

When to Stop Interviewing:

Applying Insights from Gadamer's Hermeneutic Circle

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Introduction

This article is the result of reflection on a practical problem of applied qualitative research. The problem is when to stop interviewing. Stated more precisely, I intend to offer an answer to the question when one has collected enough empirical data to support, or reject one's hypotheses. To answer this question I resort to a rather old discussion on the difference between natural and human sciences that has characterized German academic life for many years – in fact since the early 19th century – and led to some more heated phases of academic dispute, known as the “Positivismusstreit” in the 1930s and the 1960s.

Hans Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, first published in German in 1960, stands out in this dispute as one of the major works to advance the discussion about the epistemology of human and social sciences. Gadamer makes an important contribution to the endeavor of providing a scientifically solid ground on which to make valid and reliable claims about the subject of their analysis: human action, transmitted or not in the form of written text.

One of the corollaries of Gadamer's work is that it offers an answer to the question when to stop interviewing, as I intend to demonstrate in this paper.

I will first lay out the intellectual and historical contours of *Truth and Method*, both those preceding and following.

Secondly, I lay out Gadamer's theory of the hermeneutic circle, and

thirdly I seek to apply it to the question posed above, namely, when to stop interviewing.

Gadamer's Hermeneutics

Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, first published in 1960, was written in order to provide a solution to the problem of interpreting historical texts and to the broader problem of understanding historical utterances, a problem solved unsatisfactorily by Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Gadamer's work succeeds in providing an epistemological grounding for the interpretation of historical texts and speech.

As pointed out by Hans Albert during the German "Positivismusstreit," the major weakness of the interpretative approaches that dwelled on the Schleiermacher tradition was that understanding of meaning expressed in speech or text required empathy. But empathy does not provide a solid enough grounding for reaching reliable and inter-subjectively verifiable generalizations. How then, can we reach a reliable interpretation of historic texts? This is the question Gadamer sets out to answer. By elaborating on this problem, Gadamer provides answers to many related problems, such as how to understand and interpret utterances of others in the first place and how to proceed methodologically in order to reach a reliable interpretation of these utterances. For the purpose of this paper, I will elaborate on these two questions.

How to understand and interpret utterances of others

We are born into institutional settings that predate our entry. As human beings, we constantly have to learn and interpret the world, and more specifically the institutions that surround us in order to understand and interpret correctly the meaning of actions and utterances with which we are confronted. Cognitive systems are closed systems, (Luhmann, 1985: 404f) and it is by no means self-evident how communication across different consciousnesses is even possible. Social interaction relies almost exclusively on language as a means to communicate, but language communication is inherently threatened by misunderstanding. The main reason for this is that utterances are made to convene *meaning*, and hence require interpretation. Chances for misinterpretation are accordingly high, first because language does not always overlap 100 percent with the intended meaning and secondly because perception is structured by the cognitive constitution, or consciousness, of the receiver, i.e. that any information is filtered, sorted out, and changed by the receiver. Some information might not be recognized as information at all and simply not be processed and some information will be changed in the process of perception in order to fit the available frame of reference and to "make sense."

All these complications have led many social scientists to abstain from the reconstruction of such slippery concepts as motivation, meaning, intention, etc. and focus their efforts on observable and measurable outcomes on the one hand, and on one strong motivational pattern on the other - rational profit maximizing. This endeavor has produced some very strong and extremely useful theories able to explain much human behavior, but its very elegance is the cause for its limited applicability, as it does not allow for an assessment of human behavior if and when it is irrational and not, or not predominantly motivated by the urge to maximize profits. Merely measuring actions and observable outcomes of social interaction therefore provides an “undersocialized” (to use the term coined by Mark Granovetter, 1985) view of meaningful social interaction. In the words of Habermas, “[...] everyday experience [...] is, for its part, already symbolically structured and inaccessible to mere observation.” (Habermas 1984:110)

To avoid the shortcomings of rational choice and to provide more complex, nuanced, and valid explanations of social interaction one must therefore have a reliable methodology of interpretation. Gadamer’s hermeneutics lay out the ground for such a methodology.

Gadamer’s basic insight is that any utterance is historically situated and cannot be understood without also understanding the historical context in which it is produced and by which it is constituted and made possible. Dwelling on the work of Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schütz, and Berger Luckmann, Gadamer argues that we approach any utterance, be it in the form of speech or text, by anticipating its meaning according to our own frame reference, or what Luhmann calls our system-own creation of sense. When listening to others, we try to understand their meaning by categorizing their utterances into our existing framework of sedimented patterns and stereotypes. In order to reach an understanding of the meaning as it was conveyed by the speaker, we must therefore start a process of not only understanding a single utterance, but the whole frame of reference of the speaker, her way of making sense and her categorizations and stereotypes. We must, in the words of Gadamer, understand a person’s lifeworld so that we can understand where a single utterance is coming from.

By understanding another person’s lifeworld we get familiar with it and make it our own, which is the only way of reaching an understanding of an external consciousness as we cannot assume the identity of another person and perceive the world through her eyes and senses. The most we can do is reproduce a system of reference that overlaps enough with the other person’s to allow

us an understanding of her way of creating sense and interpreting the world. Language bears the inherent possibility for such a process, as Habermas explains:

“[...] the idea of coming to rationally motivated, mutual understanding is to be found in the very structure of language, it is no mere demand of practical reason but is built into the reproduction of social life.” (Habermas 1989:96)

Language allows us to become familiar with the lifeworlds of others. Familiarization means considering these lifeworlds by integrating them tentatively into our own frame of reference and way of making sense of the world. Lifeworld, as I use it here, is best defined as “represented by a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns.” (Habermas 1989:124)

Method: The Hermeneutic Circle

What are the implications of such an approach to social life for carrying out social research?

Writes Gadamer:

“The meaning of the part can be discovered only from the context – i.e., ultimately from the whole. [...] Fundamentally, understanding is always a movement in this kind of circle, which is why the repeated return from the whole to the parts, and vice versa, is essential. Moreover, this circle is constantly expanding, since the concept of the whole is relative, and being integrated in ever larger contexts always affects the understanding of the individual part.” (Gadamer 1994:190)

In order to reach a valid understanding of the intended meaning of an utterance, one must therefore start a process of gathering information about the historical, political, and institutional context under which a particular utterance is made. The end-result of this process is reached, when the researcher is able to understand and explain why the single utterance in question was made and how it relates to its specific context, or stated more precisely, when the researcher is able to grasp the lifeworld of the person who made the statement.¹

¹ The German “nachvollziehen” captures this process with more accuracy, as it implies a temporal dimension of “after acting,” different from imitation, but also more precise than “understanding.”

One problem arising from this conception is that, because the circle of relevance is constantly expanding, this process is potentially endless. This is indeed the case for the unstructured inquiries we make in our everyday lives, but this problem does not present itself in scientific research, which is theory driven. Theory restricts the domain of research and allows for a-priori sorting out of relevant from irrelevant variables, without foreclosing the possibility to discover and integrate previously unknown variables, as long as this occurs in a structured manner. “Incompleteness of description is not a deficiency as long as the choice of descriptive expression is determined by a theoretical frame of reference.” (Habermas 1988: 159)

Implication: When to stop Interviewing

The hermeneutic circle provides a straight forward answer to the question when to stop researching, and, as a corollary, when to stop interviewing. The premise for accepting this answer lies in recognizing that any scientific research must start with theory, as only a theoretical framework allows for the separation of realms for systematic inquiry. First, we have to define what we are interested in, then our theory will tell us what variables we have to look for and how we suppose they relate to the phenomenon in question. In other words, the hypotheses we formulate allow us to determine what is relevant to our inquiry. It is important to remember that theories cannot be true or false, but they can generate heuristic models that allow us the pose useful questions and formulate useful hypotheses about reality, by artificially separating one realm of reality from the totality of the social world. Theories reduce complexity in order to be able to make fruitful causal statements about reality. As Kenneth Waltz (1979:5) has reminded us, theory is not equal to reality but a heuristic construct operating on a higher ontological level. Theory allows us to separate a realm of relevance and identify those variables we will consider in our inquiry.

Once we have separated a realm for our inquiry, we can start the process of gathering data, where speech acts are considered part of the data to be collected. In addition to collection speech acts, we must contextualize this data with other information relevant to the speaker(s) so that we can reach an understanding of her lifeworld and situate her speech. This is achieved by going for and back between the specific and the general, the concrete speech act and the political, historical, psychological, and in general institutional context in which the speaker and the speech is embedded.

This conceptions leads us to gather empirical data up to the point when each single new information “makes sense,” i.e. it complements the logical structure of the lifeworld we are exploring. Each new interview must relate to and ultimately confirm what we already have found out, in a positive or negative way, and little by little we construct a contextualized understanding of the single speech act in question, which allows us to interpret each new piece information and locate it within the horizon of meanings that constitute the context or lifeworld of the speech and the speaker and the realm we have separated for our inquiry.

If we come across an information that “does not make sense,” i.e. utterances or data that cannot be explained by the frame of reference we have already elaborated, we are forced to revise this framework by gathering more information and amplify our perception of the lifeworld in question until each single information “fits in” and can be explained by it. The hermeneutic circle closes when all the gathered information complements each other, forming closed whole, or in the words of Gadamer, when the specific and the general complement each other and form a heuristic whole. Once this stage is achieved, each new utterance and new information “makes sense” and can be explained and understood from within its context, even apparently deviant information. Once this point is reached, the process of interviewing is finished, as at this point in time new information would only confirm the already found and merely add unnecessary layers of validity to the findings.

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