This paper introduces hermeneutic philosophy and inquiry to postmodern therapists. Hermeneutic inquiry is an approach to research that posits that all understanding is interpretation, and interpretation is constructed in language. It shares a common view of language with postmodern therapies, and therefore is likely to be a congenial and accessible approach to research for postmodern therapists. This paper describes one example of hermeneutic inquiry and discusses some practical implications of a hermeneutic approach to inquiry. Hermeneutic Inquiry: A Research Approach for Postmodern Therapists

I have practiced solution-focused and narrative therapies for over 20 years and consider myself a postmodern therapist who practices from a social constructionist perspective. As I began to read the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989), I saw how a hermeneutic approach to research was very much consistent with my postmodern disposition to therapy. Because hermeneutic inquiry and postmodern therapies share a common view of language, I believe that postmodern therapists will find hermeneutic inquiry to be an accessible approach to research that is consistent with their philosophy and world view. In this paper, I introduce postmodern therapists to hermeneutic inquiry and describe how I conducted a hermeneutic inquiry. I do this not to prescribe a normative template for the conduct of such research, nor to present a research article that “reports the results,” but to describe how I did it and make this approach accessible and easy to envision in one’s own work. Finally, I present some of the practical vicissitudes of utilizing a hermeneutic approach to inquiry.
LANGUAGE AND POSTMODERN THERAPIES

Those whose clinical work is influenced by approaches like narrative therapy, brief (including solution-focused) therapies, collaborative language systems (CLS), or Milan systemic perspectives, or by some combination of these, may define themselves as postmodern therapists. Miller and de Shazer (1997, p. 370) quipped that postmodernism is “. . . an amorphous term that may refer to a historical period, to a variety of loosely connected ideas, and/or to an ‘attitude’ toward life.” While I agree with their statement, it is likely unsatisfying for those, especially new therapists, seeking a clear definition. Postmodern thinkers would likely resist requests for a singular definition of postmodernism, because, as Jencks (1992, p. 11) asserts, in postmodernism, the search for universal truth is replaced by “a respect for difference of the regional, local and particular.” Postmodernism does not take it for granted that how we perceive the world is objective reality.

In the realm of therapy, Mills and Sprenkle (1995) have defined the Milan systemic approach, CLS, narrative therapy, and solution-focused therapy as postmodern approaches. Instead of taking up a modernist view of language, in which language is presumed to represent or symbolize internal mental constructs, these therapeutic approaches adopt a postmodern view of language, in which language constitutes or constructs social reality, as persons interact with one another. As Shotter (1993, p. 20) observes, a constitutive view of “language . . . contrasts markedly with . . . the taken for granted nature of language as a referential-representational system or code of meaningful signs.” We “. . . unknowingly ‘shape’ or ‘construct’ between ourselves . . . not only a sense of our identities, but also a sense of our own ‘social worlds.’” The therapies identified by Mills and Sprenkle (1995, p. 369) operationalize this constitutive view of language through purposeful therapeutic interviewing, but differ in “their beliefs about the most helpful way to steer (or not steer) the conversation. . . .” Others have referred to approaches that adopt a postmodern constitutive view of language as “collaborative” (Anderson & Gehart, 2007; Friedman, 1993), “constructive” (Hoyt, 1994, 1996, 1998), or “discursive” (Strong & Pare, 2004).

A HERMENEUTIC APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING

The constitutive nature of language is at the heart of hermeneutic philosophy and inquiry. In fact, several postmodern therapists credit hermeneutic
philosophy as an influence on their practice. Hermeneutics has been defined as the science, art, and philosophy of interpretation (Grondin, 1994). The term “hermeneutics” is derived from the Greek verb *hermeneuein*, which means “to say or interpret;” the noun *hermeneia*, is “the utterance or explication of thought;” and the name *hermeneus*, better known as Hermes, the “trickster” in Greek mythology, who carried messages from the gods to humankind. Hermes’ work invites human interpretation of these messages, which often created openings for multiple meanings and creativity (Caputo, 1987; Grondin, 1994) This is apt, in that hermeneutic inquiry produces multiple meanings; multiple interpretations may result from different perspectives on the texts.

**Language and Meaning**

Like postmodern therapies, a hermeneutic approach to inquiry focuses on how language constructs understanding of any human endeavor. As Gadamer (1989) states, “...language is the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the world and the all-embracing form of the constitution of the world” (p. 39). Language is the means by which particular understandings are negotiated and developed. For Gadamer (1989) “knowledge” is not an objective state of affairs that awaits discovery, but rather the outcome of a creative interpretive process. Meaning is negotiated in the dialogue between an interpreting subject and “another,” which may be another person in conversation, a text, a work of art or drama, etc. In a piece of research designed to understand of how persons interpret some phenomenon, the researcher is the interpreting subject, engaging with the participants’ accounts (Craig, 2007; Lindh, Severinsson, & Berg, 2009; Wood, 2006). For Gadamer (1989), referring to a “body of knowledge” or a “data set” distinct from the interpreting subject would be meaningless. There can be no knowing, and in fact no knowledge, outside the interaction between the knower and that which is to be understood. Knowledge is intersubjective.

**History, Authority, and Tradition**

According to Gadamer (1989), the passage of time changes the interpretive process, and accordingly changes the interpretation that one derives. Thus, a particular research “finding,” or interpretation, reached at any given time, is a unique confluence of the social, cultural, and historical moment,
converging with the “effective history” that the researcher brings to the hermeneutic enterprise. A research finding is not a timeless truth, but a bounded interpretation. Therefore, it is impossible to exclude one’s culture, ideas, beliefs, values, experiences, privilege, and access to power from the interpretive process. Hermeneutic researchers approach the phenomenon they are studying aware that they are, as Gadamer puts it, “historically-effected consciousnesses,” and cognizant of the influences that impinge upon them. As Moules (2002, p. 24) acknowledges, “I cannot remove my subjectivity from my work, but I can take it up with a sense of responsibility in recognizing how it translates into the way I listen to my participants, what I hear, what stands out to me, and how I interpret it.” Accordingly, a researcher brings his or her existing understandings, derived from literature, and his or her experience, to the inquiry.

Although hermeneutic researchers are aware of their historical effectedness, this does not mean that their interpretations are bounded by the limits of the past. A different time brings with it a new horizon, which, when merged with previous views, brings about a “fusion of horizons.” This fusion of horizons allows new perspectives to emerge, while rootedness in history allows for new interpretations that are grounded in past understandings. The dialectic between historical effectedness and new perspectives allows hermeneutic researchers to avoid tautologically seeing only what they want to see. In fact, Gadamer (1989) states that, since interpretation changes as the researcher moves forward through time, it is inevitable to find something new. He also suggests that it is not possible to determine a methodology without being guided by the topic (Craig, 2007; Lindh et al., 2009; Wood, 2006).

The Hermeneutic Circle

Interacting with a phenomenon based on one’s pre-understanding and history, negotiating successive new interpretations, taking new understandings and merging them with what is already known, and reentering the interpretive process is a recursive activity, much like the practice of postmodern therapy. Gadamer (1989) and others have called this process of interpretation “the hermeneutic circle.” As Heidegger (1962, p. 195) says, the important thing is “not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way.” Gadamer elaborates, “To try to escape from one’s own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible but manifestly
absurd. . . . One must enter the circular structure of understanding by not failing to recognize beforehand the essential conditions under which it (the interpretation) can be performed” (p. 397; parentheses added). Heidegger and Gadamer both point out that, since it is impossible to escape from our preunderstanding, it is imperative to actively engage it, incorporate it, and utilize it as the basis for new understandings.

**Hermeneutic Philosophy’s Influence on Postmodern Therapies**

Several postmodern therapists have cited hermeneutic philosophy as an influence upon their practice. Narrative therapist William Lax (1995) and reflecting team originator Tom Andersen (1995), citing Gadamer, have pointed out that we cannot escape our pre-understandings as we position ourselves with clients. As Andersen (p. 12) states, our understandings of clients are “much determined by the life we have already lived.” CLS originator Harlene Anderson (1996, p. 39) asserts, “If from a hermeneutic perspective all understanding is interpretive, one can never reach a true understanding; a speaker’s meaning cannot be fully understood, much less duplicated by another person. . . . (italics in original).” Anderson reminds therapists that we cannot fully understand another. Narrative therapists Alan Parry and Robert Doan (1995) suggest that therapists might do well to invite their clients to hold their problem stories loosely, and to position themselves so that they might see their stories more as interpretive understandings, and less as absolute truth. They suggested that therapists’ endeavors could be labeled “clinical hermeneutics”: “In a word, are we prepared to work entirely within the rather humble acknowledgment that all is interpretation?” (p. 22).

**HERMENEUTIC INQUIRY: A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE**

A postmodern therapist mulling over the potentials and possibilities of hermeneutic inquiry might be thinking, “Hmm . . . this sounds like it fits. As a therapist, I believe that there are multiple realities. I use the interview to develop a different interpretation—a new story, or a solution description—that the client finds more helpful than the problem-based interpretation. I don’t necessarily think that the new story is ‘true.’ You have described the philosophy, but, how do I actually conduct research based
on these premises? How do I operationalize this philosophy as a researcher? I’ve got a thesis to get done. What is the actual research method I use?”

Therein lies the rub. Gadamer’s (1989) magnum opus, to which I have referred throughout this paper, is entitled *Truth and Method*. It might have been more aptly entitled *No Truth, No Method*. In this book, Gadamer took on two particular ideas: First, that there is one truth out there, awaiting discovery; and secondly, that certain ways of deriving knowledge (i.e., the scientific method) should be privileged over others. It would be contrary to my understanding of hermeneutics if I were to prescribe a particular research method, or to suggest that the way I conducted research should be considered normative. Accordingly, describing what I did (in this case, for my doctoral dissertation), can be viewed as but one way to arrange a research effort, and this view will open new ways to understand “research,” “qualitative research,” “hermeneutics.” Because the purpose of this paper is to invite postmodern therapists to consider taking up a hermeneutic approach to research, I will focus on what I did, and leave the interpretation at which I arrived, the “results” as it were, for another time and place.

**The Purpose of the Study**

When I began this study, I had been training counsellors, in a variety of contexts, for fifteen years. I had become increasingly curious about how counsellors in training became more competent, coherent, and confident as they proceeded through their coursework and practica. As Gadamer (1989) states, the interpretive process begins with the experience of being addressed by the topic. I interpret Gadamer’s use of “addressed” here to refer to the experience of an issue “grabbing” you, being captivated by an idea, or of a phenomenon capturing your attention. My students and I have mutually influenced one another. Interacting with novice counsellors as they negotiated new understandings of what they are doing was like interacting with living texts. My engagement in this topic engaged and captured me, or as Gadamer might have put it, addressed me. Accordingly, I recruited eight Master’s students in counsellor education, and interviewed them twice to bring their understandings about their development into the hermeneutic circle with my understandings, experiences, and beliefs.

Ellis (1998) conceptualizes the hermeneutic circle as a spiral with multiple loops. The loops represent multiple instances of engagement with various manifestations of the phenomenon under study. A loop may con-
Hermeneutic Inquiry

Hermeneutic Inquiry 25

sist of multiple engagements with the same text, or engagement with differ-
ent “data sets.” Questions for subsequent loops are informed by the
understanding derived in the previous loop. Figure 1 illustrates the loops
of interpretation I undertook.

Initial Loops

The formation of my interpretive account began with my initial experience
of being addressed by the topic, as I observed the changes that counsellors
in training experienced. As I systematically reviewed and engaged the lit-
erature on counsellor education, supervision, and development, and for-
mulated my conceptual framework, a second interpretative loop occurred.
I entered a third loop when I read the participants’ written documents (e.g.,
application documents and practicum journals), adapted the interview pro-
tocol based on them, and made notes and journal entries of my reflections.

The Interview Process: Responding to Responses. Although I started with
an interview protocol that had been approved by my institution’s research
ethics board (REB),1 it served as a framework that I adapted according to
the particularities of each participant, before commencing interviews. I found
that the style of interviewing I use in therapy was easily transferable to herme-
neutic inquiry. As White and Epston (1990) put it, I was “responding to

FIGURE 1. Loops of analysis in hermeneutic interpretation

1In Canada, these bodies are usually called research ethics boards. In the United States, they are
known as institutional review boards, and in the United Kingdom, research ethics committees.
responses,” adapting my questions to participants’ accounts. I positioned myself, as Anderson (1996) suggests, in a “not knowing” position. “Not knowing,” in the context of a research interview, does not mean that the interviewer knows nothing of the phenomenon under study, but that he or she is aware of his or her preunderstandings, and permits the participant’s account to emerge, allowing for a fusion of horizons.

Between interviews, I read my notes and made journal entries. I listened to each recording after it was transcribed, not only to ensure its accuracy, but to capture the spirit of that particular participant’s words. At times I found myself transported to a moment that had been particularly moving to the participant or to me. I wrote a descriptive paragraph, a “word picture,” if you will, of each participant, which began to form the basis of their individual stories that I retold in the dissertation. At the beginning of the second interview, I described to each participant both the content and flavor that I had experienced, and requested that they provide me with any correction or supplementary comment they wished. The second interview mirrored the first in my process of responding to the responses of the participants.

*Engaging the Transcripts.* A hermeneutic view posits that interpretation begins with the development of the researcher’s engagement with the topic and the development of the researcher’s pre-understanding. Thus, to refer to data analysis separate from process of interpretation is an arbitrary distinction. For ease of organization, I describe “data analysis” as a separate step that occurred after all the transcripts were complete.

I initially read each transcript in one sitting, recording my general impressions in my journal, noting aspects that caught my attention. Some of these threads were repeated often. Still others stood out in their evocative-ness for the participant or in me. Each successive reading brought new reflections.

I attempted to organize the interconnected threads of an interpretive account in several different ways: I grouped pages of excerpts of text into sections of a binder, which was organized and reorganized several times as I attempted to take different approaches to generating a coherent account.

There were several occasions when I became overwhelmed with the task of organizing the eight distinct participants’ stories. I eventually developed the practice of re-reading sections of one or more transcripts.
This served to broaden my focus and connect the disjointed portions of emerging story to the whole.

**The Writing Process**

Finally, the writing process itself constituted another loop in which the evolving text addressed me. It imposed a structure and discipline on me, which required that I crystallize my current interpretive position. As part of this, I sent to each participant the portions of the dissertation document that described their individual experiences, and my integrated interpretation of counsellor development. I eventually generated a document (Chang, 2008) that froze my interpretation of “counsellor development” as a snapshot in time, a fusion of horizons for that particular moment.

The graphical representation, and the description above, still cannot fully represent the recursivity of the interpretive process, and might lead the reader to think that the process was sequential. Not so. For example, as I was interviewing participants, I often recalled something I had read in their documents or in the counsellor education literature, which helped me form the next line of questioning in the interview. As I was writing the dissertation document—which did not happen sequentially—I would find myself referring to the transcript to capture the spirit and the words of the participant and be transported in another direction. Every time I scoured the literature before the submission of the dissertation, I would find something else that would contribute to my “final” interpretive position. And so on. A “true” version of Figure 1 would show loops within loops within loops, folding back and forth over themselves, and would be next to impossible to portray graphically. Figure 1 is a rough approximation of the hermeneutic process that contrasts it with the parallel steps in quantitative research, while illustrating that I was in constant dialogue with the participants, my reading of the literature, and my own experiences throughout the process of conducting the research and writing the dissertation.

I “completed” the writing of the dissertation, and successfully “defended” it. In doing so, I felt like a participant in another interesting conversation about how counsellors develop, and this further refined my interpretive position. I arrived at a new interpretive position during and after my oral. But, to quote Winston Churchill in much more trying circumstances, “Now, this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps,
the end of the beginning.” I now have a full-time job as a professor of counselling, the usual expectations to publish or perish, and the opportunity to observe, think, investigate, and write about how counsellors develop. My continued engagement in the topic will lead to further loops of interpretation and more fusions of horizons to come.

VICISSITUDES OF HERMENEUTIC INQUIRY

As practitioners of postmodern therapy may have found, postmodern ideas are a minority position in our mental health disciplines. The modernist discourses of diagnostic classification and empirically supported treatments have a strong hold on our training programs, agencies, and clinics. Similarly, qualitative research methods, including hermeneutic inquiry, are in a minority position in university departments where therapists are educated, and where the modernist discourses of logical-positivist science run deep. This may create practical obstacles for postmodern therapists who are drawn to qualitative research in general, and hermeneutic inquiry in particular. Moreover, hermeneutic inquiry is deeply personal and inherently messy.

A Work of the Heart

Hermeneutic inquiry is a work of the heart. I was addressed by the topic, captured by it, and immersed in reflection on how counsellors develop. The results of my study were not merely findings—I have been transformed by my interactions with students and research participants. As Moules (2002, p. 24) says, “Hermeneutics demands that we proceed delicately and yet wholeheartedly, and as a result of what we study, we carry ourselves differently, and we live differently.” In the course of this investigation, I was most affected by the personal agency that was exercised by the participants. Perhaps in the same way that the participants were moved by the strength and resilience of clients they encountered in their practices, I was moved by the motivation, desire for learning, resourcefulness, and determination of the participants. These eight counsellors in training highlighted the humanity and integrity I have seen in students and supervisees during my working life. Hermeneutic researchers are neither neutral nor objective when it comes to their topic of study, and accordingly, hermeneutic accounts may be found wanting by those who equate representativeness
and generalizability with utility. However, hermeneutic inquiry invites evaluation on its own terms—authenticity, evocativeness, and the potential to invite further questions.

**Messiness**

Hermeneutic inquiry is inherently “messy” in several ways. While there is a philosophy that drives one’s method, there is no standardized “way to do things.” “Hermeneutics offers a substantive philosophy rather than a strategic method. . . . [O]ne might say hermeneutics is substantively driven rather than methodologically given” (Moules, 2002, p. 26). Gadamer’s objection to a normative or standardized method of inquiry often bumps up against a researcher’s need for a clear direction, the needs of ethics review boards, and the tradition of quantitative academic writing.

As a novice hermeneutic researcher, I desired to “know” the “right way to do things.” I found little clear methodological guidance in qualitative research methods texts. At first, this was frustrating. However, as I found other hermeneutic researchers and read their work, I eventually was able to discern a flavor, a sentiment, and a way of positioning myself in relation to what I wanted to study. I can best describe this as an attitude of wonder and curiosity, or “not knowing” position, similar to how postmodern therapists operate (Anderson, 1996; Peller & Walter, 2000), situating myself as part of a circular meaning-making process. In a way, this was not difficult, and even came somewhat naturally, as I had conducted therapy from this posture for many years. Keeping myself positioned in this way allowed me to devise a procedure that was true to the spirit of hermeneutics as I then understood it. I also invited one of the researchers whose work I had read to serve on my committee. She resisted my invitations to tell me what to do, and in turn invited me to listen to my hermeneutic heart.

Although the skepticism of REBs about qualitative research is lifting, the epistemology that operates in REBs often goes unexamined (Holland, 2007). Thus, in seeking approval for my study, the REB at my university required me to develop an interview protocol, listing the topics about which I would inquire, and the specific questions I would ask. In doing so, they were carrying out their mission of protecting the participants, by ensuring that my proposed questions were not overly intrusive or likely to create unacceptable risk. However, the suggestion that I should adhere to an interview protocol carried in it the modernist assumption that an interview
is simply a medium for gathering information, as opposed to a recursive intersubjective process of responding to responses. I knew I could not anticipate every response a participant might make, but I devised an interview protocol that followed an “if-then” format, allowing the REB to see that I was taking sufficient care to limit my questions to the domain under study. I did this in a way that was true to my positioning of myself as an active interpreting subject co-constructing meaning, not merely a gatherer of information that was fully formed, awaiting discovery.

I was fortunate to study in an academic unit that had a strong tradition of qualitative research in general, and hermeneutic inquiry, in particular. However, the “five chapter” format for quantitative psychology dissertations collided with my desire to write a document that would reflect how I had been touched by my research, and tell my story organically without constraining it unnecessarily. Accordingly, I renamed the traditional chapter titles in psychology dissertations in a way that was true to my sentiment and my story. “Statement of the Problem” became “A Rationale for Inquiry on Counsellor Development.” “Literature Review” was relabeled “Arriving at a View of Counsellor Development.” “Methodology” became “A Method for Inquiry into the Development of Counsellors.” “Results” morphed into “Participants’ Accounts and an Interpretive Position.” Finally, “Discussion” was renamed “Connecting Past, Present, and Future.” I was fortunate to have a supervisory committee who tolerated some unorthodoxy. They allowed me to present my work in a way that was faithful to my epistemology and how I chose to position myself as a co-creator, not a discoverer, of knowledge.

**FINAL WORDS**

In 1994, I met my then 79-year-old uncle, my father’s brother, for the first time. My family and I travelled from western Canada to my cousin’s home in North Carolina to visit him. Although I had never met them, I experienced an instant affinity with them as we discussed common experiences and roots. Hermeneutic philosophy provided a similar experience—like a relative I had never met, but with whom I had a great deal in common. Although I was new to the ideas of Gadamer and others, they had a familiar feel. As a postmodern therapist, hermeneutic inquiry provided a place for me to land as a researcher. Perhaps your reading of this paper will enter the interpretive process that forms your understanding of “research,” and perhaps you too will find some familiar aspects as you explore further.
REFERENCES


