> researcher's engagement in a search for meaning and truth in relation to the topic of inquiry . . . in the end it is the capacity of the inquirer to see and understand that makes the difference. (p. 55)

It is the process of precisely how we come to see and understand that the philosophical perspectives of phenomenology and hermeneutics attempt to clarify.

How do we know what we know? – Phenomenology

Let us begin with some provisional definitions of the two central concepts. *Phenomenology* is a philosophy of experience that attempts to understand the ways in which meaning is constructed in and through human experience. This perspective views a person's *lived experience* (the thing in itself) of and within the world as the foundation of meaning. It 'seeks to set aside any assumptions about the object of inquiry, and build up a thorough and comprehensive description of the "thing itself" ' (McLeod 2001, p. 56). The aim of phenomenology is to determine what an experience means to a person quite apart from any theoretical overlay that might be put on it by the researcher, and to provide a comprehensive and rich description of it (Moustakas 1994)

> [P]henomenology is the study of the lifeworld – the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it. . . . Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. Phenomenology asks, 'What is this or that kind of experience like?' It differs from almost every other science in that it attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it. (Van Manen 1990, p. 9)

Phenomenology does not attempt to build theory that can be used to *explain* the way the world works. Rather it seeks to present plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world (Van Manen 1990, p. 9).

> Transformative experience alters action. Knowledge resulting from phenomenological inquiry, becomes practically relevant in its possibilities of changing the manner in which a professional communicates with and acts towards another individual in the very next situation he/she may encounter. Phenomenological knowledge reforms understanding, does something to us, it affects us, and leads to more thoughtful action. (Van der Zalm 2000)

Phenomenological insight, in providing deep insights and understandings into the way that things are, enables people to see the world differently, and in seeing it differently to act differently towards it.

How do we know what we know? – Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics functions in quite a different way from phenomenology. In hermeneutics, understanding is always from a particular position or perspective. It is therefore always a matter of *interpretation*. The researcher can never be free from the pre-understandings and 'prejudices' that inevitably arise from them being a member of a culture and a user of particular modes of language. Indeed, as we shall see, the act of interpretation is dependent on such prejudices.

Hermeneutics relates to the general science of interpretation (Reedier 1988). It has to do with the ways in which human beings interpret and make sense of the world. It is important to note that in the perspective being developed here, hermeneutics (the act of interpretation) is not simply something that people do. Rather, with Gadamer (1981) we would want to argue that hermeneutics is what people *are*, that is, human beings are by definition interpretative creatures. In other words, hermeneutics is an ontological rather than merely an epistemological position. We cannot be anything other than interpretative beings. Humans can only make sense of the

world through utilizing complex and ongoing hermeneutical processes which are carried out implicitly and explicitly, reflectively and unreflectively. Within the research context, the practice of hermeneutics relates to making explicit and formal the ontological propensity of human beings to interpret the world.

Hermeneutics and phenomenology

There are clearly tensions and differences between these two perspectives: with one seeking to explain the world and people's experiences within it in an objective, unbiased way, and with the other, as we will see, claiming that interpretation, bias and prejudice are crucial to the ways in which human beings encounter the world. Nevertheless, while there are dissimilarities between phenomenology and hermeneutics, there are also important similarities:

1 Both assume an 'active, intentional, construction of a social world and its meanings for reflexive human beings' (Mcleod 2001, p. 57). While phenomenology seeks to explore the true meaning of a phenomenon, it does not rule out that that meaning may be the product of interpretative processes. So, for example, a phenomenological study of the ways in which ministers perform pastoral care will seek to get to the essence of the phenomenon being observed by seeking to exclude any biases or preconceptions by the researcher. It does not, however, rule out the fact that those being observed may construct their meaning of pastoral care through an interpretative process. It simply does not see an analysis of this dimension as part of its task.
2 Both 'deal mainly with linguistic material, or with language-based accounts of other forms of representation' (van Deusen-Hunsinger 1995). Central to the analytical task of both hermeneutics and phenomenology within qualitative research is the significance of language and the importance of analysing texts. Certainly the modes of analysis may differ, but the central importance of language and text is shared and crucial.
3 Both are concerned with the development of *understanding* which may assist people to anticipate events, by sensitizing them to possibilities. In distinction to the perspective of the natural sciences and its primary task of explanation, both hermeneutics and phenomenology seek to provide modes of understanding which, while potentially transformative, are not necessarily explanatory.

It is interesting to note that each of these points of complementarity are also points which mark out the approaches as significantly dissimilar to the natural sciences. Indeed, the use of hermeneutics and phenomenology as research methods has emerged from a growing dissatisfaction with a realist philosophy of science based on the study of material entities with no reference to cultural or social context (Ryan 1996). Hermeneutics and phenomenology presents a significant challenge to positivism,

Hermeneutic phenomenology

In the qualititative research method of hermeneutic phenomenology, both of these perspectives are brought together in order to provide a rich description of the experience and a necessary interpretative perspective on lived experience.

As a method, hermeneutic phenomenology displays both descriptive and interpretive elements. It is

> *descriptive* (phenomenological) . . . because it wants to be attentive to how things appear, it wants to let things speak for themselves; it is . . . *interpretive* (hermeneutic) . . . because it claims that there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena. The implied contradiction may be resolved if one acknowledges that the (phenomenological) 'facts' of lived experience are always already meaningfully (hermeneutically) experienced. Moreover, even the 'facts' of lived experience need to be captured in language (the human

science text), and this is inevitably an interpretive process. (Van Manen 1990, p. 181)

The hermeneutics of Hans Georg Gadamer

There are a number of philosophical perspectives that researchers have used to inform the process of hermeneutic phenomenology. In the study that is our current focus, it was the philosophy of Hans Georg Gadamer (1981) that formed the foundational perspective. For Gadamer hermeneutics is a fundamental human act and a significant way of being in the world. In line with the ontological position outlined above, Gadamer argued that the act of interpretation is not 'just one of the various possible behaviours of the subject, but the mode of being' (Gadamer 1981, p. xviii). In advocating the ontological nature of interpretation, Gadamer indicated clearly that he was not concerned with offering a methodology for the human sciences (1981, p. xiii), but was more concerned with clarifying the conditions in which understanding can take place (1981, p. 263). From this ontological position he went on to develop some key concepts that were important for the method that was used in this study.

The limitations of method

Somewhat ironically, bearing in mind the way that his thinking forms the heart of this qualitative research method, Gadamer was highly suspicious of method. He argued that any perspective that a method offers necessarily imposes limitations and boundaries. The particular questions that emerge from within the plausibility structures of the method will allow the user to access only a limited amount of knowledge, that is, only the amount of knowledge that the method's questions will provide. Methods are therefore inherently limited and limiting. The main problem with methods is that those who utilize them become embedded in a particular perspective and find it

impossible to see the limitations that that perspective enforces upon them. Gadamer's key point here is that we must become aware of our own embeddedness or historical situatedness and constantly reflect on the ways in which this situatedness influences the way that we interpret our world.

Bracketing?

The suggestion that the researcher must be aware of his situatedness contrasts with Husserlian phenomenology (Husserl 1963). Insofar as Gadamer discounts the possibility of bracketing, his position puts him at odds with phenomenology as previously described. Bracketing refers to the suspension of a person's beliefs and preconceptions in an attempt to look at the phenomenon 'as it is', that is, without any intrusion from the researcher. By adopting a stance of objectivity and neutrality, the phenomenon can be seen and understood for what it essentially is (Corben 1999). In rejecting the possibility of such objectivity or neutrality, Gadamer presents a perspective that assumes our pre-understandings or prejudices to be necessary in order for us to make sense of the world.

Experience

Gadamer develops a particular perspective on experience which it is necessary to understand. He suggests that the ability to remain open to new experiences which may be radically different from previous ones is of the utmost importance.

> [T]he experienced person proves to be . . . someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has the proper fulfillment not in definite knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself. (1981, p. 335)