

## DEMYSTIFYING A HERMENEUTIC APPROACH TO IS RESEARCH

Phyl Webb  
School of Information Systems  
University of Tasmania  
Private Bag 87, Hobart 7001, Australia  
Email: webbp@utas.edu.au

Carol Pollard  
CIS Department, John A. Walker College of Business  
Appalachian State University, Raley Hall  
Boone, NC 28607, USA  
Email: pollardce@appstate.edu

### ABSTRACT

While hermeneutics is firmly embedded in social science research and has proven merit as a qualitative research philosophy and data analysis technique, the majority of IS researchers continue to be hermeneutic neophytes. This paper seeks to promote and demystify this valuable but challenging tool, exploring the evolution of hermeneutics and its different approaches, presenting a brief overview of previous IS hermeneutic research, as reported in the literature and describing the applicability of hermeneutics to qualitative IS research. In illustration, and in an attempt to smooth the way for other novice *hermeneutists*, it presents the choice and application of one hermeneutic approach based on the work of Ricoeur and Gadamer, in a research in progress. The paper concludes with a reflection on the value of the hermeneutic approach that was adopted in the research process and its contribution to IS research.

### INTRODUCTION

While some IS researchers have embraced the use of hermeneutics, to many it still remains a complex, mysterious approach. In the following sections, the authors attempt to describe the challenges they encountered on the way to gaining enlightenment as *hermeneutists* by describing their application of one approach to a research in progress. The results of using the hermeneutic approach are also discussed together with suggestions to guide those researchers who may choose to use a similar strategy in their research.

Hermeneutics is by nature interpretivist. It deals with the interpretation and understanding of text, including text analogues (Myers and Avison, 2002).

Many hermeneutic scholars have extended their conception of text to include not just the documentary artefacts that human subjects create, but also their individual actions, group behaviours, and even social institutions, all of which, as text analogues, have meanings that can be read and interpreted (Lee 1994, p149)

This suggests that hermeneutics is an approach that lends itself to application within organisational contexts where there is commonly, a preponderance of documentation describing and explaining the organisation's focus, mission, processes and procedures. In addition, the employees themselves represent a rich and valuable source of text or text analogue, most commonly in the form of

interview transcripts. To some, hermeneutics is more than a data analysis technique or method. It can instead be treated as both an underlying philosophy and specific mode of analysis (Myers and Avison 2002). Common to all forms of hermeneutics is the concept of the hermeneutic circle or spiral. This concept encapsulates the idea that, in an attempt to understand the true meaning of something, one seeks a pre-existing understanding of the article under study from one's own experience. This, in turn, enhances and expands knowledge and understanding of the article and leads to greater understanding (Mallery, Hurwitz and Duffy 1987). To gain perspective on hermeneutic research, Table 1 provides a brief chronology of its prominent scholars.

Scholar	Lived
Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher	1768-1834
Wilhelm Dilthey	1833-1911
Martin Heidegger	1889-1976
Hans-Georg Gadamer	1900-2002
Jurgen Habermas	1929-
Paul Ricoeur	1913-2005

Table 1 - Prominent Hermeneutic Scholars: A Chronology

Hermeneutics has been described in a number of ways. Mallery et al (1987) include the following classification in their informative discussion of hermeneutics:

- Classical Methodological Hermeneutics
- Philosophical Hermeneutics
- Critical Hermeneutics
- Phenomenological Hermeneutics

These categories are a useful starting point for beginning to understand hermeneutics. This paper contains a brief discussion of the proponents of hermeneutics most commonly encountered in IS research framed within the categories provided above. This is followed by a brief overview of published IS research that applies a hermeneutic approach and an explanation of the application of hermeneutics in an ongoing IT governance research project.

### CLASSICAL METHODOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics originated as the study and interpretation of literary and biblical texts. The Greek scholars who undertook the study of texts analysed and interpreted works for consistency in grammar and literary style. Biblical scholars applied similar methods. However they also made use of allegory in their interpretation and application of hermeneutics (Mallery et al 1987).

According to Bleicher (1980), Schleiermacher, an early and important contributor to the development of classical methodological hermeneutics, maintained that the purpose of hermeneutics was to derive understanding from the text under study. In this way, Schleiermacher began to develop a philosophical focus for hermeneutics. He did this through his consideration of the process of understanding and the conditions that are necessary for a valid interpretation (Bleicher 1980). In recognising this need for a more consistent systematic approach to hermeneutic study Schleiermacher made a valuable contribution to the evolution of hermeneutics. He also initiated increased interest in examining the epistemological issues of interpretation and understanding, (Mallery et al 1987).

Bleicher (1980) writes on Schleiermacher: 'Given adequate historical and linguistic knowledge, the interpreter is in a position to understand the author better than he understood himself' (p15) and credits him with developing a 'systematic hermeneutics' comprised of two interpretations:

1. Grammatical
2. Psychological

Schleiermacher provided forty-four canons to explain grammatical interpretation (Bleicher 1980). The first two are considered most important. In summary, these encapsulate a view that:

1. In order to comprehend or understand the text one needs to understand the linguistic context of the text.
2. In order to understand an individual part of the text the surrounding words, within which the part under study is situated, also need to be considered.

Schleiermacher also developed canons for psychological interpretation with the intention of exploring the 'creative inner process' (Dilthey 1976).

In his writing about Schleiermacher, Dilthey (1976) describes the aim of the hermeneutic process as one that allows an understanding of 'the author better than he has understood himself: a proposition which is the necessary consequence of the doctrine of unconscious creation' (p116). This view of Schleiermacher is also supported by Gadamer (1976).

Following Schleiermacher came Dilthey, a key figure in the development of hermeneutics who emphasised the role of understanding (Verstehen) who contrasted it with the pre-Kantian, Cartesian practices of explanation (Erklärung) (Hamilton 1994, p64). Dilthey spent much time studying Schleiermacher's work and was heavily influenced by him and is often grouped with Schleiermacher as a romanticist.

Dilthey's approach to hermeneutics differs from Schleiermacher's in this movement between understanding and explanation as two key foci. 'Explaining' refers to the provision of a general description of the type, providing its key characteristics. 'Understanding' infers a more in-depth knowledge of the individual internal characteristics and intentions of a member of the type (Olson and Carlisle, 2001). This movement from inner to outer was summarised epistemologically by Bleicher (1980) who proposed that 'generally valid knowledge can be derived both from appearances and inner experience' (p22).

Dilthey is credited with having developed a methodological hermeneutics but was also criticised for his 'backsliding' into objectivism. He ascribed to a belief that the interpreter could understand the author's intentions through a process called re-living, which effectively results in the conclusion that there is one true account, or objectification (Bleicher 1980). Dilthey's hermeneutics advocates acceptance of the text at face value without any critical consideration or review. In this way it differs from some of the more contemporary hermeneutics (Myers, 1994). Modern day hermeneutics is indebted to both Schleiermacher and Dilthey for their important contributions to the advancement of the concept of hermeneutics.

## **PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS**

Heidegger has been described as the 'main proponent' of dialectical hermeneutics (Mallery et al 1987). This is an approach that heralded a new philosophy for hermeneutics. His work had an ontological leaning that sought to illuminate not just the method of understanding but also the nature

of being. Heidegger moves hermeneutics from a theory of interpretation to a theory of existential understanding (Mallery et al 1987, p5).

Heidegger saw three fore-structures of understanding (Bleicher 1980):

1. Fore-having, already owning knowledge of the system, context or situation within which the phenomenon under study exists. This is a broad general view (Demetrio 2001).
2. Fore-sight, this level is specific to the phenomenon being studied but is still at a general level (Demetrio 2001) and
3. Fore-grasping, the detailed understanding of the phenomenon under study (Demetrio 2001)

Heidegger's intention in outlining fore-structures is made clearer by Grondin (1994):

Ö in order to interpret a text, for example, it is necessary to make our own situation transparent so that we can appreciate precisely the otherness and alterity of the text ñ that is, without allowing our unelucidated prejudices to dominate the text unwittingly and so conceal what is proper to it (p97).

His view of the importance and necessity for fore-structures represents a radical change in thinking regarding the hermeneutic circle.

Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, built on Heidegger's thinking in developing philosophical hermeneutics (Fleming et al 2003) and suggests that this approach represents movement away from the view of the subjectivity or objectivity of the circle. In fact, Gadamer suggests, the circle, describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter (Gadamer 1976, p120). He contends that an individual's current experience and learning contribute to their ability and means of understanding (Mallery et al 1987).

Similarly, Gadamer rejected objectivism as a delusion of human thought. He argued that there is and can be no such thing as objectivism since all human understanding is influenced subjectively (Gadamer 1976, Bleicher 1980). In essence, Gadamer's hermeneutics is not a method (Prasad 2002, Fleming et al 2003), but rather a way of life. He viewed hermeneutics as going beyond a mere methodological approach and rather occurring as a pervasive universality (Grondin 1994).

Gadamer on the other hand, differed from Heidegger in his belief that experience of other cultures and manners of thinking can moderate the effects of one's own prejudices by providing a contrasting view. He saw language as the key to unlocking the interpreter to other cultural view points and as a consequence language becomes the key to understanding that does not scientifically reconstruct a speaker's intention, but instead mediates between the interpreter's immediate horizon and his emerging one (Mallery et al 1987, p6)

## CRITICAL HERMENEUTICS

Habermas is a critical theorist. His aim is to see beyond the interpretation of the text to the provision of a critique of the text's ideological makeup (Prasad 2002). This view has resulted in critical theorists entering into debate with philosophical hermeneutics, such as Gadamer, with a view to increasing the critical focus of the practice of hermeneutics (Prasad 2002). Habermas (1968) and the Habermas/Gadamer debate can be briefly summarised in the following three points:

1. Effects of fore-structure & understanding (Bleicher 1980). Habermas contests these are not given and always legitimate, but rather can be built through self-reflection (Prasad 2002).

2. The status of language (Bleicher 1980). Habermas (1968) was in agreement with Gadamer regarding the relationship of language to understanding and interpretation, and the fundamental nature of language as a foundation for social institutions. However, he does not accept that language is ontological as Gadamer believes but rather that it is subject to alteration by social movements (Prasad 2002).
3. The justifiability of taking a critical position (Bleicher 1980). Gadamer contended that it is not possible for a truly critical position to be taken from within the culture under study, and that as previously stated, the development of a narrow method should not be the goal of hermeneutics but rather to enable understanding (Prasad 2002).

## PHENOMENOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS

Ricoeur emphasises the complementary nature of the work of Gadamer (1976) and Habermas. Rather than being opposed, Ricoeur contends that they are both necessary and can comfortably co-exist (Mallery et al 1986, Prasad 2002). This view is best summarised by Ricoeur himself:

The consequence for hermeneutics is important: we can no longer oppose hermeneutics and the critique of ideology. The critique of ideology is the necessary detour which self-understanding must take, if the latter is to be formed by the matter of the text and not by the prejudices of the reader (Ricoeur 1981, p144).

In addition to Ricoeur's work that draws together the arguments of Gadamer and Habermas, his Theory of Interpretation attempted to reconcile Dilthey's dichotomy of understanding and explanation (Mallery et al 1986, Scott-Baumann 2003). Ricoeur made a notable contribution to hermeneutics through his attempts to acknowledge, understand and, where appropriate, reconcile the apparently diverse positions of several other prominent hermeneutic scholars (Bleicher 1980). Ricoeur's view of hermeneutics incorporates both philosophy, as represented by ontology and epistemology (Bleicher 1980) while his theory of interpretation provides a more general practical approach to derive meaning from text although it cannot be described as a method (Wiklund, Lindholm and Lindstrom 2002). Ricoeur's notion of the text is any discourse that is captured in writing. He does not, as some authors claim, see everything as text. He does, however, argue there are similarities between human action and text and for this reason they can be understood in similar ways (Langdrige 2004).

Ricoeur sees the text as the objectification of the participant's subjectivities. The discourse represents the participant's view of their world and once objectified in this way, can be interpreted by others in light of its own inherent meaning. The intention of the originator of the discourse is of less consequence than the meaning that emerges directly from the text (Leonardo 2003). Ricoeur (1981) offers the following insights:

Hermeneutics can be defined no longer as an inquiry into the psychological intentions which are hidden beneath the text, but rather as the explication of the being-in-the-world displayed by the text. What is to be interpreted in the text is the proposed world which I could inhabit and in which I could project my ownmost possibilities (p112).

This brief discussion of some prominent hermeneutic scholars and their work provides an overview of the evolution of hermeneutics over time. There are many more prominent and influential hermeneutic scholars than have been included here; however those listed provide a representative cross-section of the hermeneutic tradition and its historical development. More importantly, the

scholars described here are the proponents whose approaches are most commonly discussed in IS research. The use of hermeneutics in IS research is discussed next.

## **HERMENEUTICS IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH**

Hermeneutics has been adopted and applied in many disciplines including nursing, education, anthropology and information systems (Myers 1995). The application of hermeneutics in information systems has an ever-expanding list of proponents. Among the earliest of these is Boland (1985) who recognised the appropriateness of hermeneutics and the related area of phenomenology for research in the IS area:

Information systems are data becoming information in consciousness; organizations are socially constructed through language, and our reasoning about both these processes takes place in dialogue (Boland 1985, p181).

Hermeneutics has been used in information systems for a variety of different purposes, Table 2 provides an overview of hermeneutic IS research, its research focus and the hermeneutic approach adopted. It should be noted that the table is not complete but merely representative; authors such as Boland, Lee and Myers have published more than has been cited here. In addition there will, undoubtedly, be other IS researchers who have used hermeneutics and are not included in this list. It can be seen from the table that a critical approach to hermeneutics has been favoured by IS researchers and, given the practical orientation of the discipline, this seems an appropriate choice.

It is interesting, however, to note that Gadamer features so prominently in the IS critical hermeneutic discussion, given that he saw his work conflicting with the work of hermeneutists such as Habermas (1968), who are commonly categorised as critical. Gadamer did, however, acknowledge a need for critical self-consciousness (Mallery et al 1987). Ricoeur (1981) identified that the views of Gadamer and Habermas were actually mutually compatible and the inclusion of Ricoeur's work does help to mediate the distance between Gadamer and the practice of critical hermeneutics. The following section discusses the choice and application of a hermeneutic approach adopted in an ongoing IT governance project by way of illustration.

## **THE RESEARCH SETTING**

One Australian large organisation was the focus of this case study, since it was felt that large organisations are more likely to have formal IT governance processes. The reason for limiting this research to within one geographical and national boundary was to eliminate differences in national culture in IT (Robbins and Stylianou 2002, Kim and Peterson 2003), corporate governance mechanism and country-specific regulatory frameworks (Charkham 1995) from the research situation.

Limiting the study to one organisation provided an opportunity for the researcher to become deeply immersed in the research situation. Controlling the research in this way helped to reduce any potential resistance to the research from within the organisation that may have occurred where there was a perception that issues of commercial sensitivity or security may be compromised by a detailed cross-organisational study.

<b>Research Topic</b>	<b>Citation</b>	<b>Hermeneutic Approach</b>
<b>Systems Development</b>	Butler, T. (1998), "Towards a hermeneutic method for interpretive research in information systems", <b>Journal of Information Technology</b> , Vol. 13, pp. 285-300.	Phenomenological hermeneutics (derived from Heidegger and Gadamer)
	Butler, T. (2003), "An institutional perspective on developing and implementing intranet - and internet- based information systems", <b>Information Systems Journal</b> , Vol. 13, pp. 209-231.	Phenomenological hermeneutics (derived from Heidegger and Gadamer)
<b>Implementation</b>	Bussen, W. and Myers, M. D. (1997), "Executive information systems failure: a New Zealand case study", <b>Journal of Information Technology</b> , Vol. 12, pp. 145-153.	Critical hermeneutics (derived from Myers)
	Myers, M. D. (1994), "A Disaster for Everyone to See: An Interpretive Analysis of a Failed IS Project", <b>Accounting, Management &amp; Information</b> , Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 185-201.	Critical or Dialectical hermeneutics (derived from Gadamer & Ricoeur)
	Myers, M. E. (1995), "Dialectical Hermeneutics: A Theoretical Framework for the Implementation of Information Systems", <b>Information Systems Journal</b> , Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 51-70.	Critical or Dialectical hermeneutics (derived from Gadamer & Ricoeur)
<b>Communication Richness</b>	Lee, A. S. (1994). "Electronic Mail as a Medium for Rich Communication: An Empirical Investigation Using Hermeneutic Interpretation." <b>MIS Quarterly</b> Vol. 18 No. 2, pp. 143-157.	Hermeneutics (derived from Ricoeur)
<b>Evaluation</b>	Sheffield, Jim (2005). "The Evaluation of GSS-Enabled Interventions: A Habermasian Perspective" in <b>Proceedings of the 38<sup>th</sup> Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences</b> (Ed Sprague R H), Big Island, Hawaii.	Phenomenological (derived from Habermas)
<b>Methodological</b>	Boland Jr, R. (1985). "Phenomenology: A Preferred Approach to Research on Information Systems". <b>Research Methods in Information Systems</b> . E. Mumford, R. Hirscheim, G. Fitzgerald and T. Wood-Harper. New York, North-Holland: pp193-201.	Hermeneutics (derived from Gadamer)
	Boland Jr, R. J. (1991). "Information Systems Use as a Hermeneutic Process". In <b>Information Systems Research: Contemporary Approaches &amp; Emergent Traditions</b> . H.-E. Nissen, H. K. Klein and R. Hirscheim. Amsterdam, North-Holland: 439-464.	Hermeneutics (discussed with Ricoeur, Pepper & Rorty)
	Lukaitis, S. and Cybulski, J. (2004), "A Hermeneutic Analysis of the Denver International Airport Baggage Handling System", in <b>Proceedings of the Information Systems Foundations Workshop: Constructing and Criticising</b> , (Eds, Hart, D. N. and Gregor, S. D.) Australian National University, Canberra.	Critical hermeneutic (derived from Gadamer & Kidder)
<b>Philosophical</b>	Myers, M.D. (2004). "Hermeneutics in Information Systems Research", in <b>Social Theory and Philosophy for Information Systems</b> , Mingers, J. & Willcocks, L. Chichester, West Sussex. John Wiley, pp 103-128	Critical hermeneutic (derived from Gadamer and Ricoeur)

Table 2 Hermeneutics in IS Research

The organisation that participated in this research has in excess of 100,000 employees, distributed across approximately 1000 sites throughout Australia. The organisation operates in the retail industry sector. The research reported focussed on the organisation's largest division consisting of more than 700 sites across the country. The IT unit supporting this division employs in excess of 600 staff.

Data were gathered from semi-structured interviews and organisational artefacts e.g. company documents. The data were collected during two stages, six months apart. In addition to using the rigorous approach of hermeneutics to analyse the data, the collection of multiple data types within this research, collected at different times, from different participants enabled triangulation of the data to occur (Denzin 1970, MacDonald and Tipton 1993), thus increasing the likelihood of a more accurate representation of the phenomenon under study. Twenty-five nominated individuals from different levels, different units and sub-units and from both business and IT within the organisation were invited to participate in face-to-face interviews, to discuss their perceptions and views of how IT governance worked in theory and practice with the subject organisation.

Each participant was interviewed in the first phase of data collection. In order to ensure a more complete picture of the organisational reality, the interviewees were drawn from senior IT management, IT staff, senior business managers and business staff. This cross section of roles was selected in part, because of the recognised gap between IT and the rest of the business that exists in many organisations (Peppard 2001), and in part because of the nature of IT governance, which as a sub-set of corporate governance is not just a matter for the IT area but is very much an issue for business units and the entire organisation.

The second stage of data collection was conducted in order to explore, test and add detail and richness to the insights generated from the first round of data collection. The three participants selected for this round represented areas within the organisation included in the study, i.e. one from business, one from IT and one who served in a checking or monitoring role. Recent and long term employees were interviewed in Round Two. The second round of data collection was completed by telephone. In all, 28 interviews were conducted over the two stages of the data collection.

### **CHOOSING AND APPLYING A HERMENEUTIC APPROACH**

The research in progress that is the focus of this paper adopts an interpretivist approach to explore the prescribed versus practiced IT governance and the attendant consequences of the differences between theory and praxis in a large organisation in Australia. Data was collected through two rounds of semi-structured interviews conducted with employees who were involved in IT governance at various levels and in various departments throughout the organisation and through analysis of company documents. The research seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of IT governance?
  - a) As expressed by management (prescribed) and
  - b) As it occurs in the actual manifestation of (practiced) IT governance within the organisation
2. How do the differences between theory and praxis manifest themselves within the organisation?
3. What are the consequences of the differences between theory and praxis to the organisation?

The use of hermeneutics was first considered since it has been suggested that hermeneutics is a recognised framework for the analysis of organisations (Bryman 1989). In addition, Frost et al



(1985) elaborate that it is particularly useful when looking at organisational culture and others have applied it to the analysis of socio-technical interactions (Barley 1986, Harvey and Myers 2002). The hermeneutic approach was adopted in this research as being most appropriate because of its suitability to the conduct of research within socio-technical and organisational contexts.

Moreover the epistemology applied in this research is interpretivist constructivism and draws heavily from hermeneutics. In addition, within the interpretivist epistemology, a hermeneutic approach was considered the most appropriate choice for this research supporting as it does the construction of understanding from the analysis and interpretation of the data under study. Dilthey considered:

Ö the central difficulty of all interpretative skill. The whole of a work must be understood from the individual words and their combinations, and yet the full comprehension of the details presupposes the understanding of the whole (Dilthey 1976, p115).

Given that a number of hermeneutic approaches have been adopted in IS research, the next challenge was to consider the different points of view. After much consideration, an approach informed by both Ricoeur (1981) and Gadamer (1976) was adopted for the following reasons.

1. It was felt that the hermeneutics advocated by Ricoeur offered richness for the study and interpretation of complex social situations such as those investigated in this study in that it draws together the work and thoughts of prominent hermeneutic scholars and reconciles the two foci of understanding and explanation, the specific and the general.
2. Ricoeur's focus on the text as the vehicle of meaning, whilst balancing this against a need for critical analysis and judgement, supported the selection of a hermeneutic approach inspired by his work.
3. Gadamer contributed his recognition of the need for awareness of prejudices, his view of the importance of questions, and his concept of horizon and fusion of horizons.

A diagrammatic representation of the research philosophy and design appears in Figure 1. Ricoeur's concepts of distanciation, appropriation, understanding, explanation and the application of a critically self reflexive and questioning approach were used to inform this research in progress. These concepts are discussed next.

**Distanciation**, also referred to as historicity by Myers (1994), refers to the distance between the text and its origins. Distance from a text can exist as a consequence of temporal, cultural, or lingual factors, due to the intention of the author to deceive or mislead the interpreter or due to changing social practices (Lukaitis and Cybulski 2004). Ricoeur sees that the starting point of any interpretation should be the text. Ricoeur's concept of distanciation differs from the 'temporal distance' of Gadamer through the movement to a text focus (Langdrige 2004). In Ricoeur's words:

For the distanciation revealed by writing is already present in discourse itself, which contains the seeds of the distanciation of the said from the saying, to follow Hegel's famous analysis at the beginning of *The Phenomenology of Mind*: the saying vanishes, but the said persists (Ricoeur 1981, p92)

Ricoeur also encourages the interpreter to distance themselves from their own prejudices and pre-conceived understandings and also from their reading of the text. He advocates a 'critique of prejudice' in order that the interpreter may proceed through the analysis and interpretation in a self critical and self-reflexive manner (Langdrige 2004).

Distanciation from oneself demands that the appropriation of the proposed worlds offered by the text passes through the disappropriation of the self. The critique of

false consciousness can thus become an integral part of hermeneutics, conferring upon the critique of ideology that meta-hermeneutical dimension Habermas assigns to it (Ricouer 1981, p94-95).

The process of interpretation thus becomes a dialectic between distanciation and appropriation (Geanellos 2000).

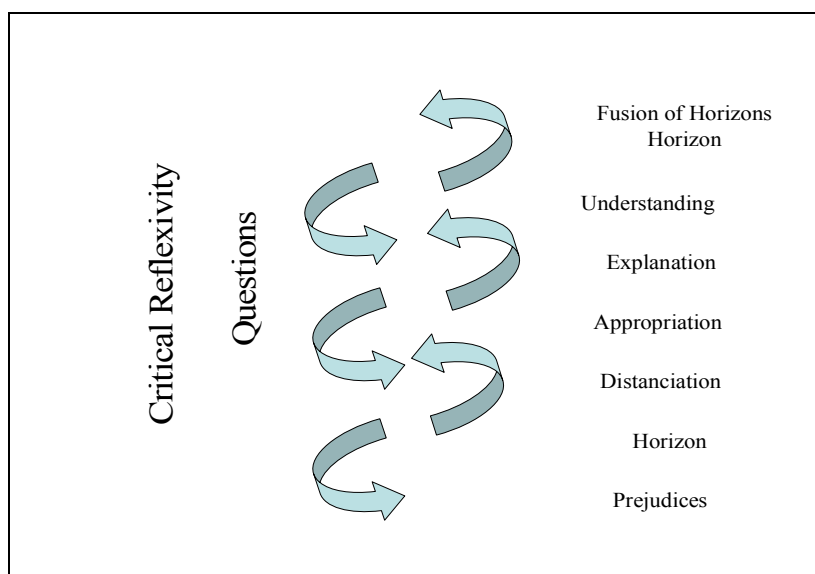


Figure 1 - Reflexive Hermeneutic Research Approach derived from Ricouer (1981) and Gadamer (1976)

In this study, it was envisioned that distanciation of the text would help ensure that during the data analysis the meaning was derived from the text and that it emerged from the conversation between the text and the researcher (Prasad 2002). This process was extended to the core of the data analysis process through the construction of additional texts, representing contexts and concepts derived from the data that informed and represented the construction of meaning (Harvey and Myer 2002). This is a recursive process that could continue indefinitely (Harvey and Myer 2002). It is the role of the interpreter to determine the appropriate moment to finalise the interpretation. This occurred when there was minimal change in interpretation and no new themes or concepts emerged from the data. Intercoder reliability was used within this study to provide confidence in the quality of the interpretation. In the words of Harvey and Myer (2002):

Every meaning is constructed, even through the very constructive act of seeking to deconstruct, and the process whereby that textual interpretation occurs must be self-critically reflected on (Ricouer 1974) (Harvey and Myer 2002, p176)

The inclusion of Ricouer's critical *self-reflexivity* was an important element in this research study. It encouraged the researchers to continually check and recheck the appropriateness of their analysis against the gradually evolving meanings derived from the data under analysis. The researchers sought at all times to remain critical and self-reflexive. This self-reflexivity informed the recruitment of research participants from a broad range of roles and perspectives within the organisation, it also enabled the researcher to draw concepts and questions from the IT governance

literature to develop the interview guide, whilst still remaining conscious of the potential that exposure to the literature might impact upon their views of the interview texts.

Ricouer's concept of *appropriation* refers to the process of making the text one's own (Boland 1991, Lee 1994, Geanellos 2000, Langdrige 2004). Appropriation refers to the researcher deriving meaning from the text, independently of the historical, social, cultural factors that influenced its creation, and independently of authorial intent. Ricouer saw this not as a reaching back to determine the meaning of the text but rather as a moving forward and exploring the area in front of the text and in this way challenging, shaping and altering the horizons and prejudices of the researcher (Langdrige 2004). Thus enabling the hermeneutic circle to begin again, with the researcher gaining a new understanding of herself, with which to recommence the process of understanding the meaning of the text (Geanellos 2000). In the course of this research appropriation is another mechanism that was used to challenge and expand prejudices and preconceptions, resulting as it did in a movement of the researchers own horizon.

Ricoeur's theory of interpretation is underpinned by two concepts:

1. Explanation, or what the text says; and
2. Understanding, or what the text talks about (Geanellos 2000, p114)

The *explanation* of the text refers to the detailed and careful analysis of the individual components of the text, while understanding the text requires the researcher to lift their focus to take in the whole meaning of the complete text (Geanellos 2000). For the hermeneutic researcher this process should be a circular and iterative one, in this way the depth of the interpretation is strengthened, moving from simple initial interpretations to deeper and more complex subsequent meanings. In this research this approach was adopted to analyse the data.

Gadamer sees the use of *questions* as key to enabling a valid interpretation (Butler 1998), according to Gadamer understanding is not possible without the activity of questioning (Fleming et al 2003, p117). Gadamer sees questions as a means to open possibilities and to keep them open (Butler 1998). They can also be used to offset or mediate the impact of a researcher's pre-existing prejudices. Questions can do this by assisting the researcher to remain constantly in touch with what those prejudices are and to assist with not taking anything for granted. In this research questions were used, for example, to challenge the researchers existing prejudices, to aid the identification of an appropriate participant profile and to inform and develop the research interview guide.

In addition, Gadamer's belief in the plurality of meaning was acknowledged as adding strength to Ricouer's approach that implies that one valid truth can be found (Geanellos 2000). In this research the researcher made a conscious effort to uncover, communicate and encompass the broadest possible plurality of meaning into the research study in order that both the data and the resulting findings are of the highest quality. This attempt to remain open to plurality of meaning throughout the research process manifested in the number and selection of interviewees, the selection of organisational artefacts and has been extended to the selection of research literature the researcher incorporated into the study.

Gadamer was strongly aware of the importance of acknowledging *prejudices* (Butler 1998) and actions and activities to highlight the researcher's prejudices have been incorporated into the research approach in order to assist the researcher to constantly challenge her initial and subsequent interpretations. This was done by:

1. Including intercoder checking into the data analysis,
2. Continually questioning conclusions and ideas that emerged from the data,

3. Seeking participants from a broad range of roles within the organisation, so that multiple perspectives and views were discovered and as a consequence questioned and integrated, and
4. Informing the researcher's review of the existing literature and how that impacted upon the researcher's opinions and views.

Finally Gadamer's (1976) notion of *horizon* and the eventual *fusion of horizons* that occurs at the moment understanding is reached (Butler 1998) was applied in this research. Gadamer saw horizons as everything that can be seen from one particular point (Butler 1998, Fleming et al 2003). A horizon is a constantly changing phenomenon. It is suggested that a person's view is coloured and varied by their cultural background, their historical understanding of the phenomenon being viewed, and by social and traditional factors. It is through challenging and working through these pre-existing impacts and prejudices that one's horizon can move over time. The result of working toward common understandings in this way can be a fusion of horizons between individuals. When there is a fusion of horizons, there also is understanding (Butler 1998).

Having the researcher complete the data collection and transcription of all interviews and other documents for analysis within this study was a decision also based on Gadamer's hermeneutics. Gadamer believed that understanding is gained through dialogue, and that activity, such as conducting and transcribing interviews, should not be delegated as they contribute to a fuller immersion in the topic and a greater opportunity for shared understanding through dialogue between researcher and interviewee (Fleming et al 2003). This in turn should support movement toward fusion of horizons, or greater understanding between researcher and participants. It should be noted though that in the words of Myers (1994):

The hermeneutic-dialectic approach does not accept uncritically participants' own views on a particular topic; rather, it recognises that the researcher (or developer) attempts to critically evaluate and transform social reality, a reality that is historically constituted (p191).

At some stage the researcher must call a halt to what Gadamer believed should be an endless cycle of interpretation, reach the final understandings and record the results of the research. In pursuit of valid research outcomes and to help in establishing an endpoint to the interpretation of the data, the authors chose to employ the technique of intercoder checking. This is an additional step that introduces added rigour into the research method and relies on the use of questions, to help identify, challenge and overcome interpreter prejudices and to confirm the appropriate point in the research process to discontinue the cycles of interpretation. Thus the hermeneutic circle is closed.

## **RESULTS OF USING THE HERMENEUTIC APPROACH**

It is important to recognise that the interpretivist epistemology adopted in this research is not one clear definable approach. Rather interpretivism is moulded and formed by the intent and application of the researcher (Schwandt 1994). For example, it is commonly acknowledged that hermeneutics is one form of interpretivism (Lee 1994). Other forms of interpretivism include postmodernism and deconstructionism (Kein and Myers 1999). Klein and Myers (1999, p70) go on to describe interpretivism as 'a family of paradigms too large and diverse to tackle for this project'. The purpose of drawing the reader's attention to the diversity of forms is to illustrate what might be described as the illusory nature of interpretivism. Illusory because the purpose of the epistemological level is to consider issues of being and knowing rather than remain focussed on the minutia of the mechanism by which knowledge or understanding is derived. However, because of

the nature of interpretivism and the need for the researcher's epistemological intention and approach to be clear, it is important for the researcher to carefully document and record the process of meaning construction (Schwandt 1994, p118). In this research, the use of a clearly defined hermeneutic approach proved beneficial in this regard enabling the researcher to maintain a consistent philosophical position, thus ensuring the basic integrity and internal consistency of the research process.

Another major advantage of the hermeneutic approach used in this research is in its recognition and embracing of prejudice. In this research, the primary researcher spent considerable time and effort in becoming aware of her own prejudices and recognising these as the point where understanding begins (Myers 2004). This researcher became a part of the research situation. Interview data was socially constructed in the exchange between researcher and participant and again in the process of transcription and analysis. The hermeneutic approach provided recognition of this reality and a useful mechanism for raising an awareness of these prejudices such that meaning in the research became apparent (Myers 2004).

The hermeneutic approach also offered benefits in increasing the validity of the research. As indicated earlier, carefully and accurately documenting the research process is an important step in interpretivist research. In this research, the development and application of a clearly articulated hermeneutic approach supported detailed recording of the researcher's reflections throughout the research journey. Transferability refers to relevance of the research results to other settings. To facilitate transferability in this study, the research process, setting, participants (Burke Johnson 1997), and the findings were detailed in a richer, more accurate and more complete manner supported by the hermeneutic approach (Guba and Lincoln 1989, Trochim 2001). This detailed account should enable a reader of the research results to make their own decision about the appropriateness of the research findings for their situation.

Since dependability relies on the researcher's rich and detailed description of processes, methods and approaches used (Flick 2002) the writing process in this research began early to ensure higher degrees of accuracy and the writing continued thoughtfully throughout the research journey.

In addition, the conscientious application of intercoder reliability by both researchers increases dependability in this research by providing a structured opportunity for feedback and to challenge the primary researcher's evolving interpretations and analyses (Flick 2002).

The critical reflexivity demanded by the hermeneutic approach also enhanced the dependability of the research process through continually challenging the researchers to reconsider and review emerging interpretations (Flick 2002).

The rich, detailed documentation and interpretations will assist the reader to clearly follow the research decisions made and will contribute to the auditability of the process.

Applying the hermeneutic approach also supported confirmability, i.e., the extent to which others can corroborate the results of the research (Trochim 2001). This occurred through the use of:

1. Intercoder reliability during the data analysis phase,
2. Careful and detailed documentation of the process,
3. Seeking out and reviewing occurrences in the data that did not support the emerging research findings, negative cases (Burke Johnson 1997, Mays and Pope 2000).

In addition the critical reflexivity inherent within the hermeneutic approach used offered an opportunity for continuous and productive challenging of the research process. This enabled identification of paradoxes and contradictions in interpretation, and how it evolved over the period of the research, and the subsequent documentation of the research (Mays and Pope 2000, Lincoln and Guba 2003).

The overall benefit gained in this research from the adoption of a hermeneutic approach was a more robust research framework that was synergistic with the philosophical underpinnings of the research. This enabled the researchers to move with confidence through the research process knowing that at every stage in the journey each step was designed to ensure greater immersion in the research and to enhance the richness of the data collection and analysis. Perhaps equally as important was the knowledge that any prejudices held or assumptions made would be subject to challenge, through questioning, critical self-reflexivity or the use of other techniques, such as intercoder checking.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In exploring the most appropriate of the various qualitative research techniques for an ongoing research project in IT governance, the authors happened upon a most interesting and exciting option and were thus introduced to the intricacies of the ancient art of hermeneutics. Given the anticipated richness and rigour the application of hermeneutics promised to add to their qualitative process, the authors persevered through many difficult and complex descriptions of hermeneutics until they gained a level of comfort and confidence in its applicability and use. The comprehensive chronological discussion of its evolution and comparative discussion of the various hermeneutic approaches provide a greater understanding of the breadth and depth of hermeneutics and the distinct applicability of its various approaches to case studies in general and IS research in particular. This report on the application of one approach to hermeneutics in a case study of IT governance in a large Australian organisation is an attempt to ease the way of others who may be considering a similar choice. In addition, it illustrates the unique benefits to be gained by using hermeneutics in IS research to strengthen the dependability and validity of qualitative inquiries and hopefully promotes an increased understanding of the various approaches to hermeneutics.

IS research is uniquely poised to benefit greatly from hermeneutics as a valuable qualitative research tool. The IS research community is continually called upon to conduct inquiries into emerging phenomena. Such inquiries could benefit from robust tools that go beyond descriptive analysis to rigorously explain their impact. Hermeneutics is one such tool that will allow qualitative IS researchers to transcend the usual everyday descriptive character of qualitative understanding of these emerging phenomena to identify paradoxes and contradictions, challenge assumptions and plumb the depths of inquiry to develop strong, dependable explanatory foundations for subsequent quantitative inquiries.

In sharing the authors' insights into the challenges of understanding, choosing and applying hermeneutics as an appropriate research philosophy and data analysis tool this paper is the first attempt to demystify the often misunderstood and overrated complexities of applying hermeneutics to IS research and is designed to encourage more widespread acceptance and application of hermeneutics within the broader IS research community.

## REFERENCES

- Barley, S. R. (1986). *Technology as an occasion for restructuring: Evidence from observations of CT scanners and the social order of radiology departments*. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol 31, Iss 1, pp 78-108.
- Bleicher, J. (1980). *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as method, philosophy and critique*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
- Boland Jr, R. (1985). *Phenomenology: A Preferred Approach to Research on Information Systems*. *Research Methods in Information Systems*. E. Mumford, R. Hirscheim, G. Fitzgerald and T. Wood-Harper, (Eds.), North-Holland, New York: pp193-201.
- Boland Jr, R. J. (1991). *Information Systems Use as a Hermeneutic Process*. *Information Systems Research: Contemporary Approaches & Emergent Traditions*. in H-E. Nissen, H. K. Klein and R. Hirscheim, (Eds.). North-Holland, Amsterdam: pp 439-464.
- Bryman, A. (1989). *Research Methods and Organization Studies*, Unwin Hyman, London.
- Burke Johnson, R. (1997). *Examining the validity structure of qualitative research*. *Education* 118(2): 282-292.
- Bussen, W. and M. D. Myers (1997). *Executive information systems failure: a New Zealand case study*. *Journal of Information Technology* Vol 12, pp 145-153.
- Butler, T. (1998). *Towards a hermeneutic method for interpretive research in information systems*. *Journal of Information Technology* Vol 13, pp 285-300.
- Butler, T. (2003). *An institutional perspective on developing and implementing intranet - and internet- based information systems*. *Information Systems Journal* Vol 13, pp 209-231.
- Charkham, J. P. (1995). *Keeping Good Company: A Study of Corporate Governance in Five Countries*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Demeterio, F. P. A. I. (2001). *Dialectical Hermeneutics*. *Diwatao* Vol 1, Iss 1: [http://www.geocities.com/philodept/diwatao/dialectical\\_hermeneutics.htm](http://www.geocities.com/philodept/diwatao/dialectical_hermeneutics.htm), accessed 25 August 2003.
- Denzin, N. K. (1970). *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*. Chicago, Aldine Publishing Company.
- Dilthey, W. (1976). *The Rise of Hermeneutics*. in *Critical Sociology, Selected Readings*. P. Connerton, (Ed.). Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth.
- Fleming, V., U. Gaidys, and Y Robb. (2003). *Hermeneutic research in nursing: developing a Gadamerian - based research method*. *Nursing Inquiry* Vol 10, Iss 2: pp 113-120.
- Flick, U. (2002). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research: Second Edition*. London, Sage Publications.
- Frost, P. J., L. F. Moore, M.R. Louis, C.C. Lundberg, J Martin, (Eds.) (1985). *Organizational Culture*. Sage, Beverly Hills, CA.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1976). *The Historicity of Understanding*. in *Critical Sociology: Selected Readings*. P. Connerton, (Ed.). Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth.
- Geanellos, R. (2000). *Exploring Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory of interpretation as a method of analysing research texts*. *Nursing Inquiry* Vol 7, pp 112-119.
- Grondin, J. (1994). *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Guba, E. G. and Y. S. Lincoln (1989). *Fourth Generation Evaluation*. Newbury Park, California, Sage.
- Habermas, J. (1968). *Knowledge & Human Interest*. Polity Press.
- Hamilton, D. (1994). *Traditions, Preferences, and Postures in Applied Qualitative Research* in. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, (Eds.), Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.

- Harvey, L. J. and M. D. Myers, (Eds.) (2002). *Scholarship and Practice: The Contribution of Ethnographic Research Methods to Bridging the Gap* in. *Qualitative Research in Information Systems: A Reader*. Sage Publications London.
- Kim, C. S. and D. K. Peterson (2003). *A Comparison of the Perceived Importance of Information Systems Development Strategies by Developers from the United States and Korea*. *Information Resources Management Journal* 16(2): 1-18.
- Klein, H. K. and M. D. Myers (1999). *A set of principles for conducting and evaluating interpretive field studies in information systems*. *MIS Quarterly* 23(1): 67-93.
- Langdrige, D. (2004). *The Hermeneutic Phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur*. *Existential Analysis* Vol 15, Iss 2, pp 243-255.
- Lee, A. S. (1994). *Electronic Mail as a Medium for Rich Communication: An Empirical Investigation Using Hermeneutic Interpretation*. *MIS Quarterly* Vol 18, Iss 2, pp 143-157.
- Leonardo, Z. (2003). *Interpretation and the problem of domination: Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics*. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, Vol 22, pp 329-350.
- Lincoln, Y. S. and E. G. Guba (2003). *Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences*. In *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, (Eds.). Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications: 253-291.
- Lukaitis, S. and J. Cybulski (2004). *A Hermeneutic Analysis of the Denver International Airport Baggage Handling System*. *Proceedings of the Information Systems Foundations Workshop: Constructing and Criticising*, Australian National University, Canberra.
- Macdonald, K. and C. Tipton (1993). *Using Documents*. In *Researching Social Life*. N. Gilbert, (Ed.). London, Sage Publications: 186-200.
- Mallery, J. C., R. Hurwitz, and G. Duffy. (1987). *Hermeneutics: From Textual Explication to Computer Understanding?* In *The Encyclopaedia of Artificial Intelligence*. S. Shapiro, (Ed.). John Wiley and Sons, New York.
- Mays, N. and C. Pope (2000). *Qualitative Research in Health Care: Assessing quality in qualitative research*. *British Medical Journal* 320(7226): 50-52.
- Myers, M. D. (1994). *A Disaster for Everyone to See: An Interpretive Analysis of a Failed IS Project*. *Accounting, Management & Information* Vol 4, Iss 4, pp 185-201.
- Myers, M. D. (1995). *Dialectical Hermeneutics: A Theoretical Framework for the Implementation of Information Systems*. *Information Systems Journal* Vol 5, Iss 1, pp 51-70.
- Myers, M.D. (2004). *Hermeneutics in Information Systems Research*, in *Social Theory and Philosophy for Information Systems*, Mingers, J. & Willcocks, L. Chichester, John Wiley, West Sussex. pp 103-128.
- Myers, M. D. and D. Avison, (Eds.) (2002). *Introducing Qualitative Methods*. *Qualitative Research in Information Systems: A Reader*. Sage Publications London.
- Olson, D. L. and J. Carlisle (2001). *Hermeneutics in Information Systems*. *Proceedings of the Americas Conference on Information Systems*, Boston, Massachusetts.
- Peppard, J. (2001). *Bridging the gap between the IS organization and the rest of the business: plotting a route*. *Info Systems Journal* 11: 249-270.
- Prasad, A. (2002). *The Contest Over Meaning: Hermeneutics as an Interpretive Methodology for Understanding Texts*. *Organizational Research Methods* Vol 5, Iss 1, pp 12-33.
- Ricoeur, P. (1981). *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*. J. B. Thompson, (Ed.). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Robbins, S. S. and Stylianou, A. C. (2002), "A Study of Cultural Differences in Global Corporate Web Sites", *The Journal of Computer Information Systems*, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 3-9.
- Scott-Baumann, A. (2003). *Reconstructive Hermeneutical Philosophy: Return Ticket to the Human Condition*. *Philosophy Social Criticism* Vol 29, Iss 6, pp 703-727.



- Schwandt, T. A. (1994). *Constructivist, Interpretivist Approaches to Human Inquiry*. in Handbook of Qualitative Research. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, (Eds.). Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications.
- Trochim, W. M. K. (2001). *Qualitative Validity*. Research Methods Knowledge Base <http://trochim.human.cornell.edu/kb/qualval.htm>, accessed 2001(10 September 2001).
- Wiklund, L., L. Lindholm, and U Lindstrom. (2002). *Hermeneutics and Narration: a way to deal with qualitative data*. Nursing Inquiry Vol 9, Iss 2, pp 114-125.

