

Hermeneutics and Humanistic Psychology

David L. Rennie

York University

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Abstract

In this article, it is argued that the engagement of hermeneutics is common to both the creation of theory in humanistic psychology and the conduct of qualitative research. The theories of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers serve as examples of the tacit use of hermeneutics in theory development. With respect to qualitative research, the phenomenological psychological and grounded theory methods are connected with the concept of a human science approach to the social and health sciences, and are examined critically to expose the hermeneutic involvement in them. A call is put out for a meta-methodology of qualitative research based on the methodical type of hermeneutics. Benefits of such a methodology are suggested, especially enhanced integration of the theory and research in humanistic psychology.

Hermeneutics and Humanistic Psychology

What came to be known as humanistic psychology originated in the 1950s in the interest of restoring to psychology the nature of what is involved in being a person. Psychology was seen to have reduced persons downward to unconscious drives and wishes, on the one hand, and to behaviors controlled by environmental contingencies, on the other. For the founders of humanistic psychology, these downward reductions deprived psychology of the full range of its subject matter.¹ To correct the reductions, the founders took into account cognition, emotion, feeling, will, morality, ethics, esthetics, as well as intrapersonal, interpersonal and transpersonal relationships.

The magnificence of this scope makes humanistic psychology a world-view more than a discipline of psychology as such.² This nature of humanistic psychology has always caused tension. On the one hand, it has been reluctant to join mainstream psychology to avoid being bound by its constraints. On the other, it has desired to be within it to alter the constraints themselves. This conflict is reflected in the ways in which its participants have engaged in humanistic psychology. Some identifying with the arts and humanities have either engaged in rationalist theorizing or have integrated artistic performance into their professional practices of psychology. Others identifying with research have valued rational-empiricism and the positivistic methods going with it. Still others have disputed this approach to knowledge production, valuing non-positivistic, qualitative methods instead.

Diversity and the tensions like these can be contained within a world-view. But, the impact of humanistic psychology surely would be enhanced if it were more

integrated. The present essay is written in the interest of promoting such integration. I take the position that there is a common theme uniting the three kinds of humanistic psychologists: this is the theme of hermeneutics as method. This is not an easy argument to make. Those identifying with a realist epistemology (theory of knowledge) and positivistic methodology (theory of method) are inclined to view the argument as a regression to the humanities and the arts from which psychology has tried to emancipate itself; while those identifying with a relativist epistemology and methodological pluralism worry that it threatens to replace what they see as the methodolatry entailed in positivism with yet another one, albeit of a different kind (e.g., Reicher, 2000; cf. Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 2000). Hence, in order to inspire confidence in hermeneutics as method, it is necessary to demonstrate that it offers a way of moving psychology forward by accommodating realism and relativism. I believe that this accommodation is possible by applying hermeneutics, so long as it is looked at in the right way.

The essay has four parts. In the first I consider briefly the meaning of the term “hermeneutics;” and I amplify that meaning in terms of three main types of hermeneutics, and where they stand today. In the second, I bring hermeneutics into humanistic psychology by arguing that even the founders identifying with positivism developed their ideas through a tacit engagement in hermeneutics. In the third, I consider deficiencies in the methodologies of two main approaches to qualitative research. Finally, I conclude with a proposal of a program to develop a meta-methodology of qualitative research based on hermeneutics as the expression of human science, and outline the advantages of doing so as I see them.

I lead off with the nature of hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics

Definition of the term. Hermeneutics has been defined as “the theory of the operation of understanding in relation to the interpretation of text” (Ricoeur, 1978, p. 141). But what is meant by “text?” For the Greeks and medieval Scholastics, it meant sacred and legal documents. In the 19th century Schleiermacher and his associates, however, saw hermeneutics as “the primary aspect of social experience, not only for the scholarly interpretation of texts or documents of the past, but also for understanding the mystery of the inwardness of the other person” (Gadamer, 1984, p. 57). Others such as Karl Jaspers have generalized it even more to include the interpretation of oral communications, when proposing that psychoanalysis is a matter of hermeneutics (Erwin, 1997).

Meanwhile, in contemporary philosophy it is maintained that all science is a matter of interpretation. Does that mean that all science is thereby hermeneutical? The answer is both “yes” and “no.” Anthony Giddens observed that the physical sciences involve a single hermeneutic, while the human sciences involve a double hermeneutic. Thus, in reference to his discipline of sociology, he wrote, “Sociology...deals with a pre-interpreted world where the creation and production of meaning-frames is a very condition of that which it seeks to analyze, namely human social conduct” (Giddens, 1976, p. 158). The term “human social conduct” has an exteriorized, behavioral connotation. It does not take into account human experience beneath the surface of conduct. As maintained by the above 19th century hermeneuticists, there are texts about this experience as well, and these are the kinds of texts of interest to psychology, especially psychologists engaged in activities like psychotherapy. In any case, in current

thought, the term “hermeneutics” generally is reserved for fields of enquiry entailing the double hermeneutic. Thus, putting all this together, I define hermeneutics as the interpretation of written and oral texts about matters that include human experience and social conduct.

Three contemporary types of hermeneutics. In contemporary thought, there are three types of hermeneutics -- the methodical, philosophical, and critical kinds (Palmer, 1969). The first is about making hermeneutics into a method. The second attempts to answer the question, “How is understanding possible? (Gadamer, 1997). The third applies hermeneutics to the study of social change, emancipation in particular. Historically, methodical hermeneutics first appeared in the 16th century (Dilthey, 1996), in contrast to the more recent development of philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1992/1960) and critical hermeneutics (Habermas, 1984/1981). In a later section I distinguish how these types are positioned in terms of ontology (the nature of being), epistemology, methodology, and method. For now, however, I will touch on ontology by pointing out that there are important differences in these three kinds of hermeneutics in terms of human agency. Methodical hermeneutics locates it in the person. Philosophical hermeneutics reduces it upwards to tradition and culture. Critical hermeneutics drops it down a notch from this level in order to allow for human agency, but only in terms of speech acts, which is still an upward reduction (Wiley, 1994).

The Tacit Hermeneutic Nature of the Work by Founders of Humanistic Psychology: The Cases of Maslow and Rogers

In one way or other, the founders of humanistic psychology engaged in hermeneutics although they seldom saw their work in this light. Abraham Maslow and

Carl Rogers are cases in point. Maslow is noted for his theory of motivation crowned by the need for self-actualization (Maslow, 1987), Rogers for his person-centered theory of psychotherapy and the necessary and sufficient for conditions for therapeutic personality change (Rogers, 1951, 1957, 1959).

Maslow's theory of motivation. Maslow reported that his theory was sourced in his idolization of two of his teachers, Ruth Benedict and Max Wertheimer. He was interested in studying them to learn what made them the way they were. He proceeded to observe, more intently than before, how they behaved. He succeeded in interviewing them. He made note of what he learned in the interviews. He sought out other people who seemed to display the qualities he noted, and interviewed them. He ended up interviewing people from many walks of life (Maslow, 1967). He also read biographies of people who seemed to share the qualities he was learning about. He developed a system of categories organized in a hierarchical structure. When doing this, in several respects his approach was remarkably like the grounded theory method (cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Maslow, 1987; see also Josselson & Lieblich, 2001 who characterize his work as 'holistic qualitative'). The result was his theory of motivation.

Maslow wrote that he got support from Michael Polanyi's thesis of the subjectivity involved in the production of science (Polanyi, 1964/1958). It is noteworthy that in this book Polanyi wrote about natural science, not human science, and certainly not the kind of human science envisaged by Vico, Dilthey and Wundt. Maslow (1966) saw Polanyi's insertion of scientists' subjectivity into the production of scientific ideas as true of how he, Maslow, had developed his theory. Nevertheless, like Polanyi, Maslow saw his subjectivity to be involved in the development of theory, where its validation

required objective measurement of the variables specified by the theory. He both developed his own psychometric instrument to measure it and advocated further such psychometric work. In this sense, Maslow was a positivist.

As far as I know, the word “hermeneutics” never appears in Maslow’s writings. Yet it is clear that he operated as a methodical hermeneuticist in the development of his theory. He asked questions about his experience in an attempt to understand it. He talked to people and developed understandings of what they said. He read about people and applied his previous understandings to what he read, and vice versa, thereby engaging the hermeneutic circle of having the meaning of the whole of the text inform the meaning of the parts of the text, and vice versa.

Although Maslow (1967) viewed the development of his theory as pre-science, he nevertheless felt sufficiently confident in it to present it to the world short of this kind of validation. My sense is that he did so because, although he did not see it in these terms, his theory was grounded in his hermeneutic understanding of his and others’ experience of the phenomenon in which he was interested, where the experiences were articulated as texts about the phenomenon, in both respects.

Rogers’s Person-Centered Theory of Personality Change. Carl Rogers’s person-centered theory of personality change was sourced in American values of liberalism and individualism. In his parents’ being devout Christians. In his observing when a child that potatoes in the family’s root-cellar sent huge sprouts toward the dim light, as if searching for a way to grow. In his conduct of experiments on the farm to determine how best to grow things. In his experience of the success of a university course that he and fellow students created and ran without a professor, for degree credit. In John Dewey’s

instrumental philosophy that stresses adaptation and growth, and which challenges mind-body dualism. In Kurt Goldstein's view emphasizing that persons are organisms. In the notion of self-actualization that Kurt Goldstein proposed and Maslow endorsed. In his successful seeking of parents' counsel of how to deal with their children, referred to the clinic where he worked. In his reading works by Otto Rank that stressed creative will. In his attention to psychotherapy conversation recorded electronically. In his shyness as a person that extended into adulthood, and in his sensitivity, compassion and doggedness.

He formalized his understanding into a theory of personality and of the necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. Like Maslow, during the years when he engaged in science he was a positivist at heart and he proceeded to lead an extensive research program where he tested his theory with measures of therapists' empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence predicting clients' processes of change, in turn measured. Also like Maslow, he did not see the development of his theory as an expression of methodical hermeneutics. But that's what it was. It was an understanding derived from a purposeful and systematic interpretation of his memories, experiences and beliefs integrated with his interpretation of the meaning of his and others' observations of their experiences and social conduct.

Methodical Hermeneutics, Human Science, and Qualitative Research

A connection can be made between methodical hermeneutics, human science, and qualitative research. The first two moments are most easily linked in terms of the work of Wilhelm Dilthey. He sought a way of extending Kant's critique of pure reason to a critique of history. Kant's critique was sourced in the natural sciences: Dilthey found the epistemology coming from Kant and other Enlightenment rationalists to have "no true

blood flowing in the veins of the knowing subject...it is only the diluted juices of reason, a mere process of thought” (abridged from a quotation by Dilthey given in Rickman, 1988, p. 135). Dilthey took account of *Erlebnis*, or lived experience. Correspondingly, he came to the same conclusion that Vico had arrived at a century before, namely that the study of the nature of being human requires its own kind of science, a human science. Initially he thought that descriptive psychology would serve as the foundational discipline for all of the human sciences. Eventually he abandoned this idea and turned to hermeneutics (Makkreel, 1992). In making this turn, he considered suitable texts to be objective signs of lived experience as they are found in literature, art and architecture. He dismissed introspection because it was too subjective.³ He also held that human experience is so complex that it can only be understood in terms of the individual, whether an individual person or historical event. In doing so he employed the hermeneutic circle (see above). He also used induction, but in the opposite way it is used normally, in that he applied types to the understanding of the individual rather than conceptualizing as types those commonalities seen in aggregates of individuals.⁴ In a nutshell, this was his methodical hermeneutics. In terms of ontology, it entailed the modern concept of an agential self. In terms of epistemology, it was a life-long attempt to accommodate realism and relativism (for the history of the attempt to effect this accommodation, beginning with Aristotle, see, e.g., Coffey, 1917/1958; Wiley, 1994).

After Dilthey, methodical hermeneutics lay fallow until the 1960s, when Betti (1980/1962) and Hirsch (1967) gave it a rebirth. Both challenged the upward reduction of the person into tradition and culture foundational to Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. Their challenges could not overcome the support it got from the similar

upward reduction made in fashionable postmodern and post-structural thought, however. Instead, the attempt to resurrect methodical hermeneutics was dismissed by Gadamer as a regressive return to what he described as Dilthey's Romantic modernism. In consequence, there has never been a concerted attempt to make methodical hermeneutics into a methodology adequate for contemporary qualitative research methods (see, e.g., the contributions to the edited work by Messer, Sass & Wolfolk, 1988). Meanwhile, there is little to be gotten out of philosophical hermeneutics in terms of method because this approach to hermeneutics operates at the level of ontology, not epistemology and certainly not method. The result of all this is that methodical hermeneutics has been left in a vacuum since the development of philosophical hermeneutics. Meanwhile, although critical hermeneutics has more connection to the human sciences by virtue of its focus on social emancipation, Habermas's project mainly is cast at the level of epistemology; it has much less to say about methodology, and even less about method (see McCarthy, 1978).

The Rise of Qualitative Research

In the midst of this situation in contemporary hermeneutics new ways of doing research were developed in sociology, psychology and related disciplines. These methods were sourced in anthropology, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and conversation analysis. They came to be known as "qualitative" research methods, in contrast with "quantitative" methods. These qualitative research methods have been divided along ontological and epistemological lines. Forms of language analysis such as conversation, discourse and narrative analysis generally reduce upward the concept of the person to language, and have relativism as their epistemology. Alternatively, the

grounded theory method and the empirical-phenomenological method of phenomenological psychology do not reduce the person either upward or downward and endorse, if only tacitly, an epistemology that accommodates realism and relativism. Thus, in these respects Dilthey's ontological positioning and epistemological struggles are preserved. Correspondingly, these two methods relate to Dilthey's concept of human science and this connection is observed from time to time (e.g., Fischer, 1977; Giorgi, 1970; Giorgi, Knowles & Smith, 1979; Rennie, 1995; Wertz, 2001).

As indicated, Dilthey took some steps toward translating his notion of human science into method, but he left much to be done to make this work, especially at the level of methodology. In developing this theme, in this section I consider briefly the empirical-phenomenological method of phenomenological psychology and then the grounded theory method, in this respect.⁵

The empirical-phenomenological method of phenomenological psychology. The empirical-phenomenological method of phenomenological psychology is designed to describe the structures of lived experience (Churchill, 2000, Churchill & Richer, 2000; Churchill & Wertz, 2001). It is often portrayed by its users as having a hermeneutical element, although the connection with Dilthey's hermeneutics is played down. Instead, hermeneutics is addressed more implicitly than explicitly through reference to Heidegger's existential phenomenology, which in its development involved a turn to hermeneutics. In this way users of the empirical-phenomenological method can justify it *as* phenomenological rather than hermeneutical while recognizing Heidegger's criticism of Husserl's claim that it is possible in phenomenology to achieve apodictic descriptions of the essences of phenomena (on this critique see, e.g., Churchill & Richer, 2000;

Dreyfus, 1991). Fashioning a phenomenological psychological method out of a combination of Husserlian transcendental and Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology is not easy to achieve coherently, even when mediated by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1945, 1963/1938; cf. Churchill, 2000), in my view. Husserl's phenomenology is a rational-intuitive method that purports to transcend empiricism, or, as Husserl often described it, "mere psychology" (Husserl, 1931/1913). Thus, to use it to descend to empiricism is oxymoronic, a position to which Husserl adhered despite his attempt to make a departure into phenomenological psychology toward the end of this career (see Scanlon's Introduction in Husserl, 1977/1962). When Heidegger's (1996/1927) phenomenology is turned to as a way out of this incoherence, it is necessary to derive from it implications for method. But his phenomenology is about ontology, not epistemology, and has nothing to say about method. This situation leaves phenomenological psychologists in the position, when referring to Dilthey's approach to hermeneutics, of emphasizing description more than understanding (see Churchill, 2000; Churchill & Richer, 2000; Churchill & Wertz, 2001), seemingly to make their method accord better with phenomenology. This tactic reverses the balance between the two activities seen in Dilthey's writings (Dilthey, 1996, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). Correspondingly, in being tied to description as their mandate, phenomenological psychologists are constrained against formulating their descriptions into theory. I return to this point presently.

The grounded theory method. The grounded theory method was founded by two sociologists (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) who were discontent with what they saw to be the overly rational, top-down theorizing normative for their discipline. They developed a

way of “discovering” theory by grounding it in empirical events and conceptualizing commonalities among them, organized by a core category, or supreme commonality. They initially came to agreement on this development of a radically new method despite having had quite different backgrounds. Glaser’s background is in descriptive, quantitative sociology whereas Strauss’s was in symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). Although the method has become quite popular in the social and health sciences, as it stands it, too, entails many problems. The root of them is epistemological. Although Glaser and Strauss have recognized that the production of a grounded theory is always relative to whoever produces it, they made no attempt to justify this position epistemologically, either initially (i.e., Glaser & Strauss, 1967) or in later amplifications and revisions of the method (e.g., Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This neglect has left it open to alternative epistemologies (see, e.g., Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000). Much disarray has resulted. Glaser and Strauss themselves came into bitter conflict about the proper conduct of the method (cf. Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; see Rennie, 1998). Although Strauss’s revised version is more popular than the original method defended by Glaser, elements of Strauss’s revised method are routinely ignored. Many users reduce the method to mere theme analysis, thereby falling into the practice that the method was designed to go beyond (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Some people insist on group consensus of categories (e.g., Elliott, et al., 1994), others not (e.g., Rennie, 2000). And so on.

Meanwhile, although Glaser has always maintained that the method can be applied to “quantitative” data as well as “qualitative” data, it usually has been applied to the latter. These data have the form of notes made on the behavior of people, reports by

people on their experiences and social conduct, the researcher's own experience and conduct, and literature relevant to the phenomenon under study. All of this is text, and all is interpreted because that's what the categories produced by grounded theorists are: interpretations. Thus the methodology of the method resolves to hermeneutics, even though it is seldom seen as such.⁶ Nor is it recognized that seeing the method in this light provides guidance on how the method is to be positioned epistemologically.

This takes me to methodical hermeneutics as a possible meta-methodology of qualitative research.

Methodical Hermeneutics as a Possible Meta-methodology of Qualitative Research

For some time now there has been much talk of unified science. This ideal mitigates the concept of a human science that is different than natural science, especially if the two are seen to be incommensurable. But what if it were decided that natural science is incommensurable with the study of human experience and conduct because in order to engage in such study it is crucial not to reduce the person downward, and that all expressions of natural science do just that? Would there then be justification for a human science? Then, to complicate matters further, what if it were concluded that upward reductions of the person to language, culture and/or tradition also undermine the ontology to which epistemology, methodology and method need to be directed? Would there then be a renewal of the call for the development of a human science that avoids *that* reduction? My answer to both questions is, "yes." As indicated, efforts to correct both reductions at the level of ontology have been made by humanistic psychologists. Nevertheless, it is easier to make the correction at the level of ontology than at the level of method. In order to do that, epistemology and methodology need to be taken into

account as well. Up to now, this task has been too daunting. The tendency for qualitative research methodologists of all stripes has been to shift their epistemology to align with either downward or upward reductions of the person, as the case may be. Downward reducers gravitate to realism and express it as neo-positivism. This gravitation includes an emphasis on description which, incidentally, cuts across not only the empirical-phenomenological method but the grounded theory one as well (for reference to grounded theory on this score, see Rennie & Fergus, 2006). In contrast, upward reducers adopt a relativist epistemology which they express as methodical pluralism with few constraints. And it is understandable why this happens: Adopting either a realist or relativist epistemology is easier than attempting to make workable one that accommodates realism and relativism. These adoptions can also, peculiarly, seem *morally* right (Wiley, 1994). Those opting for realism have the prestige of natural science on their side, while those siding with relativism have the popularity of postmodernism and post-structuralism on theirs.

Thus, in order for humanistic psychology to fulfill its vision of restoring the person into psychology, it needs a science commensurable with this objective. It needs a human science, or, more precisely, it needs a better human science than it has achieved thus far. It needs one that can stand on par with natural science. I am thus calling for qualitative researchers to be as bold in the development of a qualitative research meta-methodology as the founders of humanistic psychology were in advancing a vision of what it means to be a person. As indicated throughout, my sense is that the promise of such a meta-methodology lies in hermeneutics.

The project I am calling for is immense. It requires determining if indeed hermeneutics can be seen to address the ontology of being human and the epistemology involved in knowing about the person. It needs to examine critically the ways in and extent to which hermeneutics is indeed operative in existing approaches to qualitative research, and to the point where they can justifiably be put under one roof. It requires a critique of methodical hermeneutics as it stands. It even requires alliance with those contemporary thinkers who have worked at restoring the respect given by Scholastic thinkers to rhetoric, because of the close connection between it and hermeneutics (Eden, 1987; Hernadi, 1987). Up to now, methodical hermeneutics has been proposed as an appropriate methodology for the grounded theory method (Rennie, 1998, 1999, 2000; Rennie & Fergus, 2006); I now suggest a project to test the generalizability of this methodology to all of the qualitative research methods.

I believe that it would be through this project that a closer connection could be made between humanistic theory, practice and method. Hermeneutics is about understanding, just as are theories of human nature. The reason these understandings have impact is because they resonate with people. And they resonate because they articulate what people sense about themselves and others. The theories produced by the founders of humanistic psychology have both scope and focus. The scope pulls in the inchoate experience of the consumer, whether reader or client, while the focus articulates it in ways that considered useful. One of the problems with qualitative research is that it has been too micro-analytic, insufficiently theoretical. The language-analytic methods such as discourse analysis and narrative analysis are designed to have a narrow focus; the

empirical-phenomenological method falls into it with its emphasis on description; and the grounded theory method does so as well when it results in only themes, and descriptive ones at that. In order for qualitative research to have the impact enjoyed by theory and its implementation in practice, it will have to produce more abstract understandings, more principles involved in being human.

In conclusion, I see a project of developing a qualitative research meta-methodology, entailing methodical hermeneutics, to hold forth many benefits. It would speak to the ontology of being human. It would uncover and justify an appropriate epistemology. It would provide sanction for rhetoric. It would provide a corrective to the flaws in existing methods, and unite them. It would elevate human science from where it is currently in relation to natural science. It would be an avenue toward and justification of bold ideas and would connect qualitative research with the ways humanistic psychologists have developed theory and engaged in practice all along.

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Endnotes

¹ For downward reductions of the person to, e.g., the levels of biology and behavior, and for upward reductions to, e.g., tradition, culture, or language, see Wiley (1994).

² I am indebted to Constance Fischer for pointing this general idea out to me.

³ Dilthey was against introspection because he judged it to be insufficiently objective to offset historical skepticism (see Dilthey, 2002c). Dilthey had in mind Nietzsche and other historians and philosophers who drew on their own experience exclusive of the experience of others. The practice, engaged in by present-day qualitative researchers, of comparing several persons' verbal reports on the same kind of experience to ascertain commonalities among them establishes an objectivity which, although unlikely to be universal, is at least objective conditional to the cultural matrix in which the reporters are embedded. This development goes a considerable distance toward mitigating Dilthey's mistrust of introspection.

⁴ This needs to be challenged as well (see Rennie, 2000).

⁵ I focus mainly on these two methods and only touch on the methods derived from conversation analysis because the relativist epistemology common to them poses special problems that are too complex to address here. My sense is that these methods do indeed entail a tacit use of hermeneutics but to establish the point would require a fine-grained analysis of the procedures used in the methods.

⁶ A number of years ago Addison (1989) used hermeneutics as an aid to a grounded theory analysis but saw them as entailing different assumptions; while Wilson & Hutchinson (1991) proposed that Heideggerian hermeneutics can be triangulated with the grounded theory method. In my view, these early attempts to relate hermeneutics to the method failed to penetrate the fundamental way in which it is resolvable to hermeneutics of the methodical kind (see Rennie, 2000).