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To my family, L. J., R. J., and J. A., for their love and encouragement.
Hermeneutic Inquiry

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The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief introduction to hermeneutic philosophy and to discuss the application of hermeneutics in nursing research. This chapter explores philosophical hermeneutics as a contemporary philosophy that is beginning to shape nurses’ understanding of research, education, and practice. Like other philosophies, hermeneutics expresses a Western worldview about knowledge, understanding, experience, and inquiry. But hermeneutics offers different insights about the relationship between inquiry and practice, about the links between understanding and action, and thus addresses questions that are central to nursing. As a philosophy, hermeneutics joins other contemporary schools of thought in providing us with both time-honored and radically new understandings of the research process.

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Nursing and Hermeneutics in the 1980s

The term "philosophical hermeneutics" is not commonly used in nursing contexts, and, even among nurses who have a strong background in philosophy, this field may not be well known. This is understandable because, until the 1970s, discussions of hermeneutics were concentrated in the humanities, appearing primarily in Continental philosophy, theology, and literary criticism. But, beginning in the 1970s, there were increasing references to hermeneutics in research methods literature found in the social sciences. This methodological literature discussed hermeneutics as a philosophy that redefines the scope and nature of the social sciences (Bauman, 1978; Bernstein, 1976; Polkinghorne, 1983; Ricoeur, 1981). In these discussions, social scientists argued that their disciplines could not rely on empiricism for an adequate philosophical foundation. Interpretive sociology and social anthropology were two fields that saw in hermeneutics an alternative philosophy, one that could provide an appropriate self-understanding for their approaches to human experience.

In this methodological literature, hermeneutics was recognized as a philosophy that supports an interpretive approach to people through research methods that focus on meaning and understanding in context (Geertz, 1979; Mischler, 1979). These discussions in the social sciences were part of a growing controversy in the United States that struggled with the limits of empiricism and the need for philosophical alternatives in the human studies. Because nurses practiced and studied during these years, we have been affected by these discussions, and they have come to inform our understanding of our own research agenda.

The growing interest in hermeneutics in nursing may seem puzzling to scholars in the humanities and other fields. But among practitioners in applied disciplines and among scholars in the social sciences, the turn to hermeneutic philosophy has occurred as part of a larger crisis that has seriously challenged the authority of positivism as an adequate philosophical grounding for both science and practice.

The "crisis" in contemporary social science... has become the necessary starting point for all works on contemporary social and political theory. But... It is by no means self-evident what that crisis is, or how it should be characterized. Although attacks on positivist social science and proposals for alternative conceptions have become commonplace in the

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literature of social and political theory, no resolution of the debate has been forthcoming. . . . The positivist research program in the social sciences that has been seriously discredited in recent decades still serves as the basis for most social scientific research. It has not been replaced by any of the alternative programs that have been proposed, first, because no unanimity exists as to which of these alternatives should be adopted and secondly, because none of these alternatives offers what appears to social scientists to be a viable methodology for social scientific research. As a result, as many have argued, the social sciences are cast adrift without a theoretical anchor. (Hekman, 1986, p. 1)

This erosion of positivism has occurred across a broad range of disciplines, including nursing, in part as a result of other postmodern philosophies, such as feminism, critical theory, and deconstruction. These are contemporary schools of thought that critique empiricist assumptions in science and view the rise of scientism as a distorted cultural phenomenon. One outcome of this cultural critique of empiricist science has been a turn to other philosophical traditions and a renewed interest in what other philosophies have to say to nursing about knowledge and inquiry.

During the 1980s, interest in hermeneutics has grown steadily, and now, hermeneutic philosophy is cited as an important philosophical alternative to empiricist and historicist accounts of science (Hekman, 1986). The implications of this historical development are important, because they suggest that hermeneutics may be emerging not just as a philosophy that applies to the humanities and to some social sciences but as a philosophy that applies equally to the philosophy of the natural sciences and to practice disciplines. In the last decade, for example, the following hermeneutic insights have been identified in the philosophy of science.

In contemporary reexaminations of the social disciplines there has been a recovery of the hermeneutical dimension, with its thematic emphasis on understanding and interpretation. This is also what has been happening in the postempiricist philosophy and history of science.... There is, however, a much stronger and much more consequential sense in which the hermeneutical dimension of science has been recovered. In the critique of naive and even of sophisticated forms of logical positivism and empiricism; in the questioning of the claims of the primacy of the hypothetico-deductive model of explanation; in the questioning of the sharp dichotomy that has been made between observation and theory (or observational and theoretical language); in the insistence on the underdetermination of theory by fact; and in the exploration of the ways
in which all description and observation are theory-impregnated, we find claims and arguments that are consonant with those that have been at the very heart of hermeneutics. (Bernstein, 1983, p. 301)

In nearly all these more recent references, hermeneutic philosophy is cited as a philosophy that provides us with an alternative view of science itself and with a different understanding of inquiry in general.

Discussions like these, which have identified the relevance of hermeneutics in the philosophy of science, have been matched in individual disciplines, where methodologists have also identified the relevance of the hermeneutic philosophy for research activity within their respective fields. For example, in their critique of positivism, educators Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 7) identified hermeneutics (along with other philosophies) as an alternative paradigm that is changing contemporary understandings of science.

This book describes an alternative paradigm that... is now traveling under the name "naturalistic." It has other aliases as well, for example: the postpositivist, ethnographic, phenomenological, subjective, case study, qualitative, hermeneutic, humanistic.

And in her feminist critique of gender and science, Ruth Bleier (1984, p. 202) referred to hermeneutics in a similar way when she noted that

other philosophies and methods—Hegelian dialectics, Marxist dialectical materialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics—also appreciate the realities of change, interconnectedness, and contextuality, but they are not modes of thought that are part of mainstream biological and social science. Women's experiences of life generally engender such modes of thought.

In recent years, several nurses have also identified the relevance of hermeneutics as a philosophy that has important implications for nursing research (Allen, Diekelmann, & Benner, 1986; Benner, 1984a, 1985; Leonard, 1989; Reeder, 1989; Thompson, 1985). The progression to hermeneutics in nursing has occurred through a steady development of philosophical work within the discipline, where nurses have continued to reflect about the nature of practice and the kind of inquiry that is appropriately linked to practice in this postepistemist era. Over the last two decades, this work has produced a growing self-consciousness within the discipline. Nurses now critically reflect about their role in corporate structures, about their contributions in formulating and evaluating health policy, about the nature of their work and the kind of practical knowledge it requires, and about the kind of research that can adequately inform and transform practice. In this reflexivity, and through this historical development, nurses have joined others in critiquing the politics of prevailing worldviews and exploring alternative perspectives as guides for research and practice.

The Relevance of Hermeneutics for Nursing Research

A discussion of hermeneutics is an appropriate part of nursing research texts, because, in recent years, hermeneutics has emerged as a contemporary philosophy that has significant methodological implications for any field of inquiry (Hekman, 1986). In nursing, the turn to hermeneutics and other philosophies has been part of a larger interest in alternative viewpoints and alternative research methods (Moccia, 1986; Morse, 1989; Munnhall & Oiler-Boyd, 1986). For example, one of the most well-known research applications of hermeneutic philosophy has appeared in the work of Patricia Benner (1984a), who draws on hermeneutic philosophy in her investigations of expert practice. In nursing education, Nancy Diekelmann (1988) has also drawn on hermeneutic philosophy in her discussion of curriculum reform.

The emergence of hermeneutic discourse in nursing research is a natural consequence of academic and social processes. Increasingly, insights from hermeneutic philosophy and other Continental schools of thought have found their way into many fields of inquiry. As nurses participate in academic settings, we have been and will continue to be exposed to discussions of hermeneutics in topics as diverse as the development of social theory, the philosophy of science, methods of criticism, and practical competence or skill acquisition. In the last 15 years, hermeneutics has emerged as a postmodern philosophy that speaks to or informs a broad range of existential issues. It is, therefore, understandable that hermeneutic philosophy would have found recent applications in nursing research.

Although hermeneutics did not begin as a philosophy of science, in recent years, scholars have drawn on hermeneutic insights in discussions that are beginning to alter our understanding of the
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Hermeneutic philosophy has long informed many interpretive approaches in research, including grounded theory, symbolic interactionism, ethnography, ethnmethodology, historical research, and phenomenology. It is, therefore, an important background for nurse-researchers who maintain methodological commitments to interpretive research methods. And, finally, hermeneutic philosophy has in recent years paralleled some feminist scholarship in its critique of scientism and its explication of patriarchal bias in scientific method (Bowles, 1984). Reading in hermeneutic philosophy can help nurse-researchers deal with the linkages between one’s philosophy of science, one’s methodological commitments, and the actual practice of doing research (Harding, 1986). In the experience of many nurses, it may be important to discover that hermeneutics is a philosophical tradition that is consistent with alternative points of view and with alternative research methods. Hermeneutics may then be seen as an important successor to empiricism as a philosophy that informs different understandings of the research process in nursing.

In recent years, several texts have appeared that trace important developments in the history of hermeneutic philosophy (Bleicher, 1980; Howard, 1982; Palmer, 1969; Wachterhauser, 1986). These works and others are important reading for nurses who are interested in hermeneutics. References at the end of this chapter list sources that may be helpful in understanding the hermeneutic tradition.

Background and Evolution of Hermeneutics

The term *hermeneutics* has historically been associated with the theory and practice of interpretation. As an academic discipline, hermeneutics first developed within the field of theology during the Renaissance and Reformation. During these centuries, *hermeneutics* referred to the theory and practice of biblical exegesis, especially to the principles and methods used by Protestant theologians to interpret biblical texts (Mueller-Vollmer, 1985, p. 2).

Formerly, "hermeneutics" referred to theory and practice of interpretation. It was a skill one acquired by learning how to use the instruments of history, philology, manuscriptology, and so on. The skill was typically deployed against texts rendered problematic by the ravages of time, by cultural differences or by the accidents of history. As such, hermeneutics was a regional and occasional necessity—a subdiscipline in theology.
archaeology, literary studies, the history of art and so forth. (Howard, 1982, p. xiii)

The word hermeneutics, however, has a more ancient origin, having been derived from the Greek verb, *hermeneuein*, "to interpret," and from the noun, *hermeneia*, or "interpretation." Both words were in turn derived from Hermes, the wing-footed messenger-god, who was associated with the Delphic oracle. Hermes was responsible for changing the unknowable into a form that humans could comprehend or understand. He accomplished this through the discovery and use of language and writing.

The Greek origins of the word *hermeneutic* are still relevant, for, in contemporary usage, *hermeneutics* now refers to a broad range of theoretical and practical approaches that are concerned with interpretation. In its focus on the philosophy, theory, and practice of interpretation, hermeneutics still emphasizes the importance of language and the way that language functions to "make something foreign, strange, separated in time, space or experience familiar, present, or comprehensible" (Palmer, 1969, p. 13).

Although hermeneutics was a more specialized subdiscipline in its early history, located in theology and limited to the study of interpretive canon, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the scope of hermeneutics expanded greatly, and hermeneutic practice found applications in many fields. In contemporary times, the nature and scope of hermeneutics has continued to expand until, today, hermeneutics has served as a philosophical and methodological foundation in such diverse fields as comparative religion, cultural anthropology, literary criticism, history, and linguistics.

During the twentieth century, hermeneutic philosophy has increasingly moved away from questions regarding specific interpretive method and now focuses more on existential-ontological questions of how, in general, people come to understand. Today, hermeneutics is known as a contemporary philosophy that emphasizes the human experiences of understanding and interpretation. Hermeneutics focuses on acts of interpretation and understanding not only as experiences that are found in academic disciplines but as experiences that are fundamental to human life. The work of the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-) has been recognized as central to the evolution of contemporary hermeneutic philosophy.

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It is vital at the outset to understand the distinction between Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and the kind of hermeneutics oriented to methods and methodology. Gadamer is not directly concerned with the practical problems of formulating right principles for Interpretation; he wishes rather to bring the phenomenon of understanding itself to light. This does not mean that he denies the importance of formulating such principles; on the contrary, such principles are necessary in the interpretive disciplines. What it means is that Gadamer is working on a preliminary and more fundamental question: How is understanding possible, not only in the humanities, but in the whole of man’s [sic] experiences of the world. (Palmer, 1969, p. 163)

Contemporary hermeneutic philosophy is usually characterized as a Continental school of thought, with historical roots in other European philosophies. But philosophical hermeneutics has much in common with the American school of philosophy of pragmatism and with such thinkers as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and James Dewey. The similarities between neopragmatism and contemporary hermeneutic philosophy may be noted in the work of Bernstein (1971, 1976, 1983, 1986) and Rorty (1979, 1982). These similarities between pragmatism and hermeneutics may also be noted in nursing in discussions by Fry (1987) and Thompson (1987).

Within the last decade then, hermeneutics has emerged as a broadly based philosophy that focuses on the experience of understanding and on the act of interpretation as general features of human life (Howard, 1982). Like other postmodern schools of thought, philosophical hermeneutics is perhaps best known for its emphasis on the social and historical character of human understanding.

Hermeneutical thinkers can be characterized quite generally by their concern to resist the idea of the human intellect as a wordless and timeless source of insight... hermeneutical theories of understanding argue that all human understanding is never "without words" and never "outside of time." On the contrary, what is distinctive about human understanding is that it is always in terms of some evolving linguistic framework that has been worked out over time in terms of some historically conditioned set of concerns and practices. In short, hermeneutical thinkers argue that language and history are always both conditions and limits of understanding. (Wachterhaus, 1986, pp. 5-6)

Hermeneutics then joins other contemporary philosophies in reminding nurses of the social and historical grounding of all research.
This has implications for the way we understand research, and for the ways we understand ourselves and our activity in the research process.

Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

During the twentieth century, the development of hermeneutic philosophy was greatly influenced by two important schools of thought in Continental philosophy: phenomenology and existentialism. The close association between hermeneutics and phenomenology is evident in some recent discussions that have referred to hermeneutics as "Heideggerian phenomenology" (Allen, Diekelmann, & Benner, 1986). The influence of phenomenology is also apparent in works that trace the history of the phenomenological movement and identify hermeneutics as "hermeneutic phenomenology" (Ilde, 1971; Spiegelberg, 1982).

The association between hermeneutics and phenomenology is important, although it may be confusing for students to see the terms "hermeneutics" and "phenomenology" used interchangeably. In general, when authors use the term "hermeneutic philosophy" or "Heideggerian phenomenology," they are distinguishing hermeneutics from a philosophical forerunner, Husserlian or transcendental phenomenology. The distinction between hermeneutic phenomenology and Husserlian phenomenology is one that deserves some emphasis, because there are important differences between these two influential schools of thought.

The founding of phenomenology as a school of thought is usually attributed to the work of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. While the historical evolution of phenomenology is very complex (Spiegelberg, 1982), it is possible to sketch a brief description of phenomenology as a philosophical movement. Husserl's investigations began as a search for the philosophical foundations of logic and evolved into a study of the logical structure of consciousness. For Husserl, it was the logical (as opposed to psychological) structure of consciousness that is transcendental, lying at the base of our experiences, the medium through which objects are constituted. In the course of Husserl's career, phenomenology then came to mean the study of phenomena, as-phenomena-appear-through-consciousness.

Today, many nurses still equate the phenomenological tradition with Husserl. Nurses who have been influenced by the Husserlian or transcendental school of phenomenology continue to emphasize the concepts and ideas of early phenomenology. These include

(1) an analysis of the subject and object-as-the-object-appears-through-consciousness,
(2) an emphasis on bracketing or epoché as a method for suspending naïve realist awareness,
(3) and an emphasis on describing the full appearance of the object of inquiry.

During the last few years, several works in nursing literature have discussed Husserlian phenomenology as a philosophy and as a method with significant implications for nursing research (Knaack, 1984; Morse, 1989; Munhall & Oiler-Boyd, 1986; Oiler, 1983, 1986; Omery, 1983). One important insight from this work in nursing is our awareness that there is not a single phenomenological method but, instead, several techniques that apply Husserlian principles.

While these discussions were important ways of bringing phenomenology into the awareness of nurses, they did not present the evolution in Continental philosophy that resulted in Heideggerian phenomenology. The evolution of the phenomenological movement produced several theoretical and methodological extensions such as Schutzian phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and grounded theory in sociology. Each of these interpretive approaches illustrates the historical development of the phenomenological movement. In these later applications, emphasis shifted from an earlier transcendental concern with consciousness as the medium through which we know objects to an emphasis on ordinary language as the ground of intersubjectivity, as the medium through which meaning is established.

The transcendental, or Husserlian, version of phenomenology has been more widely discussed in nursing literature, perhaps because nurses were more frequently exposed to this version of phenomenology in graduate study and also because this school of thought somehow appeals to nurses' professional interests in methods and techniques of knowledge development. But hermeneutic philosophy differs from this version of phenomenology in important ways. Hermeneutic philosophy owes much of its contemporary evolution to the work of Martin Heidegger, who literally redefined phenomenology (Palmer, 1969). It is this Heideggerian turn that should be understood when nurses study hermeneutics, for Heidegger and many
contemporary hermeneutic thinkers moved away from Husserlian phenomenology.

Hermeneutic philosophy is best understood as a historical revision or extension of Husserlian phenomenology. The progression from Husserlian phenomenology to hermeneutic phenomenology can be illustrated by naming the line of philosophers in this tradition. Edmund Husserl, the father of the phenomenological movement, was Martin Heidegger’s teacher. Heideggerian phenomenology resulted then from extensions and revisions that Heidegger made in his work with Husserl. Most accounts of these revisions note that Heidegger radically altered Husserlian phenomenology. But his work nevertheless demonstrates the influence of his teacher, Husserl. Similarly Martin Heidegger was Hans-Georg Gadamer’s teacher, and although the contemporary work of Gadamer resolves some problems in Heidegger’s thought, Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics clearly demonstrates the influence of Heidegger’s work. This historical progression from Husserl to Heidegger to Gadamer produced the transition from Husserlian phenomenology to hermeneutic phenomenology, or from transcendental phenomenology to philosophical hermeneutics.

Heideggerian phenomenology resists most of the epistemological assumptions of Husserlian phenomenology. It rejects the notion of subject and object and thus does not begin from a position that needs to show how we can know an object. Philosophical hermeneutics argues that experience is not primarily a “knowledge affair” (Bernstein, 1971). This means that our experiences in the world are not characterized by this separation of subject and object, at least they are not characterized by this separation as we are experiencing them before we stop to reflect about them. Instead, we have our experiences, or, rather, they have us, prereflectively, without any falling away of subject and object. In this way, we live or have our being in the world; we live our lives by experiencing the world and not primarily by “knowing” it.

Heideggerian phenomenology, therefore, does not emphasize the epistemological questions of knowing. Instead, it emphasizes the ontological-existential questions of experiencing. Whereas Husserlian phenomenology focuses on consciousness and knowing as a medium of uniting subject and object, Heideggerian phenomenology focuses on language and temporality, or historicity, as the medium through which we experience the world or have our being.

This distinction between Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology was also echoed in existentialism, a school of thought that greatly influenced the phenomenological movement. The work of the existentialist philosopher M. Merleau-Ponty has been identified in nursing as a phenomenological perspective that is consistent with nursing’s concern for people as embodied beings (Oller, 1986). Existentialism argued that, when we stop to reflect about an experience, to question what we know and how we know it, we have already altered the experience in so much as we remove the quality of immediacy from our experience. Existentialism was, therefore, somewhat skeptical about the phenomenological project of locating the constitution of objects and meaning in consciousness.

Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world’s basis; it steps back to watch the form of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice . . . [From this epoch] we can learn nothing but the unmotivated upsurge of the world. The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction . . . since we are in the world, since indeed our reflections are carried out in the temporal flux on to which we are trying to seize, there is no thought which embraces all our thought . . . radical reflection amounts to a consciousness of its own dependence on an unreflective life. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, pp. xiii-xiv)

The turn from consciousness to existence was, therefore, a crucial part of the development of hermeneutic phenomenology. The hermeneutic turn in phenomenology is one that literally reframed the problematic of the phenomenological movement. Concern shifted from questions of knowing to questions of being or experiencing the world. The distinction between knowledge and experience, between knowing and being, is typical of Western thought in general, and it has played itself out in philosophy, in nursing, and in many disciplines.

In philosophy, questions of knowing are central to epistemology, while questions of being and existence are central to ontology. In nursing, this distinction may be seen in works that focus on conditions of knowledge, or nursing epistemology (Carper, 1978), versus works that focus on nursing ontology, on the existential reality or “being” of nursing (Watson, 1988). In Continental philosophy, Husserl’s work was concerned primarily with epistemological issues, while Heidegger’s hermeneutic revisions were more concerned with questions of ontology and existence.
Because nurses, as people, have participated in social and historical developments during the last few decades, it is not surprising to find that the history of ideas in Western thought has influenced the history of ideas in nursing. The evolution of ideas in phenomenology has been paralleled in nursing by a movement that now shows the influence of both Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology. In asking scientific questions, nurses have sometimes borrowed from the tradition of epistemology and transcendental phenomenology. We have constructed our research activity to include ourselves (as subject) and others (as objects of investigation). In epistemological work in nursing, we have asked questions about knowing: How is it that we can come to know the experience of another? Certainly, most academic fields of study in Western culture experience this analytic posture. But, on the other hand, to take this posture is to alter the experience, for, when we reflect, we are one step removed from living or having the experience.

Hermeneutic philosophy emphasizes the prereflective quality of experience and maintains that knowing or knowledge is very much in the background, a tacit part of most of our experiences. This is why Patricia Benner’s work, for example, refers to the tacit knowledge of nurses by eliciting stories about their clinical practice in natural contexts. The emphasis on the experiences of nurses is very much consistent with existentialism’s focus on everyday lived reality and demonstrates the application of hermeneutic phenomenology in nursing research.

Three Conversations in Hermeneutics

Although hermeneutic philosophy has taken these existentialist/ontological turns, contemporary hermeneutic discourse is very diverse and includes many differing assumptions. Not all hermeneutic thinkers have followed Heidegger and Gadamer into the more broadly based philosophical hermeneutics discussed above. The hermeneutic tradition has undergone a complex evolution, with many important internal divisions and differing assumptions. Paul Ricœur (1970, pp. 26-27), for example, has suggested that “there is no general hermeneutics, no universal canon for exegesis, but only disparate and opposed theories concerning the rules of interpretation. The hermeneutic field . . . is internally at variance with itself.”

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While contemporary hermeneutic discourse does reflect this level of complexity, it is still possible to characterize different hermeneutic perspectives based on the way hermeneutic thinkers discuss interpretation and understanding. There are at least three conversations in contemporary hermeneutics that address different interpretive questions and begin from different assumptions.

Hermeneutics and Existentialist Ontology

As indicated earlier, hermeneutic thinkers who have been most influenced by Heidegger’s work speak about interpretation and understanding ontologically. This hermeneutic conversation emphasizes understanding as a broad category of life, as a way of being or as an activity that is fundamental to life at the cultural level. This conversation has been labeled “philosophical hermeneutics” (Hoy, 1982) and its most well-known living thinker is Hans-Georg Gadamer. When hermeneutic thinkers in this conversation link the act of interpretation with being, they argue for the universality of interpretation, claiming that interpretation is the activity that enables us to experience the world. For these thinkers, everything that exists in the world exists for people through acts of interpretation and understanding. This account of hermeneutics maintains that we cannot have a world, cannot have life at the cultural level, except through acts of interpretation. Contemporary parallels of this strand in hermeneutic philosophy may be found in nursing in the work of Watson (1988) and Benner (1984a), who discuss transpersonal and practical features of being in nursing.

Hermeneutics and Epistemology

For other hermeneutic thinkers, interpretation is considered epistemologically. For these thinkers, there is a more important juncture to be explored in the connection between epistemology and interpretation, and, in some cases, these hermeneutic thinkers are openly skeptical of ontological discourse. “Hermeneuts” in this conversation are concerned about conditions of knowledge. They ask questions regarding the extension of “forestructures” of understanding in different forms of knowledge. They sometimes argue that the sciences and the human studies are characterized by different logics of inquiry or by different kinds of knowledge claims. In this conversation, hermeneutic thinkers are concerned with social and historical conditions of knowledge in the human species. Because they link the
act of interpretation with conditions of knowledge, they maintain that everything in the world that can be known is known by people through acts of interpretation. Interpretation is presented again as a broad human activity, as the way we have access to the world or the way we apprehend reality.

Hermeneutics and Methodology

Still other hermeneutic thinkers discuss interpretation in a more restricted or less philosophical sense as a methodological foundation for humanistic disciplines. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many hermeneutic thinkers argued that interpretive methods and practices were the unique, distinguishing feature of the human studies. Remnants of this conversation remain today in discourse about the use of qualitative and quantitative methods in the social sciences. In this conversation, hermeneutics is examined as philosophy that guides methods and forms of analysis found in the humanities and the social sciences. Here, hermeneutics opposes empiricism as a methodological foundation for humanistic disciplines. This is a more specialized conversation, which examines questions of proper research methods and analytic techniques for those working with academic fields and research contexts. Hermeneutic thinkers in this conversation frequently investigate criteria of adequacy or truth as standards that can guide interpretive methods.

While these three conversations may be separated for the purpose of discussion, nurses usually experience them as connected and interrelated. All three conversations in hermeneutic discourse may speak to nurses and all three may find applications in nursing research. The thesis of this chapter is that a thorough understanding of all three conversations helps nurses to make clearer and more productive applications of hermeneutic discourse. Additionally, this chapter maintains that specific applications of hermeneutic philosophy in nursing reflect the interests and commitments of the scholar.

The evolution of contemporary hermeneutics contains several important insights that can lead to a different understanding of the research process. The following sections of this chapter briefly review some of these insights from hermeneutic philosophy and discuss their implications for nursing research.

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The Hermeneutic Account of Language

To understand the hermeneutic tradition, it is important to see a shift that occurred in common conceptions of language and understanding. These two notions, language and understanding, are central in contemporary hermeneutic philosophy, and they lead to a very different account of inquiry and method.

In Hans-Georg Gadamer’s work Truth and Method (1975), there appeared a major turn in hermeneutic philosophy, one that has important implications for our understanding of the research process. While Gadamer’s discussions of language and understanding demonstrate the influence of Heidegger, he avoids ontologizing and so presents a more socially and historically grounded philosophy. His account of language is a central and crucial feature of his philosophical hermeneutics.

Ultimately, the one issue that is important, the one that must be understood because it is the key to understanding others, is language. This issue overshadows all subsidiary issues that Gadamer discusses and provides a perspective by which those other issues must be approached. Thus for example instead of trying to discover Gadamer’s position on ontology, it would be more fruitful to ask how language reveals being; the question of language supercedes that of ontology and dictates how the question must be approached. (Hekman, 1986, p. 95)

Gadamer followed Heidegger in rejecting conventional notions about language. It is commonplace in modern times to think of language in instrumental ways. That is, most people think of language as an instrument or a tool that is used to refer, to describe, to make clear, and so on. This way of using language is basic to science, “with its ideal of exact designation and unambiguous concepts.”

But Gadamer (and many other thinkers influenced by ordinary language philosophy) rejects this notion of language and, in so doing, asks us to follow him in a very difficult turn. “It requires a feat of mental gymnastics to remember that outside of the scientific ideal of unambiguous designation, the life of language itself goes its way unaffected” (Palmer, 1969, p. 202). The alternative description of language that Gadamer presents is crucial to an understanding of contemporary hermeneutics.
If language is neither sign nor symbolic form created by [an individual], what is it? In the first place, words are not something that belong to [a person], but to the situation. One searches for words, the words that belong to the situation. . . . The maker of the assertion did not invent any of the words; he/she learned them. The process of learning the language came only gradually, through immersion in the stream of the heritage. [A person] does not make a word and "endow" it with a meaning; the imagining of such a procedure is pure correction of linguistic theory. . . . In formulating an assertion one only uses the words already belonging to the situation. . . . the early Greeks had no word or concept for language itself; like being and understanding, language is medium, not tool. . . . world and language both are transpersonal matters. (Palmer, 1969, pp. 203-205)

This account of language has extremely important implications for research and for the philosophy of science. It is a reiteration of the existentialist insight that language and cultural practices [or language and being] are inextricably linked, that we only have a world through language.

Gadamer amplifies this by stating that language carries everything with it, not only "culture" but "everything (in the world and out of it) is included in the realm of 'understanding' and understandability in which we move." . . . Thus language is not simply a tool that, like many others, human beings put to use. When we take a word in our mouth, we are "fixed in a direction of thought." Words themselves prescribe the only way we can use them; we cannot use them arbitrarily as we might a tool. We become acquainted with the world and even ourselves through language because language is the universal mode of being and knowledge . . . it is more correct to say that language speaks us rather than we speak it. (Hekman, 1986, pp. 110-111)

This account of language reminds us that, even in scientific discourse, we are only entering a "language game" that has already been established and that prescribes, predetermines, or prejudices the ways in which we orient ourselves to given phenomena. This view of language brings the hermeneutic tradition more in line with neopragmatic accounts of truth, where the emphasis is on concepts as a way of fixing belief, as a way of orienting ourselves. Hermeneutics then differs significantly from more familiar positions in nursing, such as realism, which view concepts as a lens that can be used to accurately mirror reality (Rorty, 1979). Instead, on this hermeneutic account of language, we are born into linguistic communities, and the language(s) we speak are at once the conditions of new knowledge, opening us to new understandings, and the limits of what we can know or understand in the future.

Hermeneutic discussions of language emphasize the historicity and the value-laden quality of human understanding. They remind us, for example, that concepts are not just value neutral, ahistorical entities that more or less accurately mirror our worlds. Rather, concepts are conditioned by our historical era and by our social interests. For some hermeneutic thinkers then, theories, concepts, theoretical terms, observations, and acts of interpretation are more ideological than realism or empiricism would allow.

Gadamer's accounts of language also suggests that, within any given historical and social context, scholars come to their work with an already established background of preunderstanding. These preunderstandings are linguistically conveyed; they are produced, reproduced, and transformed in the course of cultural evolution. Gadamer refers to this background of linguistically mediated preunderstanding by using the term "prejudice." It is a "forestructure" or a condition of knowledge in that it determines what we may find intelligible in any given situation. Arguably, such foreshores reflect social reference groups; they are a product of culture, gender, race, and class. In contrast to common usage, Gadamer argues that prejudice is not something that is negative or something that we should try to eliminate. In fact, he argues that we can only have access to the world through our prejudices. "[Gadamer] replaces the opposition between truth and prejudice with the assertion that prejudice—our situatedness in history and time—is the precondition of truth, not an obstacle to it" (Hekman, 1986, p. 117).

Hermeneutics: Philosophy of Human Understanding

The hermeneutic account of language leads to a different perspective about understanding. Since the nineteenth century, there have been lengthy and continuous discussions that describe the phenomenon of understanding and differentiate it from scientific knowledge. For centuries, hermeneutic philosophers maintained that understanding occurs for us or happens to us because we are born into a cultural-linguistic community; we have a world and understand our world through our language(s). Hermeneutic thinkers, therefore, emphasize the linguistic and historical nature of understanding.
Understanding then is not to be confused with knowledge and with the explanations that science provides.

For years, many hermeneutic thinkers also maintained that the natural sciences and human studies could be separated based on different logics of inquiry or different objects of inquiry. Early hermeneutic philosophy argued, for example, that the natural sciences provide explanations while the human studies yield understanding of the human condition. Some, like Dilthey, maintained that the essential difference between the natural sciences and human studies lies “in the context within which the perceived object is understood. The human studies will sometimes make use of the same objects or ‘facts’ as the natural sciences, but in a different context of relationships, one which includes or refers to inner experience” (Palmer, 1969, p. 105).

Some hermeneutic thinkers still maintain that the sciences and human studies operate according to different logics of inquiry. Habermas (1971, 1988) extended insights from ordinary language philosophy by proposing that natural sciences place their objects (scientific facts) within the context of the human interest of predicting and manipulating the natural environment. The hermeneutic disciplines, in contrast, place the object of inquiry, human beings, within the context of social relationships and, therefore, include and refer to subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Other hermeneutic thinkers, like Ricoeur (1981) and Hesse (1980), have argued that, in both the natural sciences and the human studies, understanding and explanation are part of the same interpretive arc and they should not be separated and dichotomized as functions that occur independently in different fields of study.

Throughout this lengthy debate, hermeneutic philosophy has produced a massive description of human understanding (Howard, 1982). As a result of this discourse, hermeneutics presents us with a description of human understanding as a more complicated operation than explanation. “We explain by means of purely intellectual processes, but we understand by means of the combined activity of all the mental powers in apprehending” (Palmer, 1969, p. 115).

This emphasis on the experience of understanding has led hermeneutic thinkers to discuss several metaphors of understanding. In the hermeneutic tradition, the experience of understanding has been compared with at least three recurring metaphors or analogies. These are the hermeneutic circle, the fusion of the horizons, and the act of dialogue.

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The Hermeneutic Circle

Many hermeneutic thinkers have contended that understanding occurs through a complex experience labeled the “hermeneutic circle.” In the United States and Great Britain, there has been a tendency to misunderstand what Europeans mean by the term “hermeneutic circle.” We have a tendency to reduce this concept to some mysterious kind of intuition (Outhwaite, 1985, p. 24). But hermeneutic thinkers have not described understanding in this way; it is not primarily a psychic event. Because of its early emphasis on language, hermeneutic philosophy described understanding as a cognitive, affective, and practical process that is based on a sphere of shared meanings and shared experiences within a common linguistic community. For hermeneutic thinkers, it is language and history that supply this shared sphere.

In the work of Dilthey, hermeneutic philosophy first began to reject psychic or psychologistic descriptions of understanding. An emphasis on shared language and a shared background of meaning was identified as part of the hermeneutic circle.

Every word or sentence, every gesture or form of politeness, every work of art and every historical deed are only understandable because the person expressing [her or] himself and the person who understands [her or] him are connected by something they have in common; the individual always experiences, thinks, acts and also understands, in this common sphere. (Dilthey, 1988, cited in Outhwaite, 1985, p. 24)

In the hermeneutic tradition, understanding is described as a process of moving dialectically between a background of shared meaning and a more finite, focused experience within it. The hermeneutic circle is a metaphor used to describe the experience of moving dialectically between part and whole. Nearly all hermeneutic thinkers have relied on this metaphor as a way of expressing what occurs in “understanding.” For example, in his description of understanding, Palmer (1969, p. 87) noted that understanding is a basically referential operation; we understand something by comparing it to something we already know. What we understand forms itself into systematic unities, or circles made up of parts. The circle as a whole defines the individual part, and the parts together form the circle. A whole sentence, for instance, is a unity. We understand the meaning of an individual word by seeing it in reference...
of the sentence; and reciprocally, the sentence’s meaning as a whole is
dependent on the meaning of individual words. By extension, an indi-
vidual concept derives its meaning from a context or horizon within
which it stands; yet the horizon is made up of the very elements to which
it gives meaning. By dialectical interaction between the whole and the
part, each gives the other meaning; understanding is circular, then.
Because within the “circle” the meaning comes to stand, we call this the
“hermeneutic circle.”

This account of the hermeneutic circle suggests that understand-
ing is really a universal experience, one that is prior to scientific
inquiry or scholarship of any kind. One of Gadamer’s most import-
ant contributions to hermeneutic philosophy is his claim of univer-
sality for the hermeneutic experience. He argues that the hermeneu-
tic experience, the interpretation of our world in light of our
preunderstandings, is a universal feature of human life and that
these interpretive practices are only extended in our scholarship.

The circularity of understanding has another consequence of greatest
importance to hermeneutics; there is really no true starting point for
understanding, since every part presupposes the others. This means that
there can be no “presuppositionless” understanding. Every act of un-
derstanding is in a given context or horizon, even in science one explains
only “in terms of” a frame of reference. . . . An interpretive approach
which ignores the historicality of lived experience and applies tem-
toral categories to historical objects can only with irony claim to be
“objective,” for it has from the outset distorted the phenomenon.
(Palmer, 1969, p. 120)

From hermeneutics, we learn that preunderstandings (and the
theories that are connected with them) are pragmatic. They have the
potential of showing us something about ourselves and our pre-
ferred actions and something about the object of our inquiry. Herme-
neutic investigations, unlike empiricist ones, are reflective; they
show us glimpses of ourselves, for, in the act of interpretation, one
must be ever conscious of one’s prejudices and must examine them
reflectively so that the object of investigation can speak.

The connection between language, preconceptions, theory, and
research then is very different given the insights from hermeneutic
philosophy. For the hermeneutic account of understanding and in-
terpretation suggests that our theories, our methodological commit-
ments, our ethical commitments, and, in a more preliminary and
holistic sense, our cosmology provide us with conditions of knowl-
edge. In a larger cultural sense, the hermeneutic account of under-
standing indicates that our human interests cannot be eliminated or
neutralized, as argued in positivist accounts of science.

Understanding as the Fusion of Horizons

While many hermeneutic thinkers have emphasized the herme-
neutic circle as a metaphor for human understanding, Gadamer is
perhaps best known for his description of understanding as the
“fusion of horizons.” This metaphor of understanding draws on the
hermeneutic tradition, extending the notion of the hermeneutic cir-
cle and avoiding both subjectivist and objectivist objects of under-
standing. In Gadamer’s notion of the fusion of horizons, meaning is
neither located in the subjective intentions of the author or actor nor
produced by the interpretive methods and preconceptions of the
scholar. Rather, understanding happens when the horizons of the
scholar intersect or fuse with the horizon, context, or standpoint of
the object of inquiry. “Understanding is not a mysterious commu-
nication of souls in which the interpreter grasps the subjective Inten-
tion of the author. Rather it is a fusion of the text’s horizon with that of
the interpreter” (Hekman, 1986, p. 111).

Gadamer defines horizon, consistent with Nietzsche and Husserl,
as “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from
a particular vantage point” (1975, p. 269). Horizons then encompass
what we find intelligible given our specific cultural perspectives and
our place in history. The notion of horizon might then be seen as the
background or frame of reference one adopts as a result, for example,
of being a white middle-class professional woman. It is the back-
ground of meanings that are acquired by living in a linguistic com-
munity, by internalizing the culture in which we live (Dreyfus, 1980).
Gadamer (1975, p. 288) again asserts that horizons are temporal,
historically changing features of life that have limits but that, never-
theless, are open.

The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never
utterly bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly
closed horizon. The horizon is, rather something into which we move
and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving.
Thus the horizon of the past, out of which all human life lives and which
exists in the form of tradition, is always in motion.
Gadamer describes understanding as the fusion of these standpoints, as the intersection, coming together, or merging of different vantage points. The term “fusion” implies that one does not eliminate one’s own horizon, or ever leave it entirely behind. Neither does Gadamer suggest that all differences are collapsed and smoothed over, but rather that one’s horizon can change. This description also suggests that understanding cannot be reduced to an experience in which we see things empathically through another’s perspective or entirely from their vantage point. Instead, the fusion of horizons resembles the “I-Thou” relationship.

In the I-Thou relationship, I am open myself to the other; I am dominated by the will to hear rather than to master, and I am willing to be modified by the other. Analogously, in understanding I open myself to tradition, that is I let it speak to me allowing the meaning hidden in it to become clear. . . . The I-Thou relationship . . . involves a dialogic relationship. (Hekman, 1986, p. 104)

By drawing this analogy, hermeneutics suggests that the fusion of horizons is more like a posture, a style, a way of living, or a way of conducting oneself than it is a way of knowing. It involves the willingness to open oneself to the standpoint of another in such a way that we genuinely let the standpoint of another speak to us, and in such a way that we are willing to be influenced by the perspective of another.

For Gadamer, the ambiguity in this description is not a weakness, rather it is a positive structure of understanding. Specifically, in order to experience the fusion of horizons, one must be able to tolerate the ambiguity of relaxing (not eliminating) one’s own preconceptions.

A consciousness informed by the authentic hermeneutic attitude will be receptive to the origins and entirely foreign features of that which comes to it from outside its own horizons. Yet this receptivity is not acquired with an objectivist “neutrality”: it is neither possible, necessary, nor desirable that we put ourselves within brackets. The hermeneutic attitude supposes only that we self-consciously designate our opinions and prejudices and qualify them as such, and in so doing strip them of their extreme character. In keeping to this attitude we grant the text the opportunity to appear as an authentically different being and to manifest its own truth, over and against our own preconceived notions. (Gadamer, 1979, p. 152)

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An important outcome of Gadamer’s insights regarding the fusion of horizons is that understanding has a practical and moral orientation. This is why so much of hermeneutic philosophy has retraced insights from practical philosophy, arguing that the act of understanding is similar to the ancient Greek description of practical wisdom phronesis. Understanding is like wisdom; it grasps particular situations and, when wisdom understands, it also has a moral sense of what should be done. For Gadamer, and most hermeneutic thinkers, there has been a serious deformation in contemporary times that obscures the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Science may provide experts with knowledge, but it cannot provide them wisdom; wisdom and understanding are complex experiences in which we encounter our own preconceptions in the act of understanding something that is foreign or unfamiliar. This fusion of horizons usually results in greater self-understanding, a greater moral awareness, and an appreciation for other vantage points.

A final outcome of the fusion of horizons then is that understanding results in ever-increasing openness, for hermeneutic experiences always enlarge and enrich our understanding of the human condition. Hermeneutic philosophy again reminds us of the difference between explanation and understanding. The kind of practical wisdom that accompanies understanding is different from the accumulation of technical, problem-solving knowledge attributed to science and to experts. Rather, understanding leaves one open to future experiences and able to encounter the foreign and unfamiliar with this openness.

The truly experienced person, one who has wisdom and not just knowledge, has learned the limitations, the finitude of all expectations. Experience teaches him [or her] not so much a storehouse of facts that will enable [her or] him to solve the same problem better next time, but how to expect the unexpected, to be open to new experience. It teaches him [sic]. In short, the poverty of knowledge in comparison with experience. (Palmer, 1969, p. 232)

Understanding as Dialogue:
The Logic of Question and Answer

Gadamer’s insights about language, understanding, and the fusion of horizons reveal his ontological perspective. He argues that understanding is a mode of being and not a way of knowing. It is
crucial to recognize this distinction, for, when Gadamer describes understanding, he is talking about existence and about ways of living, which may or may not find their extension in ways of knowing. In his most famous work, *Truth and Method* (1975), Gadamer effectively demonstrated that understanding is not produced by scholars who rely exclusively on proper method, neither is it produced in fields of study where experts are socialized to produce knowledge through sophisticated research techniques. Technique and method, in general, can yield factual knowledge, like the knowledge of science, but method cannot produce truths. This is why the title of Gadamer’s book is a paradox, for he argues that truth is something that happens to us, above and beyond any method or specific technique, in the experience of understanding.

Gadamer’s insights regarding understanding lead him to formulate a third metaphor for understanding. He compares hermeneutic understanding to the act of dialogue and to the experience that happens between two partners in dialogue. This emphasis on the dialogic relationship is not surprising, given the centrality of language in hermeneutic philosophy.

The emphasis on dialogue owes some of its origin to the rhetorical and humanist tradition (in which Gadamer is an important participant). In this tradition, the center of discourse includes questions from philosophical anthropology, questions about what it means to be a human being, and questions about our relationship to our world. This is a reflective tradition that asks moral and ethical questions in a nonobjectivist way, a tradition that thus produces self-understanding, a deeper understanding of oneself and of others (Schrag, 1980).

Gadamer draws on this tradition when he equates understanding with the metaphor of dialogue. He draws out the analogy of question and answer and suggests that human understanding can be compared with the logic of question and answer or to the play of conversation that occurs between two partners in a dialogue. The metaphor of dialogue is a complex one and not all conversations would count for Gadamer as true examples of dialogue. A lot depends on the type of question that is asked.

Beginning with Socrates, hermeneutics has recognized three different types of questions. A rhetorical question is one that gives its own answer. A pedagogical question is one that implies the direction of its answer but leaves room for the student to cross in order to reach the answer. And a genuine question, while it is not infinitely open, leads in several possible directions to several possible answers.

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(Weinscheimer, 1985, pp. 206-209). In the hermeneutic tradition, the logic of genuine questions defines true dialogue.

When Gadamer compares the act of understanding with the metaphor of dialogue, he is suggesting that, when we understand, it is usually because we have opened ourselves to the logic of question and answer, where the questions asked are genuine questions.

Gadamer asserts that hermeneutic experience is characterized by . . . the logical structure of openness. This structure is found in the dialectic of question and answer. The hermeneutic phenomenon contains within itself the original meaning of the structure of question and answer, and thus it follows that the logic of human sciences . . . is coincident with the logic of the question. For a text to become an object of interpretation it must ask a question of the interpreter. This is not an arbitrary procedure because a question is always related to the answer that is expected in the text. An examination of the dialectic of question and answer reveals, furthermore, that understanding, like conversation, is always related to the answer that is expected in the text. An examination of the dialectic of question and answer reveals, furthermore, that understanding, like conversation, is always a reciprocal relationship. (Hekman, 1986, p. 108)

Gadamer asserts that, in dialogue (and analogously in hermeneutic experiences), understanding occurs when we surrender to the movement of question and answer. It is important to note the reciprocity involved in this account. It is not just that scholars ask a question of a text or of a participant. It is that scholars open themselves to the question that the material or the participants ask of them. This feature of hermeneutic philosophy is perhaps most at odds with an empiricist account of science and with the kind of socialization that most contemporary researchers experience. In most situations, scholars and researchers undergo intense socialization that prepares them to derive and refine their own research questions and then apply these questions by matching them with appropriate techniques. This approach to inquiry is at odds with the hermeneutic experience.

The scientist, in many cases looks at the object with one or more hypotheses and with the purpose of the research in mind, and thus 'uses' the object to corroborate or disprove a hypothesis, but does not encounter the object as such in its own fullness. . . . In their (scientists') attempt . . . to fit some object or phenomenon into some system, preconception, or hypothesis, one can often observe a blinding of themselves toward the full being of the object itself. (Schachtel, 1989, p. 171)
The creative negativity of true questioning, which is essentially the negativity in experience that teaches and transforms, is the heart of the hermeneutical experience. For to experience is to understand not better but differently; experience does not tell one what s/he expected, but tends to transcend and negate expectations. A “deep” experience teaches us not to understand better what is already partially understood so much as that we were understanding wrongly. . . . Analysis and methodical questioning, however, tend not to call into question their own guiding presuppositions but rather to operate within a system, so that the answer is always potentially present and expected within the system. Thus they are not so much forms of true questioning as of testing. But experience does not follow the model of solving a problem within a system. . . . When any truly great work of art or literature is encountered, it transforms one’s understanding; it is a fresh way of seeing life. (Palmer, 1969, p. 233)

Like dialogue, understanding is an experience that takes us out of ourselves and the context of our ordinary lives and conceptions and relates us to a discovery, to discovering something new, which we had not recognized before. This element of negativity in the hermeneutic experience comes from the willingness to risk our preconceptions, to open ourselves to the material we question and to allow it to speak.
sition defends the validity or objectivity of interpretation against the passion, self-interest, or prejudice of the scholar.

This hermeneutic theory has been labeled objectivist because it is most concerned with identifying standards of objectivity that apply to interpretive work and that guarantee the validity of interpretations, irrespective of historical changes or cultural biases. In most instances, scholars who work from this theoretical perspective are skeptical of the "radical relativism" they see in Heideggerian or Gadamerian notions of historicity and understanding.

Within objectivism, some scholars also maintain intentionalist positions. Intentionalism is frequently associated with early phenomenology and argues that the subjective intentions of an author or a social actor should be reconstructed in interpretive work. The term *intention, or intentionality,* is a very important one that has specific meanings within the phenomenological movement. Sometimes, the term *intention* has carried with it a psychologistic meaning, referring to the private mental events or processes of authors and historical figures. In this usage, scholars have sometimes argued that the validity of interpretive work comes from the ability to empathically understand the intentions of the historical figures or social actors they study. In other instances, intentionalism can have a more linguistic and less psychologistic meaning, focusing more on the expressions contained in a text or uttered by social actors (Hoy, 1982, p. 29).

Both versions of intentionalism carry important methodological implications. These positions are objectivist in the sense that they carry an injunction against the bias of the researcher or scholar. On this account, interpretive methods are adequate if they "*bracket," or suspend, the bias of the scholar and disclose the original meaning of the object of inquiry. In this sense, the objectivist perspective bears a clear resemblance to both positivist and phenomenological notions of value neutrality and presuppositionless approaches in research. It resembles positivism in its search for ahistorical principles of objectivity and its emphasis on value neutrality. And it resembles phenomenology in its injunction to "*bracket*" the presuppositions of the scholar and focus exclusively on the object of inquiry.

While this position has been seriously challenged during the last decade, it is a viewpoint that continues to inform a great deal of work in the humanities, in the social sciences, and in nursing. An emphasis on the actor's intentions, or "*emic*" perspectives, is the hallmark of interpretive approaches in the social sciences and in nursing.

It is a common characteristic of Wittgensteinian social science, Schutzian phenomenology and ethnomethodology to insist that the meaning of an action is determined by the meaning bestowed on it by the actor. Interpretive social scientists... argue that the actors' understanding of their actions, that is, their subjective meaning, not only establishes the meaning of the action but must be the point of departure of all social scientific analysis. ... Although most interpretive social scientists now argue that "subjective meaning" is not established by probing the mental events of the social actor but, rather, is established by the intersubjective meanings of the social context, they nevertheless assert that this meaning is the fundamental unit of social scientific analysis. (Hekman, 1986, p. 145)

This discussion has important methodological implications for nursing research. Most descriptions of qualitative research in nursing have been influenced by the methodology of interpretive social science and most demonstrate this objectivist bias. In nursing, this approach to interpretation is found in qualitative methods that are employed to render an accurate reconstruction of the meaning expressed by social actors. The use of ethnomethod, ethnography, or other qualitative field methods, the use of some feminist methodology and, even phenomenological research, can be objectivist, if the researcher holds this theory of interpretation. Among many qualitative researchers, this approach involves the use of various techniques, such as participant observation, ethnographic interviewing, and qualitative analysis, to reconstruct the "emic" reality of research participants. Among historical researchers, objectivism is demonstrated in the use of internal and external criticism to yield an accurate reconstruction of a period in the life of a historical figure.

Qualitative research in nursing then can be identified as objectivist if it focuses primarily or exclusively on the meanings expressed by participants as the fundamental unit of analysis. But the way that nurse-researchers understand this interpretive process is also important. Most nurses have been strongly influenced by the humanistic tradition and by a socialization process that encourages the use of empathy or intuitive understanding. This may lead some nurse-researchers to view what they do in research as an expression of empathy, as a process of "seeing things through the native's eyes." But this approach to qualitative research is not consistent with contemporary insights in the hermeneutic tradition.

Because of developments in the philosophy of mind and in the philosophy of language, it is generally not acceptable to attribute the
interpretable process to empathy or intuitive connections with others. As a result of recent advances, there is now a growing awareness that we cannot have direct access to the mental processes of others. Rather, it is now generally accepted that we only have access to the way mind is expressed through language and through action. This has led to a much stronger emphasis on language and the role it plays when we are trying to understand the inner experience and actions of others. As a result, most interpretive research focuses on the expressions of participants in a context and what these expressions and participants’ actions mean in that context.

When nurse-researchers study meaning in context by interviewing, participating with, or observing others, they usually present findings that identify recurrent themes or meanings that have been expressed by participants (Wolf, 1988). Such research demonstrates an objectivist approach to interpretation if the exclusive focus of the researcher has been on the expressions, message, or actions of historical actors in context. Here, inquiry is judged valid, or “objective,” because the researcher has used methods that yield an accurate or appropriate reconstruction of the phenomenon. It may be argued that researchers influenced by this theory of Interpretation generally adopt a definition of objectivity that differs only slightly from a positivistic account of objectivity. Here, the “facts” recovered in interpretive work demonstrate “validity” and “objectivity” if the researcher is “bracketed” and if the interpretation provides an accurate reconstruction of original meaning or meaning in context.

In nursing, as in most social scientific work, this methodological approach is one that does not incorporate Heideggerian insights or methodological implications from critical social theory.

Gadamerian Hermeneutics

A second major theory of interpretation is one that appropriates the revisions in classical hermeneutic theory made by Heidegger and Gadamer. While this theory of interpretation has been identified in nursing by the label “Heideggerian phenomenology” (Allen, Diekelmann, & Benner, 1986), some methodologists in the social sciences would not identify with Heidegger and would emphasize Gadamer’s philosophy of interpretation instead (Hekman, 1986).

Gadamer’s theoretical position emphasizes the fusion of horizons and dialogue as metaphors for interpretative work. The methodological implications of this metaphor are quite different from those found in objectivism and in most interpretive social science. While there is still very little literature that deals explicitly with the methodological implications of Gadamer’s hermeneutic philosophy, recent years have seen some beginning discussions of methodological implications for the social sciences. In her work, for example, Hekman (1986) lays careful groundwork by presenting a thorough analysis of Gadamer’s position and then poses the question of methods in the social sciences.

Although Gadamer is most definitely not offering a methodology for the social sciences in his work, his position has profound implications for the social sciences. He defines a philosophical perspective that so revolutionizes the way the social sciences are conceived that it calls into question our very notion of method. It follows that his position on language and the human sciences and the anti-foundational thrust of that insight necessarily dictate a methodology that is radically different from that conceived by most social scientists. (Hekman, 1986, pp. 92-95)

Because Gadamer maintains that interpretation always occurs through the fusion of horizons, his work suggests that researchers cannot grant epistemological priority either to the “emic” reality of research participants nor to their own conceptual lenses. Rather, hermeneutic investigations would, on this account, demonstrate a dialectic, an interplay between the expressions of those that are studied and the interpretive scheme used by the scholar. Most important, hermeneutic research would show explicitly how the horizon of the researcher fused with the horizon of the researched.

The first task of the interpreter is to understand the “horizon” of the action, that is, what the action meant to the participants. But for Gadamer, understanding action in the actor’s terms does not involve probing subjective intentions or “getting inside the actor’s mind” . . . for accomplished action has a meaning that is detached from the actor’s subjective intentions. What it means thus becomes what it means in the social context in which it occurred. For Gadamer, however, understanding the action in the actor’s terms is only the first movement in the dialectic of interpretation. . . . By continuing to insist on the epistemological primacy of the actor’s meaning, [social scientists] misunderstand . . . the dialectic of interpretation. . . . the task of understanding is to explain how the horizon of interpreter and interpreted are fused. (Hekman, 1986, pp. 148-149)

From these methodological discussions, Hekman goes on to pose specific guidelines for hermeneutic researchers.
How then would a Gadamerian social scientist approach the analysis of a concrete event? First, the Gadamerian, like the interpretive social scientist, would seek to define the historical and cultural horizon of the actors involved in the event. This would entail understanding the action in terms of the social actors. Secondly, the Gadamerian would be aware that in the course of the interpretation a different horizon of meaning would necessarily be imposed on the actor's horizon, that of the interpreter. The horizon of the interpreter is defined jointly by the historical perspective of the interpreter and a specific ideological perspective. Awareness of this imposition of the “prejudice” of the interpreter is the result of the self-reflection that occurs in interpretation; in his words, I understand myself “in front of the text.” Thirdly, the Gadamerian, unlike the interpretive social scientist, would be aware of the effect of the analyzed event on subsequent history. This consciousness enhances interpretation because the interpreter is aware that the effect of the event influences the interpretation. (Hekman, 1986, p. 151; emphasis added)

Hekman here identifies three methodological implications that result from Gadamer’s hermeneutics. These implications apply equally to historical research and to interpretive studies. As in any interpretive work, the first task of the researcher is to describe the historical and cultural horizon of participants involved in the research. The researcher does this by describing actions and what these actions mean in context. The second task of the researcher is to show how, in the course of analysis/interpretation, the researcher employs a different horizon of meaning, so that the actions of participants are understood differently. “The horizon of the interpreter is defined jointly by the historical perspective of the interpreter and a specific ideological perspective” (Hekman, 1986, p. 151). This means that hermeneutic researchers deal explicitly with their own interpretive theories and understand that the use of these theories provides one with a specific ideological perspective. For example, in historical research, hermeneutic scholars who study the history of professionalization in nursing (Melosh, 1982) may use the theory of professionalization as an interpretive background that provides a specific orientation to the “facts”: the point for the hermeneutic scholar is to demonstrate how this horizon has operated in the choice of a question and in interpretive work during the course of the research.

A third methodological implication of Gadamer’s hermeneutics has to do with the self-consciousness of the researcher. For the Gadamerian researcher, there is an awareness that one has chosen a research question or a situation or phenomenon because of its perceived effect on history. This effect is discernible to the researcher because of the interpretive scheme that informs the researcher and because of one’s standpoint in history. Hermeneutic researchers must, therefore, be self-conscious, must be aware that they have chosen an action or an event because of the effect they believe the event or phenomenon will have on history. In this sense, Gadamerian—unlike a Schutzian—interpretive work is not concerned with “bracketing” the perspective of the researcher. Rather, the point is to explicate how and why the interpretations (horizon) of the researcher have informed the choice of the research question and the research process.

One outcome of this theoretical and methodological position is that there is not a single, accurate privileged perspective in hermeneutic scholarship (Leonard, 1989). Rather, interpretations necessarily change with interpreters and with the questions, historical standpoints, and theoretical schemes or conceptual leanings that inform their research. Cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1979) discussed this methodological issue when he argued that interpretation is a dialectical process of moving back and forth between the “experience near” concepts of informants and the “experience distant” concepts of researcher. Both are a necessary part of interpretive work.

This hermeneutic approach suggests important dilemmas for nursing researchers. As with all social scientists, there is the immediate question of how one deals with the differences that arise between the researcher’s interpretation of an event and the participants’ interpretations of those events. Hermeneutic philosophy takes up this dilemma where the grounded theory movement left off (Hekman, 1986). For hermeneutics helps the scholar to know that there is no such thing as uninterpreted observations and that the “theory” or interpretations that emerge from the data are influenced by the conceptual leanings and interpretive background used, consciously or unconsciously, by the scholar.

Practical strategies for dealing with this dilemma depend, to a large extent, on the politics and consciousness of the researcher. For some, differences between the “emic” expressions of participants and the “etic” descriptions of the researcher can be addressed by keeping a journal in which the researcher documents personal reactions, noticing that his or her own horizon is operating in the way interpretations are made, and documenting differences in the way the researcher analyzes events versus the meaning those events have in their natural context. Wilson (1985) argues for the use of several different forms of field notes, such as personal, theoretical, observational, and methodological, as a way of documenting interpretive
work. Lincoln and Guba (1985) presented another strategy for dealing with this dilemma in their notion of an audit trail, in which the researcher documents methodological decisions and theoretical moves during the course of the research.

Another strategy that extends this concept would be to design opportunities for dialogue with participants into the research plan (Connors, 1988), so that the researcher provides explicitly for the "fusion" of horizons, allowing time for participants to hear how the researcher is proceeding in the analysis of data and documenting the effects of these discussions on the researcher and the participants. In this way, the hermeneutic researcher deals actively and explicitly with the dilemma of allowing one’s own theoretical or conceptual leanings to assume a privileged position.

Critical Hermeneutics

A final branch of interpretive theory has been identified as "critical" hermeneutics (Bleicher, 1980), or radical hermeneutics (Caputo, 1987). Like objective hermeneutics, critical hermeneutics begins from an assumption that not all interpretations are equally valid or true and that it is important for people to discern better from worse interpretation. But unlike objectivist hermeneutics, this critical strand of hermeneutics rejects the notion of a single, univocal meaning in any interpretive act. Like other postmodern acts of interpretation, critical hermeneutics maintains that texts or messages have a history of the development of meaning and that, with each successive interpretation, meanings are constituted. Critical hermeneutics further operates explicitly on the assumption that not all social actors are heard; that tradition contains many socially accepted meanings that are hegemonic, that represent the interests of a few; and that it is important to demystify socially oppressive meanings that may be unnoticed by participants themselves.

Paul Ricoeur (1981) identified an important difference between critical hermeneutics and other forms of interpretive theory in his analysis of phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Ricoeur would have characterized the difference between objective hermeneutics, Gadamerian hermeneutics, and critical hermeneutics by emphasizing the difference between faith and suspicion. He argued that, in most traditional forms of hermeneutics, interpretive method is characterized by positive belief or faith in the hidden meaning of the symbol or the text or the message. Traditional hermeneutics is generally motivated by the aim of restoring lost meaning, and it rests on the interpreter's faith that such meaning can be restored.

[Hermeneutic Inquiry] hermeneutics is first a listening, a "belief." This presupposition is one which grants the symbol a certain "truth" from the beginning. This "truth" may be merely that of the possibility of a signifying intention which may then be classified among other types of intentionality. But it is only through the willingness to "believe" that the symbolic dimension may be so described . . . the "belief" that the symbol has something to say and that the [scholar] may learn from the symbol finally presupposed a degree of active participation on the part of the [scholar] which belies the presumed diseinterestedness of a transcendental consciousness. . . . Hermeneutics in this version of restoration of (lost) meaning is motivated by the will-to-hear. (Ihde, 1971, p. 141)

If objective hermeneutics is characterized by a belief or faith in the meaning of the text or message, critical hermeneutics may be characterized by what Ricoeur termed "suspicion." Critical hermeneutic theory emphasizes the need to demystify, to go behind given meanings that are illusionary to meanings that actors themselves cannot see. According to Ricoeur, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud were practitioners of this critical hermeneutics, and the methodological styles found in psychoanalysis and the critique of ideology are ideal-type examples of critical hermeneutic practice.

The countermotivations of a hermeneutics of suspicion are those which begin from the demystification of the symbol. A hermeneutics of suspicion takes as its aim the removal of illusions. Its hypothesis is one which begins with the positing of a "false consciousness" which is deceived (either by its situation or in self-deception). . . . It is a motivation which opposes the decision to "believe." . . . [in] the implied Konomalism of a "suspicious" hermeneutics . . . all immediacy of meaning is questioned. (Ihde, 1971, p. 152)

Ricoeur then identified an important difference between critical hermeneutics and objectivist hermeneutics. This is a distinction that leads to significant differences in the theoretical and methodological commitments of most interpretive researchers and critical social theorists.

According to one view, hermeneutics is construed as the restoration of a meaning addressed to the interpreter in the form of a message. This type of hermeneutics is animated by faith, by a willingness to listen, and
It is characterized by a respect for the symbol as a revelation of the sacred. According to another view, however, hermeneutics is regarded as the demystification of a meaning presented to the interpreter in the form of a disguise. This type of hermeneutics is animated by suspicion, by a skepticism towards the given, and it is characterized by a distrust of the symbol as a dissimulation of the real. (J. B. Thompson, 1981, p. 6)

The critical impulse in this strand of hermeneutics is an intellectual remnant of the Enlightenment. In contemporary social theory, this influence appears in the work of the Frankfurt School, also known as Critical Theory. The most well-known living representative of the Frankfurt School is Jürgen Habermas, whose social theory (1979, 1985, 1987) has found recent applications in nursing (Allen, 1985; Hedin, 1986; Stevens, 1989; Thompson, 1987). Critical theorists are best known for their critique of ideology and their continuation of the contemporary neo-Marxist tradition (Held, 1980; McCarthy, 1979; O'Neill, 1976). Critical scholars maintain that human interests are not always served by a hermeneutics of faith, by noncritically interpreting the human condition. The existence of ideological structures, of half-truths and propaganda, of manipulation and oppression of thought, these are all conditions that may remain hidden from people. The suspicion that motivates critical hermeneutics aims at demystifying such structures by uncovering meanings that may be hidden from social actors themselves.

The tension between faith and suspicion is an interesting part of contemporary hermeneutic discourse. While objectivist hermeneutics is characterized more by faith, and critical hermeneutics more by suspicion, both impulses may be found within the work of a single thinker.

Within the more secularized variants of modern German hermeneutics, it is possible to see the effects of both tendencies (faith and suspicion), often in uneasy tension within the same thinker's work. In two recent traditions particularly, that of *Existenzphilosophie* and Critical Theory, both impulses have been operative. . . . The tensions between the two impulses are in part responsible for the continued fecundity of the two traditions. Indeed, it might be said that the cutting edge of contemporary German hermeneutics is precisely where *Existenzphilosophie* and Critical Theory Intersect, for it is here that the implications of the two types of hermeneutics have been most profoundly exposed. (Jay, 1982, pp. 91-92)

The tension between suspicion and faith is present in the works of both Gadamer and Habermas. The debate between them has produced an enormous amount of commentary and still generates important insights regarding central controversies in hermeneutic theory (Bleicher, 1980; Hoy, 1982; Jay, 1982). Habermas has been especially critical of philosophical hermeneutics and what he sees as a politically conservative tendency in Heideggerian thought in general.

For Habermas, as with Gadamer, the hermeneutic experience does include the horizon of the interpreter, the historical conditions that are brought to the interpretive project. But for Habermas, the whole notion of a fusion of horizons threatens the very possibility of scholarship as a critical activity, as a use of reason. Habermas maintains that the critique of texts, of meanings, and of participants' understandings of their world is an important way of showing us systematically distorted power relations, relations that are institutionally produced and reproduced, from generation to generation, because people do not see through them. He maintains that, as the critical theorist/scholar remains somewhat distanced, skeptical, and able to critique taken-for-granted meanings, the social world can be transformed, can move toward greater freedom.

In response, Gadamer argues that it is not possible to remove or distance oneself to a vantage point that is outside cultural, linguistic traditions and that critique cannot occur outside of the hermeneutic circle. Gadamer's influence on Habermas has been real. Critical social theory no longer maintains transcendental, "Eurocentric" perspectives about the critique of practice and action (Bernstein, 1983; Habermas, 1987). Instead, critical hermeneutics maintains that, within the symbolic dimension of the life-world, it is possible to slacken commitments to tradition and critically examine one's cultural practices. Language itself contains this critical function. The debate between Heideggerian scholars and critical social theorists then frequently centers on the extent to which people can go beyond their context-dependent understandings of a situation and leave behind meanings that are accepted because of uncritically internalizing the authority of tradition.

This controversy in the hermeneutic tradition is important for nursing, because issues that are raised in this debate may influence the theoretical and methodological perspectives held by nurse-researchers. One way to understand these issues is to look more closely at the ontology that is implied in Gadamer's hermeneutics, and in Heideggerian thought in general, and to see why Habermas is skeptical of these philosophical leanings.
Hermeneutic Inquiry

On one hand, hermeneutic philosophy grasps some important insights from postmodern philosophy. Gadamer and Heidegger both deal with what has been termed "the metaphysics of presence." During the twentieth century, this phrase has emerged in Western thought as we have become more reflexive and aware of the function of language in the construction of meaning. Insights from ordinary language philosophy have helped us to recognize that language always functions in ordinary life as a medium of meaning making. In language, things and the meaning of things in our world become present to us. This function of language to make things present to us is captured in the phrase "metaphysics of presence." Things become present for us in and through language. For some postmodern thinkers, this insight has led to nihilistic conclusions, to an emphasis on the function of language as a dissimulation, as an act of violence that imposes meaning.

Heidegger and Gadamer, however, hold a view of language that does not lead to this kind of nihilism. The hermeneutic act of language and history maintains that it is in and through our traditions, our practices, our preconceptions, our historical perspectives and worldviews, and our specific concepts and ideas that we are able to constitute the world and objects in it. Tradition gives us a world, makes it present to us. Hermeneutic philosophy also acknowledges that most of our naive, natural attitudes are characterized by pre-reflexive efforts to "fill in," to constitute objects and meanings. We do this frequently in un-self-conscious ways, without stopping to reflect, because we are already socialized as competent speakers.

But hermeneutic philosophy, as other postmodern schools of thought, is skeptical of this "foundation" of presence. Gadamer's work is especially antifoundational in that he emphasizes the social and historical nature of our understandings. Gadamer does not suggest that we should remain naive and comfortable within our traditions, in our ideas and in our ways of constituting the world. Like Heidegger, he holds absence and presence in an uneasy tension. For Gadamer, the hermeneutic experience is one in which the presence of the subject can be eclipsed, can be called into question because it is recognized as prejudice. With this recognition, we can see our attempts at making things present, and, in this moment, presence recedes, or withdraws, leaving mystery and letting things be (Caputo, 1985). The dialectic of absence and presence is reflected in Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons, because the fusion for Gadamer does not mean that all differences are collapsed, rather that one is opened up to different understanding. In this way, Gadamer's hermeneutic holds some opening for traditions to be transformed, to change.

This aspect of hermeneutic discourse is a precursor of other postmodern accounts of interpretation, where greater emphasis has been placed on this notion of eclipsing the perspective of the subject, on questioning the view or vantage point of the knower. In postmodernism, the uneasy tension between presence and absence is shifted, and there is a major emphasis on critique that decenters, that questions the perspective of the knowing subject as the seat of meaning making, and that, therefore, challenges the entire tradition of humanism, questioning the notion that humans are the center or the seat of meaning making. Postmodernism helps us to notice that only certain privileged voices have been heard in the construction of meaning and that these voices, which usually have belonged to white, privileged, heterosexual men, have held a monopoly on the establishment of meaning. Hermeneutics falls short of deconstruction here, however, in that it resists the tendency to equate human attempts to establish meaning with acts of violence that impose significance. In the evolution of Continental philosophy then, Gadamer's hermeneutics assumes a moderate position, "taking one to the abyss, but maintaining that there are things to be done" (Caputo, 1987).

The critical dimensions of hermeneutics are more skeptical of the ways in which meaning is constituted. In critical hermeneutics, there is an explicit focus on uncovering or deconstructing the role of tradition and the way tradition operates to establish meaning. There is a more explicit concern with questioning the authority of given meanings and of noticing that not all speakers' meanings count. Critical hermeneutics then does not thematize trust and notices that meanings that endure are largely the meanings of winners (Caputo, 1987).

The tension between Gadamerian hermeneutics and critical hermeneutics is one that appears increasingly in nursing research literature (Allen, Diekelmann, & Benner, 1986; Diekelmann, Allen, & Tanner, 1989; Leonard, 1989; Stevens, 1989; Thompson, 1985). In social scientific literature, recent discussions suggest that the debate between Gadamer and Habermas was more an issue of degree (Hekman, 1986; Jay, 1982), that hermeneutics may be more or less radical, depending on the extent to which one emphasizes the importance of critique and decentering. The debate between Habermas and Gadamer was important, however, because, as a result of it, Habermas (1987) modified an earlier transcendental leaning in his work and,
following Gadamer, located the possibility of critique within the functions of language and the life-world.

These issues of critique and tradition are important for researchers in nursing because they help us to understand our role in the social production of knowledge, in the development or the transformation of cultural traditions. For this reason, the movement between Gadamer, Habermas, and others' notions of deconstruction (Dzurec, 1989) is one that holds important implications for theory, method, and practice in nursing.

For many critical theorists, the language of being that is so characteristic of Heideggerian thought is problematic. Critical theorists will want to know who is speaking about being and how this speaker is situated in relation to other, more marginal discourse. Furthermore, an ontology of presence is problematic when it obscures context, remaining open to the moral presence of being but not dealing with the politics that are ever present in the social construction of our world. In so doing, Heideggerian thought may be criticized for contributing to the deformation of the world and of being, of helping to preserve a world in which the traditions, interests, and constructions of a few prevail. Critical hermeneutics, in contrast, is "constantly drawing our attention to those systematic features of contemporary society that inhibit, distort, or prevent dialogue from being concretely embodied in our everyday practices" (Bernstein, 1983, p. 224).

These differences in the theoretical leanings of hermeneutic scholars may also lead to differences in methodological commitments. Some recent discussions in the social sciences have identified methodological differences between critical hermeneutics and Gadamerian hermeneutics. These are methodological implications that also hold for nursing researchers, because they derive from differences in the theory of interpretation held by the researcher.

In her analysis of research informed by critical theory, Lather (1986) noted that critical inquiry is implied in at least three contemporary paradigms: feminist research, neo-Marxist critical ethnography, and Freirian "empowering," or participatory educational research. While there are several sources of example of critical hermeneutic work in research, these have remained somewhat isolated, and the methodological implications of critical hermeneutics have been largely unexplored.

Like Gadamerian hermeneutics, critical hermeneutics maintains that there are no neutral, objective interpretations. Critical herme-

Hermeneutic Inquiry argues, however, that there are many instances when researchers believe that "because they are unconscious of any bias or political agenda, they are neutral and objective, when in fact they are only unconscious" (Namenwirth, 1986). Unlike objective hermeneutics, which maintains that the interests of the scholar can be bracketed, critical hermeneutics argues that the vantage point and interests of the scholar are always involved in interpretation and that they should be explicit rather than hidden. In contrast to other interpretive approaches, critical inquiry is openly conscious of its interests and committed to critiquing distorted power relations and to building a more just society. Critical hermeneutics leads to a kind of research that "allows us not only to understand the maldistribution of power and resources underlying our society but also to change that maldistribution to help create a more equal world . . . [It is] research as praxis" (Lather, 1986, p. 258).

One feature of critical scholarship then is its function as an intervention, as a practice that can lead to greater understandings of injustice and through these understandings to transformations of the social world. Because critique, or "suspicion," is a feature of critical hermeneutic theory, researchers influenced by this tradition usually deal with the phenomenon of "false consciousness" or "consciousness-raising."

The critique of "false consciousness," or the critique of ideologies, then is a hallmark of critical hermeneutics, and while there is much controversy surrounding these notions, in general, they suggest that people may not always be aware of oppressive features of their situations. Critical hermeneutics maintains that we are frequently unaware of oppressive conditions because social and personal beliefs operate, as any ideology does, to convince us of the truth or authority of a situation. Such beliefs or ideologies may be critiqued as "false" if people have not had the opportunity to see through them or if such a "false" consciousness functions to legitimize a reprehensible situation (Guess, 1981). The "suspicion" behind critical hermeneutics then is intended to go beyond "commonsense," socially acceptable meanings and to uncover hidden meanings that may be unnoticed by social actors themselves but that, nevertheless, function to sustain and reproduce inequities and injustices.

Like consciousness-raising, critical or emancipatory research has an effect. The insights that are generated from self-reflection in critical hermeneutics intervene in people's lives and, subsequently, affect their realities.
Emancipatory social research calls for empowering approaches to research. For researchers with emancipatory aspirations, doing empirical research offers a powerful opportunity for praxis to the extent that the research process enables people to change by encouraging self-reflection and a deeper understanding of their particular situations. (Lather, 1986, p. 258-262)

Lather identified five characteristics of emancipatory research that illustrate the methodological implications of critical hermeneutics. While there are some similarities between this methodology and that found in Gadamerian hermeneutics, one important difference is the extent to which researchers explicitly situate themselves in relation to cultural practices. Critical researchers are committed to the critique of false consciousness and to an active, nonellist engagement with participants to address social injustices.

First, critical inquiry is a response to the experiences, desires, and needs of oppressed people. Its initial step is to develop an understanding of the world view of research participants. Central to establishing such understanding is a dialogic research design where respondents are actively involved in the construction and validation of meaning. The purpose of this phase of inquiry is to provide accounts that are a basis for further analysis and a corrective to the "investigator's preconceptions regarding the subjects' life-world and experiences." Second, critical inquiry inspires and guides the dispossessed in the process of cultural transformation. At the core of the transformation is a "reciprocal relationship in which every teacher is always a student and every pupil a teacher." [In the critique of "false consciousness"]... the present is cast against the historical backdrop while at the same time the "naturalness" of social arrangements is challenged so that social actors can see both the constraints and the potential for change in their situations.

Third, critical inquiry focuses on fundamental contradictions which help dispossessed people see how poorly their "ideologically frozen understandings" serve their interests. Fourth, the validity of a critical account can be found, in part, in the participants' responses. ... The point is to provide an environment that invites participants' critical reaction to the researcher's accounts of their worlds. Fifth, critical inquiry stimulates a "self-sustaining process of critical analysis and enlightened action." ... The researcher joins the participants in a theoretically guided program of action extended over a period of time. (Lather, 1986, p. 268)

These methodological commitments have a significant impact on issues of validity in critical research. In effect, they "raise the stakes," or increase the need for rigor, because researchers must demonstrate that their interpretations are "valid" and that they have done such work in a nonellist and nonmanipulative manner, "meaning that one wants to be not a 'one-way propagandist' " (Lather, 1986).

The summaries in Box 7.1 and Box 7.2 present methodological suggestions that guide interpretive work in emancipatory or critical research. Lather notes that these approaches explicitly address issues of validity and trustworthiness in data collection and interpretation.

Recent literature demonstrates the influence of critical hermeneutics in nursing research. Examples of this approach may be found in the work of Hedin (1986), who studied the socialization of nurses in German training programs, and in Allen and Peterson (1986), who studied shared governance in bureaucratic settings. In nursing education, the work of Diekelmann (1988) demonstrates the impact of critical research and empowering approaches in the curriculum. While this approach to research is clearly grounded in contemporary hermeneutic scholarship, an important issue for nurse-researchers influenced by this tradition is the extent to which prevailing institutions will support and remain open to critical interpretive work.
Box 7.2. Establishing Validity: Dialectical Theory-Building versus Theoretical Imposition

**SOURCE**: Adapted from Lather (1986).

Construct validity must be dealt with... [it] requires a ceaseless confrontation with and respect for the experience of people in their daily lives to guard against theoretical imposition. A systematized reflexivity which reveals how a priori theory has been changed by the logic of the data becomes essential in establishing construct validity.

Face validity needs to be reconsidered. "Research with face validity provides a 'click of recognition' and a 'yes, of course' instead of 'yes, but experience.' Face validity is operationalized by recycling description, emerging analysis and conclusion back through at least a subsample of respondents... refining in light of the participants' reactions. One caution... the possibility of encountering false consciousness creates a limit [for face validity]... most people to some extent identify with and/or accept ideologies which do not serve their best interests...." Catalytic validity represents the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it, a process termed conscientization.

**Hermeneutic Inquiry**

While Benner (1985) acknowledges the influence of Heidegger in her intellectual development, there is less evidence that she has been influenced by Gadamer's interpretive work and by the social and historical implications of his philosophy of interpretation. The absence of Gadamer's influence can be seen in a methodological ambiguity that places Benner's research somewhere between objective hermeneutics and Gadamerian hermeneutics. This ambiguity is an important one because, in dealing with it, one can anticipate future directions in the development of Benner's research program.

The study of expert practice in nursing was first discussed in 1982 (Benner, 1982a) and continued as a line of research that drew interest throughout the 1980s. Benner's research design uses "exemplars," which she defines as "an example that conveys more than one intent, meaning, function or outcome and [that] can easily be compared or translated to other clinical situations whose objective characteristics might be quite different" (Benner, 1984a, p. 293). The methodology involves interviews with highly skilled and experienced nurses who are encouraged to relate critical incidents from their practice in which they feel their interventions have made a difference in the patient's outcome. The exemplar interviews are then analyzed for themes that demonstrate common meanings and intentions. Benner also conducted interviews with pairs of nurses consisting of preceptors and newly graduated nurses to determine differences in practice between beginner and experienced nurses.

As a result of this research, Benner identified five levels of proficiency in clinical nursing practice. These levels of proficiency were labeled as follows: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert. In Benner's research, the movement from novice to expert involves changes in nurses' perceptions and use of past experience and movement from detachment to involvement. In addition to levels of proficiency, Benner also identified domains of competency in nursing practice, which include functions such as teaching-coaching, helping, diagnosing and monitoring, and managing rapidly changing situations.

The interpretation of data and identification of these competencies and levels of proficiency involved the use of a model of skill acquisition developed by Stuart Dreyfus, a mathematician, and Hubert Dreyfus, a philosopher. The Dreyfus model, in turn, was developed while studying the performance of airplane pilots responding to emergency situations (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986).

In the design of her research program and in the theoretical influence apparent in her work, Benner clearly demonstrates the appli-
tion of hermeneutic thought in nursing. For example, throughout her work, there are repeated references to the importance of meaning and the ways in which context determines meaning.

Meaning resides not solely within the individual or solely within the situation but is a transaction between the two so that the individual constitutes and is constituted by the situation. (Benner, 1985, p. 7)

The idea of situated meaning is a predominant part of Benner's work, as indicated in another statement, where she argues that the notion of skill acquisition used and developed in her research was a "situational model," where "the characteristics of the situation have as much influence on successful performance as does knowledge of procedural steps for performing the task." (Benner, 1982b, p. 304).

These references to situated meaning are a hallmark of Heideggerian discourse and in Benner's later work they are extended in a grand theory of what it means to be a person (Benner & Wruble, 1989). Benner's theoretical leanings are reflected in her notions about people being nonmechanistic and more than the sum of behaviors and cognitions. There is a clear emphasis on the primacy of being situated, of always interpreting one's situation and constituting its meaning. This use of hermeneutics is consistent with Heideggerian phenomenology and with Heidegger's claims about the primacy of interpretation and his insistence that interpreting is the ground of Being. But Benner's work also demonstrates a tendency to ontologize in ways that obscure the politics of situated meaning. Her use of hermeneutics is then not as socially and as historically grounded as it might be if influenced by different strands in the hermeneutic tradition. This influence can be discussed both at the level of theory and at the level of methodology.

First, at the level of theoretical influence, Benner's familiarity with Heideggerian scholarship has allowed her to break away from prior theories of nursing. Her approach to nursing practice emphasizes the holistic quality of actions. She maintains, along with most Heideggerians, that Western culture has for too long neglected the primary of being embodied and already situated in social contexts. She, therefore, begins from a vantage point that is more interested in people's experiencing of the world and less in how we know what we know. Such an interest is a natural application of the hermeneutic tradition, especially because this vantage point enables Benner to focus on skilled actions and the kind of interpretations that are involved in the practice of expert nurses.

Hermeneutic Inquiry

In taking this theoretical approach to nursing practice, Benner extended the Dreyfus model of skill acquisition. The research developed by Dreyfus and Dreyfus was part of a trend labeled "applied Heidegger" that occurred during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In philosophy, some of this impulse was translated into efforts to distinguish between artificial intelligence and human skill acquisition and it emerged in the work of Dreyfus and Dreyfus in their notions of skilled activity and embodied intelligence. These ideas emphasize the ways in which human decision making and expertise are holistic, experiential, and contextual.

The theory of skill acquisition implied in Benner's work shows how she has taken up a conversation that is central in hermeneutic discourse. The hermeneutic tradition has a long history of reconstructing ancient Greek distinctions between skilled technical knowledge and other forms of knowledge and wisdom. Many hermeneutic thinkers have explored the differences and similarities between wisdom, knowledge, and technical proficiency. Most scholars in this tradition refuse to reduce practical knowledge to the accumulation of technical experience. They have been part of an important conversation in hermeneutic discourse that recollects Aristotle's distinction between techne and praxis (Arendt, 1958; Bellah, 1982; Bernstein, 1983; Gadamer, 1975; Habermas, 1971; Lobkowicz, 1967; Parekh, 1981). For Aristotle, techne (poiesis) was the kind of technical knowledge one acquired as a result of repeated experiences in doing or making. In contrast, praxis (pronomos) was the kind of wisdom one acquired as a result of living in moral and political communities (Gadamer, 1975).

While Benner's work elevates the kind of knowledge found in skilled bodily activity, and this should be recognized as an important contribution to nursing, her research also deals with the wisdom, the ethics, and the politics of nursing practice. Benner's research retains a tie with hermeneutic discourse and with practical philosophy because she does not collapse the distinction between wisdom and knowledge. Specifically, she does not equate the knowledge of the expert nurse with technical proficiency. Underlying her descriptions of the expert nurse are descriptions of wisdom, of the ethics of knowing what should be done in specific clinical situations. Thus the technical proficiency, or the "knowledge" one acquires in the course of becoming an expert nurse, also includes wisdom, the ethics and politics of understanding, a prudent grasp of the situation with a moral sense of what should be done (Benner, 1989). For Benner, the wisdom of nursing is expressed in the term "care," or "concern"
(Benner & Wrubel, 1989), an ethical expertise that is expressed in nursing practice.

An important theoretical issue in Benner’s research stems from an ambiguity regarding this dimension of expert practice. For many hermeneutic thinkers, the wisdom of practice is derived from context, specifically from cultural practices that define the good and the virtuous. Many hermeneutic scholars notice that, in the transition from communal societies to capitalist ones, we have lost the cultural categories that made praxis a real activity, as opposed to an ideal (Bernstein, 1983; Heller, 1978). Other hermeneutic scholars have noted that, in the transition from communal societies to individualistic ones, contexts no longer bring diverse people together in ways that define, at the cultural level, what is good and virtuous (Macintyre, 1981).

It is this cultural frame of reference that is muted or missing from Benner’s research program. Most critical scholars would ask how the contexts of nursing practice influence the wisdom of nursing. Critical scholars might notice that, in many instances, nurses are losing the context of care (Moccia, 1988), and that the wisdom of nursing is gradually being eclipsed by the politics of hierarchical bureaucracies. The things that have significance or meaning for nurses, the way of being that is involved in caring, happens in a context, and we know that, in the modern world, these contexts do not always support the concerns of nurses or other marginal people.

Although Benner indicates that she is aware of the importance of context, her research does not sufficiently address the social and political contexts in which nurses practice. She does not show us, as a critical ethnographer would (Todd, 1989), how the context—both the macro and micro levels of the social world—set up meanings, how the culture of bureaucracies influences the wisdom, the ethics, and the politics of practice. A critical emphasis on the contexts in which nurses practice would help this research program not only describe the nature of “being” in nursing but show us how the social and political contexts in which we practice require our attention.

Additionally, Benner’s theoretical ties to Heidegger become problematic when ontology is discussed in universalizing ways. It is important to notice who is speaking about “being” or whose narratives are being considered. Postmodernism would remind us that the existential reality of white, middle-class women is not the same existential reality shared by working-class women or men of color. The “being” of a critical care nurse, if generalized to all categories of nursing practice, becomes another example of a privileged stand-

point developing into a discourse that is unconscious of its own hidden dimensions of power. It is, therefore, important to notice that expert practice of nursing does not constitute a single standpoint, rather, expert practice in nursing derives from the experiences of nurses who share different standpoints in terms of gender, race, class, and sexual preference.

These theoretical issues are matched by another concern, which occurs at the level of methodology. Again, Benner’s work is more clearly influenced by Heidegger than by Gadamer, and it is this influence that may be responsible for an ambiguity in methodology. Benner’s research occupies a somewhat ambiguous position that cannot be easily identified as objectivist, Gadamerian, or critical hermeneutic. On one hand, her methodology emphasizes the “emic” reality of nurses, recounting the stories of expert nurses as these are told in their natural settings. She uses three related interpretive processes in data analysis: thematic analysis, analysis of exemplars, and the search for paradigm cases (Benner, 1985).

This methodological strategy is of concern in that the analysis of themes and the development of coding schemes is presented without situating the researcher in relation to the practices. In her published work, there is not an explicit position that identifies Benner’s interest in these practices as part of a larger cultural scene. There is very little analysis or discussion that locates her interests “in front of” the text, so that the reader understands how and why Benner has chosen these practices as having an effect on history. The failure to situate herself in relation to the material suggests that this methodology is more consistent with objective hermeneutics.

But Benner’s research program has also included many public appearances in which she discusses exemplars with nurses and consultation that addresses the development of expert practice in institutional settings. This strategy could be consistent with Gadamer’s theory of interpretation, if it were used as a way to discuss the “fusion of horizons” that has occurred in Benner’s research. Such discussions would presumably situate Benner in relation to the texts and the practices of nurses, explicating her interests in expert practice and her choice of this topic or subject as having a potential effect on history. This research strategy needs to be explicit and readily available to the reader so that Benner’s audience can determine the ways in which the researcher understands the nurses’ stories in light of her conceptual background, an interpretive scheme involving practical ethics, embodied intelligence, and her own ideological perspective. If resolved, this methodological ambiguity will clearly
locate Benner’s research program within one of the following approaches to research: an objective hermeneutic, a Gadamer hermeneutic, or a critical hermeneutic.

The last possibility, that of Benner’s research occupying a clear position as critical hermeneutic research, seems unlikely. On one hand, Benner is a strong advocate of nurses, sees her work as informed by feminist commitments, and presents her work with the insight that “a lack of adequate description of clinical expertise has contributed to not only adequate recognition and reward in nursing” (Benner, 1984a, p. 11). But on the other hand, her methodological commitments do not include an active, explicit engagement with participants in the critique of oppressive social conditions, in the critique of ideology, or in the explicit transformation of the injustices in nursing.

Ironically, these criticisms are especially relevant for Benner’s research. While she adamantly resists the use of her research to certify novice, proficient, or expert nurses (1984), her work has, in fact, been used to develop clinical ladders and has contributed to increased tendencies toward hierarchy and stratification in nursing. This leaves Benner’s work open to a common criticism from feminist and critical social theorists.

A work that does not explicitly situate itself in relation to the cultural issues of its time does not help people to make cultural transformations. A work that does not address the politics of context does not succeed in being neutral or apolitical. It merely obscures impediments to cultural transformation. In hermeneutic research in nursing, theoretical and methodological ambiguities are important because they may contribute, albeit unknowingly, to the superficial use of a work in support of the status quo in nursing.

Closing Thoughts

This chapter provides an introduction to the hermeneutic tradition and explores issues and questions that are raised in the application of hermeneutics in nursing research. Patricia Benner’s work has been explored as a well-known example of hermeneutic scholarship in nursing. The strengths and limits of Benner’s research program may be summarized from several vantage points. On one hand, Benner’s work has clearly moved nursing discourse into a postempiricist era. Her views about science, research, and knowledge are some of the first indications that nursing is moving away from an empiricist perspective about science and theory and into a historical hermeneutic understanding of knowledge, wisdom, research, and practice.

Her work should also be recognized as an important practical intervention. She successfully locates the potential in nursing and in the practice of communities of nurses to believe in the significance of our contributions to the health and well-being of people. She elevates the “knowledge” of nursing at a time when the social world has consistently devalued it, and she does this not by appropriating an empiricist paradigm for knowledge development but by affirming the knowledge and wisdom that are embedded in the practice of nurses. This aspect of her research program brings to mind insights from practical philosophy.

One of the great needs of the modern democratic polity is to recover a sense of significant differentiation, so that partial communities, be they geographical, or cultural, or occupational, can become again important centres of concern and activity for their members in a way which connects them to the whole. (Taylor, 1975, pp. 441-416; emphasis added)

Because Benner’s hermeneutic fosters self-understanding and a sense of community in nursing, her work is an important empowering postmodern voice in nursing. But, from the perspective of critical social theory, this work needs also to show how the contexts in which we practice inhibit the development of a wider community, close off the possibility of free, unconstrained dialogue, and, while they may be empowering for the few, may also reduce the practices of many to a one-dimensional sphere of technical reason and purposive rational action.

Why? Because the threat of power and domination is ever present in modernity and it cannot be resisted if we obscure it. Critique is an important moment in the hermeneutic experience, and nurses as well as others can benefit from the incorporation of a critical hermeneutic voice in nursing research. Critical hermeneutics is not a totalizing nihilistic critique. It is rather a voice that is ever alert to the systematic deformations of the social world, showing us concretely what needs to be overcome so that the wisdom and knowledge of all people can flourish.

For what is characteristic of our contemporary situation is not just the playing out of powerful forces that are always beyond our control, or the spread of disciplinary techniques that always elude our grasp, but a paradoxical situation where power creates counter-power (resistance).
and reveals the vulnerability of power, where the very forces that undermine and inhibit communal life also create new, and frequently unpredictable, forms of solidarity. (Bernstein, 1983, p. 228)

By showing us how nurses resist systematically distorted communication and the power relations embedded in hierarchical contexts, and by showing us different models of community in bureaucracy, critical hermeneutics in nursing sketches the contours of a different social world. This form of scholarship not only is consistent with nursing's heritage and its tradition of care but is also an intervention that is urgently needed, a sketching, a spinning of metaphor that keeps alive the prospect of a genuinely human(e) world.

Note

1. In a personal communication (October, 1989), Benner argues that her dissertation (1984b) illustrates the differences between her research program and one informed by grounded theory.

References


Hermeneutic Inquiry


Hermeneutic Inquiry


Response to Hermeneutic Inquiry

PATRICIA E. BENNER

While there is much I agree with in Janice Thompson's chapter, I will respond critically to the assertions: (1) that interpretive hermeneutics fails to provide a critique; (2) that according to Gadamer and a three-way classification scheme, my work is methodologically ambiguous; (3) that the practical applications of From Novice to Expert to the development of clinical promotion programs create divisive hierarchies; and (4) finally, I argue for pluralism in critical methods rather than giving one critical method privilege.

Critique from an Interpretive Hermeneutical Perspective

Janice Thompson introduces the reader to the issues in the postmodern critique of logical positivism and relevant philosophy of science issues that distinguish the natural sciences and the human sciences. Those who do interpretive research begin with notions of the person that differ from the Cartesian assumptions inherent in logical positivism (Benner and Wrubel, 1989; Leonard, 1989; Taylor, 1989). I agree with Thompson that critical theory is an important method for critiquing false consciousness and oppressive ideologies, but do not agree that it is the only critical approach. Thompson, like other critical theorists, fails to see the possibility of critique that is not procedural or based upon the ethics of rights and justice.
Interpretive hermeneutics augments critical theory because in order to set up the rational discourse about justice, one needs a substantive set of goods that one wants to conserve and preserve. Critical theory provides a procedural approach (a freedom from dialogue, and a rights and justice dialogue) but does not provide a coherent statement of substantive notions of good (a positive freedom to do and be). Interpretive phenomenology of nursing practice and stress and coping in health and illness gives voice to the substantive good. Critical theorists might be called the pinnacle of Enlightenment thinking in which the focus of the critique is on freedom from rather than a substantive positive project of what to do with the freedom. This blind spot is what makes Thompson overlook the critical project in *From Novice to Expert* and *The Primacy of Caring*. Both of these works focus on the positive project of nursing, as Thompson notes, without focusing on the structural constraints of the practice. But Thompson fails to notice that the narratives of excellence (the freedom to or positive project) and nurses’ own critiques of constraints are used in both works to critique dominant cultural and organizational constraints to these nurses’ practice, e.g., a technological self-understanding and discourses of power that overlook everyday skillful ethical comportment and the ethics of care and responsibility.

Thus Thompson overlooks the ways that enlightened expert practice can be a source of liberation. Theory (critical or otherwise) is not the only source of liberation. In *From Novice to Expert*, and *Primacy of Caring*, excellent practice is used to critique the constraints of the practice, as well as to critique Cartesian dualism, techno-cure, a technological self-understanding and a strictly procedural approach to liberation. Both works critique the cultural crisis in caring practices. With a technological self-understanding comes a quest for control and a freedom from vulnerability that devalues caring practices and systematically overlooks many in the society who are vulnerable and require care. This is a central fault with the grand dream of freedom from the burdens of care that Enlightenment thinkers purchased by their liberation and freedom through the work of many supporting caregivers. This, in fact, is a blind spot in the discourse ethics proposed by Habermas (1989a; 1989b) and critical theorists, where the communicative context is based upon rational discourse among equals (see Fraser, 1987; Benhabib, 1987; 1989; Murphy & Gilligan, 1980).

I suspect attention to the procedural approach to critique used by critical theorists causes Thompson to overlook the critical passages

Response to Hermeneutic Inquiry

In both works, perhaps because the definition of the problem is different in critical theory and interpretive phenomenology. The following excerpts are cited as evidence of this oversight, for example, in *From Novice to Expert*:

The disparagement of feminine perspectives on power is based upon the misguided assumption that feminine values have kept women and nursing subservient, rather than recognizing that society’s devaluing of and discrimination against women are the sources of the problem. The former view—the misguided assumption—blames the victim and promises that discrimination will stop when women abandon what they value and learn to play the power games like men do . . . Adopting coercive, dominating notions of power or strictly public-relations approaches abandons the values and commitments required for powerful caring and excellence; it adopts the pathologies inherent in a unipolar view (Benner, 1984a, p. 208).

And in *The Primacy of Caring*:

The rational-technical model of management has no language or strategies for determining what are worthy goals (MacIntyre, 1981; March, 1976). The rational-technical model is limited to the assumption that we know what are the appropriate ends and that the only problem is how to be more efficient in reaching them. To go beyond the rational-technical model we need to develop a discourse on worthy ends. We need to examine our caring practices and augment the rational-technical model of management with narrative forms about what is required to support and facilitate excellence in caring practices . . . If nurses are to liberate caring practices, organizations will have to be redesigned to facilitate and sponsor caring practices (Benner & Wrubel, 1989, p. 399).

Both books provide commentary on the constraints in practice identified by the nurses. I conclude that Thompson does not recognize the form of critique that my work takes. This conclusion is sensible since these works critique critical theory's only critical strategies for liberation, i.e., rational discourse and abstract principled ethics. In fact this form of liberation overlooks notions of good unamenable to adjudication. Critical theory is limited to epistemological and power issues, it cannot offer new webs and new metaphors. It can help us clear the way for the new metaphors, and that is a significant contribution.
Methodological Ambiguity

I disagree that my work is methodologically ambiguous because it “does not show the influence of Gadamer.” Gadamer’s methodological insights stem from Heidegger and Kierkegaard, and indeed I too have been influenced by Gadamer’s cogent arguments about the impossibility of separating theory and method as is referenced in most of my work (Benner & Benner, 1979; Benner, 1984b; Benner & Wrubel, 1989). Thompson is correct, my work does not fit the three categories: an objective hermeneutic, a Gadamerian hermeneutic, or a critical hermeneutic approach to research. My work is based upon the writings of Kierkegaard (1846, 1967; 1842, 1968), Heidegger (1962; 1982), Dreyfus (1990), Rubin (in press), and Taylor (1985, 1989), where the goal is to study naturallyistically the habits, skills, practices and meanings of people. The interview and observation data provide a text analogue. The goal is to get beyond “subjectivism” and “objectivism” by critiquing the Cartesian view of the person as private, disconnected, subject standing over against an objective world. The assumption is that common language, habits, skills, practices, situations, meanings, and embodiment make it possible to understand others, not as private subjects but as embodied participants and members of a common humanity, language and culture group. The common taken for granted meanings and practices do not ensure agreement. Indeed they provide enough commensurability for disagreement and for different voices to be heard. Complete incommensurability would not allow for meaningful differences to show up (Gadamer, 1975; Kuhn, 1970). As noted above, interpretive phenomenology seeks to elucidate the meanings, knowledge, skill, and notions of good embedded in divergent practices and human activity, in order to provide the substantive alternatives and to provide a critical perspective based upon the substantive content and notions of good embedded in the practices. In this way it contains a positive project (a hermeneutics of understanding, or faith, i.e., giving voice to the observed practices) and a critical project of identifying the voice embedded in the practice as well as the conflicts, constraints and blocks to this voice and practice in its most liberated form. The focus tends to be on context, function, and process and less on structure. Interpretive phenomenology is well suited to the study of habits, skills, and practices that are not limited to language, and therefore it is well suited to study embodiment. Interpretive phenomenology is not the best method for studying structures.

Thompson states that my “work has in fact been used to develop clinical ladders and has contributed to increased tendencies and stratification in nursing.” This is critical theory at its freedom from worst. Is the unstated critical theory alternative a non-stratified, non-hierarchical, completely classless, egalitarian system that recognizes no distinctions between knowledge, function and skill levels? It is hard to imagine what such an arrangement would be other than chaotic and nihilistic. I interpret clinical promotion programs as a valid way to develop the practice (knowledge, skill, and notions of good), an approach that gives credit and empowerment to nurses fairly and appropriately. I would not like for the only hierarchy and reward system to be administrative. I believe that strategies that attend to the focus on the actual knowledge and skill embedded in the practice are the best approach to develop the practice, and to promote and reward excellent practice. The Dreyfus model of skill acquisition is not a trait or talent approach, it is based upon actual performance in practice and is judged by peers. When done well it can provide sound, just distinctions that help nurses provide the best health care.

Pluralism in Theories and Methods

Finally, I do not think that it is possible for one method or one paradigm to make all voices or all aspects of our human world visible. In the human sciences, the existence of one normal paradigm or choosing only one critical method would create totalitarianism or totalism, not diversity, not increased possibility. We need critical theory, but it is not the only critical method. We need interpretive phenomenology because it has both a critical and a positive project, but it too is not the only interpretive approach. It is less suited for structural analysis and like any method cannot be adequately evaluated by examining one study or one researcher.

References

Sociolinguistic Inquiry

MARY LOU VANCOTT

... the process of communication always involves a mutual exchange of impressions between the patient and the care provider.

The achievement of goals in health care often hinges on the professional health care provider’s ability to interpret as a coherent whole the very diverse needs and perceptions of individual patients or clients. Among a number of factors that may influence the patterns of communication in health care settings are the individuals themselves, interacting in a specific situation. The patient’s perspective may influence the outcome of care, may affect the quality of the intervention experience, or may contribute to the degree of adherence to the treatment plan (Brink, 1986). An analysis that deals with both the interaction process between patients and health care providers and the social and perceptual processes that affect the interaction has the potential to increase understanding substantively, methodologically, and theoretically by adding new dimensions to our understanding of the patient’s social environment and reactions to that environment. From such analysis, it is possible to build a theoretical link that connects social interaction with the context within which it occurs. The focus of this chapter will be on the use of sociolinguistic analysis as a method of inquiry to advance knowledge for nursing interventions in areas where language, communication, and the interaction process are the focus of study.