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The Hermeneutic Foundations of Qualitative Research

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nities, and so forth.

[4] Scholarly research may arouse suspicions in places that lack a field research tradition or in repressive political climates. Research projects can be deemed sensitive either because the research question itself addresses touchy subjects or, even when the topic is not especially taboo, the process of extracting information may encounter reluctant respondents who fear local recriminations or reputational loss. In addition, institutional "gatekeepers" may block access to critical documentation or informants to assert their own power, protect their positions, or attempt to extract compensation from researchers.

[5] I use the term "relative" to recognize the virtual impossibility of absolute neutrality on the part of the interviewer (Gubrium 2002, Kvale and Kvale 1996, Rubin and Rubin 2005).

[6] Such precautions may include coding interviews and maintaining a separate list of informants or refusing to reveal the names and other identifying information of informants.

[7] Some local candidates for research assistantships or interpreter positions may regard themselves as out of the fray because of their personal political views, but others will invariably pigeonhole them. I experienced this while conducting field research in Lebanon, where my research assistant was a secular, Western-educated development consultant, yet my informants regarded her as a Sunni Muslim from a prominent Beiruti family.

[8] This can include to units *within* larger institutions, such as universities. For example, after several extended research trips to Lebanon, I found that the School of Public Health at the American University in Beirut not only housed impressive faculty, affiliated researchers, and students, but also enjoyed a solid reputation among NGOs, government agencies, and the scholarly community in Lebanon as scientifically rigorous and politically non-aligned.

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This article is the result of reflection that emerged while conducting qualitative field research on nationalism and exclusion in Portugal.[1] The problem I confronted was when to stop interviewing. Stated more precisely, I was seeking an answer to the question of when one has collected enough empirical data to support or reject one's hypotheses. This initial problem led me 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–producing 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. His main argument is that any human action and any utterance is meaningful and requires interpretation. The interpretation of a speech or a text must necessarily start from the concrete historical and cultural position of the researcher and on the cognitive and linguistic tools available to him or her. These, in turn, are determined by one's own cultural, linguistic, and historical context and background. Understanding others therefore first requires understanding yourself. The more a researcher becomes aware of his or her own situatedness, the more (s)he can compare it to that of the researched other and initiate a process of systematic understanding via comparison and tentative overlapping of two different cognitive systems.

This process of understanding others is potentially endless, as one can expand the horizon of meaning further and further. Gadamer's work does not offer a direct answer to the problem of when to stop collecting data; it does, however, allow for a deduction drawn from the more general arguments presented. I argue that one of the implications that follow from Gadamer's hermeneutics is that integrating a clearly defined research design and a concrete research question into the interpretative process controls the potentially endless process of interpretation. In other words, although a full and complete understanding of others is impossible, the answering of a research question about a well-defined aspect of their lifeworld is not.

In order to elaborate these arguments, I will first lay out the intellectual and historical contours of *Truth and Method*. Secondly, I seek to explain Gadamer's theory of the hermeneu-

tic circle, and thirdly, I will apply it to the question posed above, namely, when to stop interviewing.

Gadamer's *Truth and Method*

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 the utterances of others in the first place and how to proceed methodologically in order to reach a reliable interpretation of these utterances. I will first elaborate on these two questions.

How to Understand and Interpret the 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. In the case of my research on nationalism and minority rights in Portugal, it became clear that contemporary reality is the product of historical forces and as such the product of meaningful human interaction and struggle. Past relations of domination and control influence the ways individuals with different ethnic and religious backgrounds interact in contemporary Portugal. Portugal's ambivalent situation towards Europe is equally influenced by the century-old struggle for recognition and respect from the much richer and influential northern European states.[2] Historical continuities also emerged when analyzing the prevalent nationalist discourses in Portugal. An ongoing threat of early 20th century scientific positivism that had tried to demonstrate the "naturalness" of belonging of certain people to certain places, justified with reference to their essentialized cultural characteristics, lurked through many of the contemporary statements and discourses I collected about nationalism and the position of minorities.[3] During my initial time in Portugal, I was unable to "place" the statements and interviews I recorded into their context of relevance. Although I understood all the words that my informants told me, their statements didn't make much sense to me, because I had yet to become familiar with their context.

To complicate matters even further, cognitive systems are closed systems (Luhmann 1985: 404 f), 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 might 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." In my case, I had to first become familiar with Portugal's colonial history before I was able to correctly situate the statements of most of my informants. I also needed to become familiar with ways the Portuguese interact on a daily basis and with the taken-for-granted and normalized ways they reproduce their everyday reality in order to be able to reach a more adequate interpretation of the statements and behaviors I observed and recorded.

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, namely rational self-interest. This endeavor has produced some very strong and extremely useful theories able to explain much human behavior, but their very elegance is the cause for their heuristic limitation, as they do 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. In addition, a true understanding of meaningful human interaction cannot be achieved through these methods, and issues of causality and validity necessarily follow because we are left in the dark about such important factors in human action as motivation. Merely measuring actions and observable outcomes of social interaction therefore provides an "under-socialized" (to use the term coined by Mark Granovetter, 1985) view of meaningful social interaction. Furthermore, as Gadamer notes, "the individual case does not serve only to confirm a law from which practical predications can be made. Its ideal is rather to understand the phenomenon itself in its unique and historical concreteness" (Gadamer 1994:5).

The Problem of Objectivity

According to the widely accepted research guidelines provided by King, Keohane, and Verba (1994), all social inquiry must be reliable and replicable, and therefore guided by a systematic and transparent methodology. Such procedures should ensure that findings are verifiable or falsifiable by others. Although this seems a self-evident requirement, it bypasses a whole set of problems and complications, the most serious being the assumed neutrality of the researcher that is required in such an approach. When addressing this problem,

Gadamer dwells on Edmund Husserl, who argued that "The naiveté of talk about 'objectivity' which completely ignores experiencing, knowing subjectivity, subjectivity which performs real, concrete achievements, the naiveté of the scientist concerned with nature, with the world in general, who is blind to the fact that all the truths that he acquires as objective, and the objective world itself that is the substratum in his formulas is his own *life construct* [emphasis in the original] that has grown within him, is, of course, no longer possible, when *life* [emphasis in the original] comes on the scene" (quoted in Gadamer 1994: 249).

Gadamer himself argues that "the theme and object of research are actually constituted by the motivation of the inquiry. Hence historical research is carried along by historical movement of life itself and cannot be understood teleologically in terms of the object into which it is inquiring. Such an "object in itself" clearly does not exist at all. This is precisely what distinguishes the human sciences from the natural sciences" (Gadamer 1994: 285). Others, like Jürgen Habermas, have followed in this tradition, arguing that "everyday experience …is, for its part, already symbolically structured and inaccessible to mere observation" (Habermas 1984: 110).

The criticism raised by these authors is that the researcher cannot escape from the social reality that he or she is analyzing. Being part of a symbolically structured world implies that one is not free in one's relationship to this world and that the very perception of the world around us is influenced and structured by our belonging to it. The questions we ask and even the facts we perceive have been handed down to us by tradition and we cannot escape from its influence.

That, per se, is not a problem, according to Gadamer, as long as we are aware of our own cultural, linguistic, and historical, in addition to our racialized and gendered, backgrounds[4]: "All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it" (Gadamer 1994: 268). The worst would be to not be aware of one's own background, not making it explicit in one's account of a given analysis, and instead pretending that one stands above the observed reality, analyzing it "neutrally." Such an attitude must necessarily lead to unreflected and undisclosed bias and distortion, and it leaves the reader without a means of taking the position and situatedness of the researcher into account.

The Positioning of the Researcher and the Fusion of Horizons

Several theoretical insights influence our ways of perceiving, understanding, and explaining reality. At the minimum, any researcher must assume a critical and self-reflective posture towards the reality of the study and towards oneself as a researcher. There is no escape from the fact that the researcher shares some of the categories and some patterns of perception, interpretation, and explanation with the subjects of her/his study. Furthermore, one's own scientific activity is necessarily part of the ongoing process of reconstructing the world through meaningful interaction and potentially influences the

very outcomes one wants to observe and understand. The only way to achieve more reliable findings about any given social reality is to include one's own historical, cultural, gendered, and racialized background and situatedness into the analysis and make it explicit to the audience of one's work. This positioning of the researcher within the object of his or her research is driven by an understanding of the world as socially constructed through meaningful interaction.

Gadamer points out that understanding requires that the inquiring subject become self-aware of his or her traditions, backgrounds and institutionalized ways of seeing and interpreting the world. According to Gadamer, this means realizing "that the interpreter's own thoughts too have gone into reawakening the text's meaning. In this the interpreter's own horizon is decisive, yet not as a personal standpoint that he maintains or enforces, but more as an opinion and a possibility that one brings into play and puts at risk, and that helps one truly to make one's own what the text says. I have described this above as a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer 1994: 388).

Ultimately, then, understanding others requires self-understanding first, where self-understanding is a necessary, although not sufficient, condition to understanding others and their verbal or textual utterances. In the words of Gadamer: "*All such understanding is ultimately self-understanding* [emphasis in the original]. Even understanding an expression means, ultimately, not only immediately grasping what lies in the expression, but disclosing what is enclosed in it, so that one knows one's way around in it. Thus it is true in every case that a person who understands, understands himself, projecting himself upon his possibilities" (Gadamer 1994: 260).

Accordingly, part of the task of understanding others is self-analysis. Concretely, the researcher must analyze his or her interpretative patterns and prejudices in an effort to become aware of them so that they can be considered and addressed, or at least integrated into the analysis as limiting factors. Gadamer explains: "Thus it is quite right for the interpreter not to approach the text directly, relying solely on the fore-meaning already available to him, but rather *explicitly to examine the legitimacy–i.e., the origin and validity–of the fore-meanings dwelling within him* [my emphasis]" (Gadamer 1994: 267).

In the case of trying to reach an adequate interpretation of the statements made by my informants in Portugal, I soon realized that being a white male of German nationality helped me gain initial insights from white Portuguese citizens who oftentimes counted on my benevolent understanding when making racist statements about Africans, Brazilians, and blacks ("pretos"). Such unrestrained talk allowed for important initial insights into the social and racial hierarchies of Portuguese society because it demonstrated how far everyday language had incorporated discriminatory value judgments. But being who I am also limited my access to the lifeworlds of excluded groups and my understanding of historical processes. It took me months to grasp the oftentimes very subtle references and value judgments conveyed in everyday speech and interaction, and even after a year of sharing the lifeworld of Lisboans, I still confronted situations where I did not know how to inter-

pret correctly what I saw or heard. Counterbalancing my status as an outsider was the fact that I speak Portuguese with a strong Brazilian accent, which goes back to several years spent in Brazil. As a result, I was perceived by most Portuguese as a Brazilian immigrant and as such I had the chance to share some typical "immigrant experiences," such as being barred from entering certain bars and being attended badly in several shops, restaurants, libraries, and even by university personnel.

The more general questions arising from such experiences are if and how understanding is possible in the first place, and how correct and reliable interpretations can be achieved without falling into the highly speculative and voluntaristic statements that hard-minded scientists have been so eager to criticize. This is the question that Gadamer sets out to answer with his hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics

When analyzing a text or speech, we make use of the frames of reference that we have at our disposal, anticipating the meaning of the whole by reading or listening to a part. Whenever we seek to understand, we reach forward and come to more or less adequate conclusions about the meaning of an utterance. We cannot, and should not, avoid this method of advancing understanding through anticipation. What differentiates scientific understanding from popular understanding is that the first is systematic and less willing to readily accept the first conclusions reached. Scientific understanding, according to Gadamer, instead requires a going forth and back, a constant questioning of achieved conclusions, a suspension of already achieved insights until more information has corroborated the findings, and a openness to revise one's findings in the light of contradicting evidence. Gadamer explains that "A person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither "neutrality" with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings" (Gadamer 1994: 269).

Gadamer further explains that, "Within the concrete conditions of his own historical existence–not from some position suspended above things–he [the historian] sets himself the task of being fair. "This is his fairness, namely that he tries to understand" (§91). Hence Droysen's formula for historical knowledge is "understanding through research" (§8). This process implies both an infinite mediation and an ultimate immediacy. Only in ceaseless research into the traditions, in opening up new sources and in ever new interpretations of them, does research move progressively toward the idea (Gadamer 1994: 215).

For Gadamer, "Methodologically conscious understanding will be concerned not merely to form anticipatory ideas, but to make them conscious, so as to check them and thus acquire right understanding from the things themselves"

(Gadamer 1994: 269). He quotes Heidegger to demonstrate that all understanding is anticipation, arguing that "Heidegger describes the circle in such a way that the understanding of the text remains permanently determined by the anticipatory movement of fore-understanding. The circle of whole and part is not dissolved in perfect understanding, but, on the contrary, is most fully realized. The circle, then, is not formal in nature. It is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves" (Gadamer 1994: 293).

It is important to highlight that Gadamer does not demonstrate the impossibility of understanding others, nor does he advance a postmodern position, where any interpretation is as good and valid as any other. Instead, Gadamer seeks to demonstrate that there is indeed one correct way to interpret a given speech or text and that to reach this correct reading one must follow a systematic methodology. When addressing the question of how to avoid misinterpretations, Gadamer contends that "all that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it" (Gadamer 1994: 268). The only limitation to this claim is that any interpretation is as historically situated as the text it sets out to understand and any interpretation is therefore open to different future interpretations and revisions, much in the tradition of scientific work as defined by Kuhn and Popper. In his hermeneutics, he instead lays out a way how to reach reliable interpretations of text and speech.

During my own research, my interpretation of the meaning of a statement changed as I became more familiar with the background and context of the speaker, allowing me to reach better and more accurate interpretations over time. A statement, such as "I am a Portuguese citizen but at the same time I am not a Portuguese citizen,"[5] made by a black Portuguese, initially did not make much sense to me, but once I became more familiar with Portugal's colonial history, I was able to understand what this interviewee tried to convey to me.

Method

As explained above, 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 and Martin Heidegger, 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 of 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, where "life-world means the whole in which we live as historical creatures" (Gadamer 1994: 247).

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 and place the single utterance into its context.[6] Concretely, the researcher must engage in a process of moving back and forth between any single piece of information received and the context into which this piece is embedded. In the words of 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 effects the understanding of the individual part" (Gadamer 1994: 190).

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.

Understanding requires that the inquiring subject becomes self-aware of his or her traditions, backgrounds and institutionalized ways of seeing and interpreting the world. According to Gadamer, this means realizing "that the interpreters own thoughts too have gone into re-awakening the text's meaning. In this the interpreter's own horizon is decisive, yet not as a personal standpoint that he maintains or enforces, but more as an opinion and a possibility that one brings into play and puts at risk, and that helps one truly to make one's own what the text says. I have described this above as a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer 1994: 388).

Interpretation of texts and speech can therefore be analytically separated into two separate realms. On one side, the researcher has to analyze the text or speech by putting it into its historical and cultural context, by connecting the part to the whole, as it were. This procedure will lead to a gradual expansion of the horizon of understanding, allowing the researcher to gain more and more insight into the meaning of a given text or speech. This movement is not to be confounded with reconstructing the original meaning of a text, as this would also be a futile and naïve endeavor, because no complete reconstruction of all the relevant factors will ever be possible, nor is it required. Instead, and this is where the second component of the analysis becomes relevant, by including one's own horizon into the analysis, one can reach a sufficient understanding of the text or speech in question that is grounded in one's own historical situatedness. "This is how *I* understand it now," and "my understanding is the most complete understanding possible" are the two statements that any researcher should aspire to reach.

The same is true for cultural distance. Cultural distance does not foreclose the possibility of understanding someone from another culture. The task of understanding him or her correctly does not also require "going native" and reconstructing the underpinnings on which current statements rest. This would be a naïve and futile endeavor. As human beings we all share a common ground of constructing our world in ways that are meaningful to us. The use of language is at the core of this possibility, as our meaningful constructions of reality rest on language as the main means of this construction, and language also constitutes the main vehicle of communicating across generations and cultures. Understanding requires, then, becoming aware of the differences in the historical construction of meaning, and it necessarily proceeds by way of comparing one's own cultural background with that of the object of inquiry. No understanding is possible without a conscious integration and explicitation of one's own background, and understanding of other cultures is reached by going back and forth between one's own interpretation of reality and facts and that of the examined other. In Gadamer's words, "To understand what a person says is, as we saw, to come to an understanding about the subject matter, not to get inside another person and relive his experiences" (Gadamer 1994: 383).

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 apriori 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).

Language

Language is the medium through which understanding can be reached: "For you understand a language by living in it–a statement that is true, as we know, not only of living but if dead languages as well. Thus the hermeneutical problem concerns not the correct mastery of language but coming to a proper understanding about a subject matter, which takes place in the medium of language...Thus we do not relate the other's

opinion to him but to our own opinions and views" (Gadamer 1994: 385).

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).

Implication: When to Stop Interviewing

The hermeneutic circle provides a answer to the question of 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 to 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 collecting 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 forward 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 are embedded.

This conception leads us to gather empirical data up to the point when each single new piece of 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 of 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 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 piece of information "fits in" and can be explained by it. The hermeneutic circle closes when all the gathered pieces of information complement each other, forming a 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 piece of information "makes sense" and fits into the already achieved understanding and interpretation of available data and its relationship to the lifeworld in question. Any new information 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 what has already been found and merely add unnecessary layers of validity to the findings.

In practical terms, interviewers will reach a point where all the new information they receive confirms the insights and explanations already achieved. One of the main understandings I gained when researching the ethnic bias and the exclusive construction of Portuguese nationhood was that Portuguese citizens of African descent were treated as foreigners in their everyday interactions with traditional, white Portuguese citizens. After some exploratory research, I was also able to formulate the hypothesis that the Portuguese state actively supported and disseminated the conception of nonwhite Portuguese citizens as foreigners by strategically financing those studies that dealt with foreigners and immigrants, while at the same time not supporting any research that dealt with ethnic minorities. The formulation of these hypotheses allowed me to collect data, in the form of interviews, to confirm or refute my arguments. I was then able to interpret correctly what an interviewee meant when he said, "I am a Portuguese citizen but at the same time I am not a Portuguese citizen." Once I had reached this level of familiarity with the Portuguese way of collectively imagining an ethnically biased defi-nition of nationhood, all the new information I was able to collect started to make sense and "fell into place," i.e., it complemented the overall and more general explanation I had reached. At this point, my research could stop, because all the new evidence I collected only additional layers of validity to my argument. The hermeneutic circle had closed.

Conclusion

One of the central insights flowing out of Gadamer's work is that understanding requires that the researcher be part of the social reality he or she is trying to understand. Gadamer demonstrates that it is naïve to try to assume a neutral or objective position toward social facts. As human beings we are already born into a world that has been structured and invested with meaning. Even more, our actions constantly influence the world around us. Max Horkheimer explained, "the world which is given to the individual and which he must ac-

cept and take into account is, in its present and continuing form, a product of the activity of society as a whole. The objects we perceive in our surroundings–cities, villages, fields, and woods–bear the mark of having been worked on by man. It is not only in clothing and appearance, in outward form and emotional make-up that men are the product of history. Even the way they see and hear is inseparable from the social life process as it has evolved over millennia. The facts which our senses present to us are socially preformed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ. Both are not simply natural; they are shaped by human activity, and yet the individual perceives himself as receptive and passive in the act of perception" (Horkheimer 1972: 200).

Parting from this insight, Gadame constructs a philosophical grounding of understanding that is rooted in interpretation. He then develops the rules which allow for a systematic and method-driven interpretation, namely, through following the ins and outs of a "hermeneutic circle." I suggest in this article that the logic that drives this methodology of interpretation can be expanded and applied to the very practical question of when to stop interviewing. Accordingly, the short answer is "when the hermeneutic circle is closed and all the new and partial information obtained fits into the broader explanatory context, forming one coherent whole."

Notes

[1] Reiter 2005.

[2] Léonard 2000, Vol. 4: 524 ff.

[3] E.g., Gilroy 2000: 281 f.

[4] As pointed out, e.g., by Sandra Harding (1993).

[5] Interview conducted on 10 June 2003 in Lisbon. My translation.

[6] 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."

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In Memoriam: Alexander L. George, 1920—2006

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Alexander L. George died of a stroke on August 16 in Seattle. George was a towering figure in the international relations field, and he made pioneering and enduring contributions to case study methodology, foreign policy decision-making, political psychology, and the study of deterrence, coercive diplomacy, and crisis management. George was a former president of the International Studies Association, a key figure in the distinguished international relations faculty at Stanford University for over three decades, and a valued teacher and mentor of countless students at Stanford and throughout the discipline.

George was born in Chicago on May 31, 1920. He did his undergraduate and graduate work at the University of Chicago and received his PhD in Political Science in 1958. He served as a research analyst for the Federal Communications Commission during World War II and then as a civil affairs officer in Germany after the war. George was an analyst at the RAND Corporation from 1948 to 1968, and became director of its social science department. He moved to Stanford University in 1968, where he taught until he retired in 1990. He was emeritus at Stanford until 2006, when he moved to Seattle. George was professionally active until the very end. His short book *On Foreign Policy: Unfinished Business* was published a month before his death.

George's first book, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House* (1956), written with his wife Juliette, had a major impact. It is widely regarded as one of the very best psychobiographies ever written, and is still in print after fifty years. George and George were concerned as much with the methodology of psychohistory as with the substance. They looked for pat-