanyi, 1958; Roth, 1987). For example, as Feyerabend (1975) has famously argued, "the idea of a method that contains firm, unchanging, and absolutely binding principles for conducting the business of science meets considerable difficulty when confronted with the results of historical research." (p. 14). As evidence of this, he cites examples from the development of atomism (both in antiquity

and in modern times), the Copernican Revolution, and the wave theory of light and shows how these advancements “occurred only because some thinkers either decided not to be bound by certain 'obvious' methodological rules, or because they unwittingly broke them” (p. 14).

Indeed, some of the most successful and consequential research of modern times did not adhere to the model of scientific practice Giorgi describes. Darwin’s development of the theory of evolution by natural selection is a case in point. Darwin’s work is obviously one of the most influential pieces of science in the modern era, yet his approach to research was not based on fixed methodological principles spelled out in advance. Rather, Darwin seems to have worked flexibly, intuitively, and inductively, observing the natural world and developing his theory. In fact, if it makes sense to talk of Darwin’s method at all, it does so only retrospectively—that is, attempting to reconstruct the implicit logic of his investigation. He clearly did not work by selecting an “established or fixed method” in advance of inquiry (for a discussion of Darwin’s approach, see Cowles, 2020).

If a non-methodological approach (in the sense described above) is a viable approach to qualitative inquiry, as I have argued, then the task of training qualitative researchers must be significantly transformed. No longer does it make sense to train researchers by merely walking them through the codified steps of an off-the-shelf method. Rather, qualitative research training must focus researchers away from methodological prescriptions and toward what really matters for qualitative research.

What Matters in Qualitative Research

Late in life, Gadamer succinctly described the methodological implications of his philosophy in a conversation with philosopher Carsten Dutt (Gadamer et al., 2001). In that conversation, he clarified that there is nothing wrong with learning the methods of a given field:

"as tools, methods are always good to have" (p. 41). However, while methods are not bad to know, he maintained that they are not what really matters for researchers:

> What does the truly productive researcher do? … Are they creative because they have mastered the methods in that field? Applying the method is what the person does who never finds out anything new, who never brings to light an interpretation that has revelatory power. No, it is not their mastery of methods but their hermeneutical imagination that distinguishes truly productive researchers. (pp. 41-42)

Gadamer suggests here that method-focused disciplines, like qualitative psychology, are in danger of misunderstanding what makes for great research. For example, one reading of the rise of the modern methodological paradigm is that modern methods make explicit the strategies implicitly employed by influential researchers of the past (see, e.g., Wertz et al., 2011, p. 48). Yet this reading might suggest that it was the *methods* these scholars used that made their work groundbreaking and influential, rather than the attributes of the researchers themselves. Gadamer is saying this gets it backward. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is creative and insightful not because James (1902/1982) discovered a powerful method for analyzing data but because James is a creative and insightful researcher. Indeed, as Robinson (2000) has argued, scientific progress "is won by the application of an informed imagination to a problem of genuine consequence" rather than by "the habitual application of some formulaic mode of inquiry to a set of quasi-problems chosen chiefly because of their compatibility with the adopted method" (p. 41).

Thus, for Gadamer, what is actually essential for the human sciences is not their methods but the knowledge, experience, and character of human science researchers—what he calls

hermeneutical imagination.[17] Indeed, Gadamer (1960/2004) maintains that the human sciences are entirely dependent upon this capacity. Indeed, he argues that this instinctive "psychological tact" (p. 7) "envelops the human sciences' form of judgment and mode of knowledge" (p. 14). Thus, human science presupposes that scholars "[possess] the right, unlearnable, and inimitable tact" of hermeneutical imagination (p.14). And because this capacity is so foundational, there can even be cases, Gadamer (1994) maintains, where there is "more truth in the work of an unscientific dilettante than in an ever so methodical evaluation of the material" (p. 26)—provided the dilettante has a well-formed hermeneutical imagination. Regrettably, Gadamer never systematically describes hermeneutical imagination; however, throughout his writings, he does hint at the nature of this capacity and suggests how it might be developed.

Hermeneutical Imagination

Throughout his writings, Gadamer clarified that the psychological tact required to do hermeneutical work is akin to the knowledge that guides decision-making in moral situations (i.e., phronesis; see Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 322-355; 1979).[18] Hermeneutical imagination is an easy characteristic to spot, but it is not easy to define or systematically describe. Most essentially, it is a special sensitivity and know-how regarding the meaning and significance of

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[17] I will follow Gadamer in referring to this as hermeneutical imagination, although I acknowledge that he does not use the term consistently. Indeed, at various points he uses a variety of short-hands to refer to the capacity to interpret well, describing as a psychological tact (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 7), a "[talent] requiring certain finesse of mind" (p. 318), genius (p. 50), and hermeneutical know-how (Gadamer, 1979, p. 130).

[18] Gadamer's most explicit treatment of the nature of hermeneutical imagination comes through his exposition of Aristotle's concept of phronesis, where he clarifies that a virtue much like phronesis must be at play in interpretive work. And while late in his career he clarified that "phronesis is the basic hermeneutical virtue" (Gadamer, 1986, as cited in Dostal, 2022, p. 82), he never clarified the precise relationship between phronesis and hermeneutical imagination. While some researchers have identified phronesis as the knowledge that guides qualitative practice (i.e., identified hermeneutical imagination with phronesis; see, Macklin & Whiteford, 2012), I think there are meaningful reasons to distinguish them. Thus, in this paper, I will refer to hermeneutical imagination as a capacity that is of a similar kind as phronesis, but I will not collapse the two concepts into one another.

human phenomena. It is the ability to understand difficult texts and to offer insightful interpretations or the capacity to get to the heart of things and to identify what is relevant or important.

Unfortunately for methodologists, Gadamer (1960/2004) clarifies that hermeneutical imagination is not like the knowledge required to do mathematics (*episteme*) or build a chair (*techne*). Mathematical knowledge and productive knowledge are fundamentally explicit and systematic and, therefore, can be reduced to clear rules, procedures, or ideas that can be clearly taught. Hermeneutic imagination, however, is essentially "tacit and unformulable" (p. 15) and therefore "cannot be taught and demonstrated" (Gadamer, 1994, p. 28) in the same way one could teach someone to do math or build a chair.

One reason hermeneutical imagination cannot be straightforwardly transmitted from one person to another is that it is essentially a *practical* and *contextual* capacity. This means that hermeneutical imagination is (1) an ability that determines and directs *action* and (2) that it is only manifest during action, that is, in the context of particular interactions with things to be understood and interpreted. Because of this, hermeneutical imagination is not a capacity that is available in advance in the way that a craftsman can lay out his blueprints and strategies before beginning a project; it is knowledge that only manifests itself "in the course of 'hot action'" (Smith, 1999, p. 330).

Hermeneutical imagination is also not directly transmittable because it is uniquely grounded in the being of the interpreter. [19] As Dunne (1993) describes, it is "not a cognitive capacity that one has at one's disposal but is, rather, very closely bound up with the kind of person that one is" (p. 273). Thus, while almost any type of person could learn to build a chair or calculate sums (provided they had the cognitive capacity to follow directions), hermeneutical imagination, like moral judgment, requires that the interpreter *be* a certain type of person, that is, possess *experience* and *character*.

By experience, I mean both immersion in the particulars of a field of inquiry over time and the aptitudes, skills, and sensitivities that emerge from that participation. Thus, Gadamer (1960/2004) describes hermeneutical imagination as a tact that is developed "by virtue of a thoroughly concrete experience in everyday practice" (p. 138). More specifically, though, it is developed by "unrelenting interaction with the subject matter" that one is studying (Gadamer, 1994, p. 28). Thus, while it might make sense to describe a tact for hermeneutic work in general, it is probably more accurate to describe domain-specific forms of hermeneutical imagination. Someone might, for example, have a particular genius for understanding and interpreting emotional life, whereas someone else might be adept at understanding systems or organizations, and these capacities would emerge from researchers' experiences in these domains.

But Gadamer clarifies that hermeneutical imagination is not *merely* experience; rather, it is being shaped by experience in specific ways. Thus, it might be possible to picture someone

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[19] As scholars have observed, Gadamer's description of the relationship between the interpreter and the text aligns well with Michael Polanyi's philosophy of personal knowledge (see, 1958). As Polanyi (1967) argues, scientific knowledge (i.e., a scientists' knowledge of his discoveries) is "personal, in the sense of involving the personality of him who holds it" and is associated with virtues like commitment and responsibility (pp. 24-25). (For a discussion of the similarities between Gadamer and Polanyi see, Mulherin, 2010; Weinsheimer, 1985.)

who has had extensive experience in, for example, dealing with a certain difficult type of person—say individuals with borderline personality disorder—but who has responded to that experience by developing a close-minded, resentful, and judgmental character. In this case, the mere fact of brute experience is insufficient to provide them with the tact that would make them a good scholar of personality disorders. As Dunne and Pendlebury (2002) summarize, "raw experience is not a sufficient condition" for producing this type of knowledge; "crucially, one must learn from one's experience—perhaps especially from one's mistakes—so that one's experience is constantly reconstructed" (p. 198).

Thus, hermeneutical imagination arises from a character that has been shaped by experience to possess certain *virtues*, for example, "openness to the other" (p. 369) and goodwill (Gadamer, 2007, p. 172). For example, successful understanding seems to require

> virtues such as patience in sticking with a problem, a sense of balance that keeps both details and 'big picture' in focus, a sobriety that keeps one from being easily swayed by impulse or first impressions, a courage that enables one to persist in a truthful though otherwise unprofitable or unpopular direction. (Dunne & Pendlebury, 2002, p. 198)

Indeed, the willingness to revise one's fore-conceptions in light of meanings emerging from the text seems to depend on "personal qualities and not just cognitive abilities" (p. 198): personal qualities like humility to let oneself be corrected or charity to hear someone out.

As Dunne (1993) notes, the type of wisdom "needed here is not easily acquired" (p. 369). However, the problem with technical, procedural approaches to research is that they attempt to "supplant" or work around hermeneutical imagination "rather than develop it" (p. 369). At least, it would be fair to say that most methodological introductions to qualitative research (e.g., textbooks, handbooks, research seminars, methodology courses) neglect the role of

hermeneutical imagination in qualitative work. But this does not need to be the case. As I will argue next, qualitative research training could focus on helping researchers cultivate hermeneutical imagination rather than merely teaching them codified methods.

Teaching Qualitative Research and Cultivating Hermeneutical Imagination

If the capacity required to do qualitative research "cannot be taught and demonstrated" (Gadamer, 1994, p. 28), as Gadamer describes, then it is reasonable to ask how educators might help aspiring qualitative researchers learn their craft. If hermeneutical imagination cannot be taught, in the same way that one can teach someone mathematics or woodworking, are there ways educators could help students develop it? Gadamer does not answer this directly; however, based on the above analysis, there are several ways teachers might help researchers cultivate hermeneutical imagination.

Experience. An approach to education that centers on cultivating hermeneutical imagination would first and foremost focus on providing researchers with hermeneutic experience. As Macklin and Whiteford (2012) argue, what is most helpful in qualitative research training is for novice researchers to "throw themselves into [qualitative research] practice" because "they will improve in their practice of qualitative research as their experience grows" (pp. 98-99). Indeed, as described above, Gadamer (1979) maintains that hermeneutical imagination is acquired "by virtue of a thoroughly concrete experience in everyday practice" (p. 138). The key word here is practice. Gadamer's point is that the type of experience that matters here is not passive (e.g., merely being exposed to human phenomena); rather, it is experience with the vicissitudes of hermeneutic work, that is, working through difficult texts, making sense of them, and clearly communicating what they mean.

Thus, aspiring researchers would perhaps be best served by a model of qualitative research training that emphasized hands-on practice with real data rather than abstract methodological principles. Working through a complex dataset as a class, arguing about the meanings of passages, and sharing and getting feedback on interpretations that make sense of the data—these are all activities that would be particularly helpful.

However, Gadamer seems to suggest that an approach to training focused on qualitative research *in general* might be less helpful than it could be. Experience matters, but Gadamer also emphasizes that the tact to interpret well is acquired "through unrelenting interaction with *the subject matter* [emphasis added]" (Gadamer, 1994, p. 28). Thus, hermeneutical imagination develops best as students immerse themselves in the subjects they intend to study, rather than "practicing" data analysis on a subject unrelated to their interests. Thus, method classes that focus on qualitative research in general might be helpful, but only to a limited degree; a thoroughgoing emersion in the specifics of a particular subject would be more useful.

Thus, one implication of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is that the method-centric model of training might be problematic in itself, and instead of trying to train all-purpose qualitative researchers, it would make more sense to cultivate thoughtful addiction researchers or scholars of family relationships. While working through a "practice" data set (i.e., something assigned by a teacher for a class) might provide some helpful experience, it would not have the same effect as having students work through their own projects because it would do nothing to attune them to the specifics of the subjects that move them.

Consequently, perhaps the ideal case would be some minimal "methods" training outlining basic principles of practice, then working with a mentor who is an expert in a specific subject and diving into the nitty-gritty of ongoing projects. The point is that hermeneutic

imagination is not merely a set of transferable, all-purpose skills; it is perhaps first and foremost a sensitivity towards certain domains of meaning, and this sensitivity is developed by engaging with those domains and not in the abstract.

Mentoring. As hinted above, working with an experienced researcher would also be a powerful way to cultivate hermeneutical imagination. Indeed, as Macklin and Whiteford (2012) argue, training "can, and arguably must be done, under the guidance of more experienced qualitative researchers" (p. 99).

One reason for this is that an experienced researcher can help one become attuned to the details and idiosyncrasies of a particular subject; subject experts know the writings that lay out the major ideas of the field, and they can help a new researcher make sense of some of the peculiarities of working with a particular population or phenomenon. For example, an accomplished trauma researcher would be able to help a novice learn the major theories and approaches of the field. Such an expert could also help a new researcher learn practical skills like how to identify untrustworthy data or how to sensitively discuss traumatic events with survivors. As Mills (1959) points out, conversation with experienced researchers can also impart a realistic sense of how research is carried out: "only by conversations in which experienced thinkers exchange information about their actual ways of working can a useful sense of method and theory be imparted to the beginning student" (p. 195).

Beyond this, working with a mentor is a powerful way to develop the virtues that make for a good researcher. As Lawn (2006) describes, "habits of character are picked up by following the example of those already in possession of virtue," and by emulating those with character, "we are drawn into the moral tradition of desirable actions, generous acts, truthful acts, and so forth" (p. 134). Thus, by observing and emulating an accomplished researcher and receiving

feedback about their performance, a novice can begin to practice those virtues that are associated with hermeneutical imagination.

For example, studying the attitudes and beliefs of conspiracy theorists requires certain virtues—goodwill, patience, and charity, for example—and a powerful way to develop these virtues would be to follow the example of a veteran researcher. One might, for example, pay attention to how the experienced researcher handles belligerent participants and attempt to emulate that behavior. An experienced researcher could also help a novice work through a breakdown in practice and understand how to be more patient or open-minded in the future.

Examples. While this approach would not focus on teaching codified methods, that does not mean that it would entirely neglect discussing methods. As Gadamer (1960/2004) maintains, hermeneutic tasks are like moral tasks, and it can be helpful "to make an outline and by means of this sketch give some help to moral consciousness" (p. 323). Gadamer's point, though, is that outlines of practice could only ever provide rough sketches of what research might look like; each project will inevitably call for adaptation and improvisation. Thus, rather than presenting methods as ironclad rules, this approach would present them as sketches of what the research process *might* look like. In this approach, methods would be conceptualized as tools in a toolkit—techniques that might be helpful in the same way that a painter might benefit from learning certain brushstrokes or methods or mixing paint. But as tools, methods would not be presented as clear-cut rules, recipes, or maps. They would always be *potential* tactics, only to be applied if warranted by the situation.

However, while studying codified methods (e.g., thematic analysis or grounded theory) might be helpful, focusing on completed projects rather than abstract principles might be more beneficial. For example, novices might benefit from reading influential qualitative research and

learning the process by which it was carried out, or they might benefit from hearing a scholar describe how she carried out a successful study. This would have at least two benefits. First, it would give students a sense of how research is actually carried out, rather than merely describing how it could be accomplished (as codified methods do). This would help students get a sense of the vicissitudes of practice and the flexibility and problem solving it often requires. Second, focusing on actual research would help hone students' sensibilities regarding what makes for powerful research. Having exemplary research that one seeks to emulate might stimulate hermeneutical imagination more than focusing on techniques in the abstract.

Reasoning. Finally, this approach would necessarily involve reasoning with students about the nature and purposes of qualitative work. As Gadamer (2007) notes, moral education might not be able to tell moral actors specifically what to do, but it can "[aid] in making present for rational consideration the ultimate purposes of one's actions" (p. 263), and this is the case in qualitative research as well.

Once again, methodological writings would have a role to play in this. While methodological principles rarely could function as concrete rules, they could still help researchers refine their practice. Just as ethical hypotheticals can help sharpen moral judgment, it might be helpful to contemplate and discuss, for example, what makes for a good sample, ethical issues relating to data collection, what role ideology should play in interpretation, or the meanings of significant terminology like phenomenological "essences." As above, though, this would focus on helping students understand general principles of practice, and it would be careful not to depict these ideas as iron-clad rules.

Conclusion

As Gadamer (1960/2004) notes, “ultimately, as Descartes himself realized, it belongs to the special structure of straightening something crooked that it needs to be bent in the opposite direction” (p. 580). The present argument has functioned like this, setting forth a distinctively critical take on the role of methods in qualitative work. However, while I have downplayed the significance and importance of methods, I am not arguing for their abolition. It is okay to talk about methods, give methodological advice, sketch out procedures that have worked in the past, and offer guidance about how to avoid mistakes in research. And insofar as methods contain real wisdom—wisdom won from experience—they can help researchers.

However, scholars must be clear-eyed about what methods can do—presenting research methods as imperatives that *must* be followed or as powerful tools that guarantee success misrepresents the nature and capacity of methods. Methods cannot solve researchers' problems, do the work for them, or show them how to interpret the data at hand; indeed, they leave the central tasks of qualitative analyses essentially undirected. Indeed, as Robinson (2000) asserts, somewhat provocatively, “It is only the hack or ‘hired hand’ who latches onto some textbook method – some ‘methodology,’ as they say – and then casts about for problem trite enough to be settled by it” (p. 41). As Gadamer (1979) describes, general knowledge of moral principles “by virtue of its very generality, is unmindful of concrete situations and their exigencies,” and, if it is too tightly grasped, it can “obscure the meaning of the concrete exigencies which a factual situation could pose” to a moral actor (p. 136). As I have argued, the same is true with codified methods.

Thus, following Schrag and Ramsey (1994), I argue that the implication of this argument is “not so much a jettisoning of concerns about method, but rather a re-situation of methodological inquiry against the backdrop of the ‘about which’ one is inquiring” (p. 132).

Beyond this, I have argued that method also needs to be resituated against the backdrop of the being of the interpreter. That is, methods should not just take into account the features of the subject they investigate; they must also consider the finite, historical, and hermeneutic nature of human investigators. Thus, for example, Husserlian methods require a type of purifiable consciousness that human scientists simply do not possess; for these methods to be properly understood and employed, they must be reconceptualized and thus re-situated.

This dissertation has followed Gadamer (1960/2004) in "[attempting] to understand what the human sciences truly are, beyond their methodological self-consciousness" (p. xxii), and what I hope to have established is that the modern methodological paradigm misunderstands the type of work qualitative research inevitably is. Following Gadamer, I believe this misunderstanding has had consequences for qualitative psychology; foremost among these has been a "narrowing of perspective that results from concentrating on method" (p. 579). Significantly, it is not the methods themselves that have led to this—"as *tools,* [emphasis added] methods are always good to have" (Gadamer et al., 2001, p. 41). Rather, it is methods in combination with a methodological paradigm that misrepresents their power, their capacities, and their necessity that leads to poor outcomes.

I agree with Reicher (2000) that "the health of our discipline depends upon a willingness to use qualitative methods when appropriate" (p. 2), and I maintain, as argued above, that this is particularly true of social psychology. Given the unique features of social phenomena, social psychology might have the most to gain from a greater embrace of qualitative research. But if Gadamer is right that concentrating on method leads to a narrowing of perspective, then it will be equally crucial for social psychologists to approach qualitative work with a clear vision of the

nature and uses of codified methods. Only then will social psychology be able to benefit from the full power of this approach to research.

In the conclusion to *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1960/2004) briefly summarizes what his ideas imply about the practice of research in the human sciences:

> Throughout our investigation it has emerged that the certainty achieved by using scientific methods does not suffice to guarantee truth. This especially applies to the human sciences, but it does not mean that they are less scientific; on the contrary, it justifies the claim to special humane significance that they have always made. The fact that in such knowledge the knower's own being [e.g., his experience and character] comes into play certainly shows the limits of method, but not of science. Rather, what the tool of method does not achieve must—and really can—be achieved by a discipline of questioning and inquiring, a discipline that guarantees truth. (p. 506)

The term discipline is instructive here. It implies a way of doing things but also is etymologically related to Latin terms associated with education, moral training, and being a pupil (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). And this resonates with the uniquely historical, humane, and hermeneutic nature of qualitative research and the rigorous spiritual cultivation this requires of us.

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