

A GADAMERIAN HERMENEUTIC APPROACH TO ETHNOGRAPHIC CONSTRUCTION RESEARCH

TAP Howarth

School Of Construction, Sheffield Hallam University

In undertaking the knowledge development process of empirical research it is well recognised that a variety of philosophies of approach are available to the researcher. Whilst accepting that issues relating to both quantitative and qualitative approaches to research have been extensively presented, this paper provides for a clarification of the meaning applied to the data and findings within one 'variety' of philosophical approach to ethnographic construction research - the Gadamerian hermeneutic approach. This Gadamerian approach to the research process has been practiced within the author's PhD study of undergraduate construction education. Through its utilisation the researcher has realised that literature relating to knowledge developing construction research, as viewed from a non-enlightenment, post-modern perspective, is thin and unexpanded. This deficiency is unacceptable as an informed process of consideration is essential for the appreciation of both the means to enable the research purpose, and the implications and limitations of that purpose. As such this paper presents and in so doing informs the reader, with reference to the author's research, of a Gadamerian hermeneutic approach to construction research, and the post-modern context in which findings and resultant empirical knowledge must be considered.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, knowledge-meaning, qualitative research,

INTRODUCTION

In undertaking what is considered to be 'research', a clarity of thought as regards the methodological approach to an investigation is a fundamental pre-requisite to a project. Such appreciation or 'know-how' of how the investigation is to be conducted can be seen to enable researcher focus to be placed upon the management of the research process. Unarguably, attention to the process of investigation is essential in the attempt to ensure appropriateness and validity in method. Without such attention, methods of inquiry would be deemed to produce unreliable, unscientific, inaccurate data.

Whilst accepting that issues relating to both quantitative and qualitative investigation methodology have been extensively presented (Seymore et al (1995), Loosemore et al (1996), Edum-Fotwe et al (1996), Hill (1997)), discussion of the meaning of research findings, within the construction management context, remains unexpanded within the literature. This has become evident during the author's own PhD research experience. Such deficiency is considered unacceptable as an informed process of consideration is essential, not only for appreciation of the means to enable the research investigation, but also to enable an understanding of the implications and limitations applied to data and findings. Without an initial appreciation of the meaning that can be applied to research findings, the researcher is unable to undertake a process of data analysis. Relevant and valid meaning cannot be applied to the data due to the existence of uncertainty within the researcher's understanding of the investigative process.

In an attempt to alleviate the problem of researcher uncertainty, this paper presents an outline of an 'alternative' to the historically-dominant rationalistic approach to construction management. This 'alternative' being practiced within the author's PhD research investigation. This alternative utilises a Gadamerian hermeneutic approach to an ethnographic process of construction research. The adoption of a Gadamerian hermeneutic philosophy towards the treatment of research data infers a post-modern context upon the way in which findings and empirical knowledge are viewed. It is envisaged that the presentation of this 'alternative' ethnographic approach to construction management research will enable the novice researcher to develop an informed understanding of the investigative process. It is also hoped that the novice construction management researcher will, through consideration of the potential meanings of research data, be better informed as to the meaning that can be applied to data and findings from differing philosophical perspectives.

BACKGROUND

The historically dominant perspective of research investigation and knowledge development of recent centuries is grounded in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Such an approach to research relies upon the adoption of the scientific view of the researcher as 'neutral', 'objective' onlooker, separate, unconnected and very much independent from the researched. As West (1996) points out 'reality' in this context is considered as "no more than a mechanical system of matter extended in space", and value "is something that must be added by the human subjects to an evaluatively neutral world"

Such a view of 'reality' and the researched - researcher relationship are inadequate and inappropriate for the purpose of non-rationalistic ethnographic research investigations. This is realised within the author's ethnographic PhD investigation. The investigation is firmly entrenched in ideological opposition to such positivistic analytical philosophy. Rather, a view is held in approach to the study that

"this (mechanistic) 'reality' is a myth, and that the social world (of study in ethnographic investigations) is the multi-faceted outcome of the interaction of human agents; it is a world which does not have unequivocal reality"(Ashworth, P (1996) pp.10.).

In reflection and reinforcement of this philosophical perspective, the ethnographic PhD investigation utilises a Gadamerian hermeneutic to data interpretation.

HERMENEUTIC(S)

Palmer (1969) identifies that the field of hermeneutics, in modern times, has been defined in at least six fairly distinct ways. Whatever the 'strand' of hermeneutics, each can be expressed as being 'interpretational', be it in a context of: 'saying': 'explaining': or 'translating'. "Each represents essentially a standpoint from which hermeneutics is viewed; each brings different but legitimate sides of the act of interpretation, especially text interpretation. The very content of hermeneutics itself tends to reshaped with the changes of standpoint."(Palmer 1969 pp.33-34)

Historically, hermeneutic(s) originated out of a Protestant concern for interpretation of written religious texts. Such 'interest' in interpretation has since grown and expanded beyond a purely religious context. Hermeneutics is now regarded as being a broad field of thought relating to the interpretation of any *text*. The *text* is taken to be the object of the interpretation: be it a literary publication, television broadcast, musical

recital or social encounter, to give instance of but a few. In undertaking to present an interpretation of the text, a view is taken that the text is “problematical, incomplete, confused, somehow puzzling” (Ashworth 1987 pp.8).

For the purpose of qualitative ethnographic investigation, such as that of the author’s PhD, whether within a construction context or not, the desired interpreted outcome is, as Ashworth (1987 pp.8-9) states, to ‘lend coherence, render less confusing and make understandable’ aspects of the social world. With this being the considered aim of ethnographic research, appropriate thought is demanded as to how to achieve this aim. The philosophy of Gadamerian hermeneutics provides a considered perspective for enabling the fulfilment of such an aim. It also commands that a post-modernist view be applied to the meaning of presented research ‘findings’.

GADAMERIAN HERMENEUTICAL PHILOSOPHY

Heidegger’s analysis of human existence in *Being and Time* (1962) presents ‘understanding’ and ‘interpretation’ as “foundational modes of mans’ being”. Gadamer shares and extends this philosophy in *Truth and Method* (1989 (trans)). For Gadamer all understanding and interpretation is rooted in hermeneutics, it is part of ‘being-in-the-world’. Palmer (1969) appreciates this, stating that “Interpretation isperhaps the most basic act of human thinking; indeed, existing itself may be said to be a constant process of interpretation. (Palmer R.E. (1969) pp.8). Gadamer’s standpoint rejects ‘truth’ interpreted through methodical, objective investigation. It cannot be accepted, as understanding is part of the ‘being’ of the interpreter, it is an essential aspect of human-existence.

The ‘standpoint’ of the interpreter must be appreciated in relation to the text. The history and ‘culture’ of the interpreter provides the starting point for a ‘circle of understanding’. They are what Gadamer calls the ‘tradition’. Historically and culturally-unbound ‘objectivity’ cannot exist. As Ashworth (1996 pp.17) recognises in the approach to hermeneutic understanding:

“The interpreter, both must and should start from the viewpoint of their own culture and tradition, and reach some kind of ‘fusion of horizons’ with the area under investigation, thereby enriching the initial understanding. It is not that objectivity is a hard quality to achieve, but that it is impossible - not least, because there *is no unequivocal, culture-free reality* to be sought”.

Gadamer recognises that people hold pre-judgements, or ‘prejudices’ to a text that are not, and cannot be thought of as being, removable. Prejudices are, for Gadamer, an essential part of understanding,

“...there is no understanding that is free of all prejudices, however much the will of our knowledge must be directed towards escaping their thrall. Throughout our investigation it has emerged that the certainty achieved by using scientific methods does not suffice to guarantee truth. This especially applies to the human sciences, but it does not mean that they are less scientific; on the contrary, it justifies the claim to special humane significance that they have always made. The fact that in such knowledge the knower’s own being comes into play certainly shows the limits of the method, but not of science. Rather, what the tool of method does not achieve must - and really can - by a discipline of questioning and inquiring, a discipline that guarantees truth” (Gadamer H-G (1989) pp 490-1).

Further, Gadamer presents the nature and ‘role’ of prejudices’ in understanding;

“Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something - whereby what we encounter says something to us” (Gadamer H-G in Kearney (1996) pp.115).

Clearly, there is always some element of pre-understanding and prejudice, or ‘fore-understanding’ as Ashworth (1987) labels it. And as Gadamer points out, one cannot ‘prejudice against prejudice’ as this is a refusal to recognise the significance of our own insertion in a ‘tradition’ that, in some way, we already understand.

The explicit recognition of prejudice is central to Gadamerian interpretation and understanding. It provides a point of departure for the ‘circle of understanding’, in which the researcher must attempt to ‘fuse horizons’ with other individuals.

A FUSING OF HORIZONS

In the context of the author’s PhD investigation the researcher’s horizon - that of a prejudicial historical tradition - is an experience of the life-world of the construction classroom as an undergraduate student. The horizons with which this prejudicial, historical tradition is ‘fused’ are those traditions of individuals *present* in the text. *In fusing the past and present traditions of the text a fresh interpreted understanding of the text is arrived at.* This is Gadamer’s concept of interpreted understanding - it is participation in a stream of tradition, in a moment that combines past and present.

In expressing ‘prejudice’ and ‘fore-understanding’, born of my ‘historical consciousness’, towards the text, *it is of central importance to the researcher to also express how this appreciation is situated within the relationship with other individuals of the text.* To assist in this, appreciation Gadamer’s typologies of three kinds of ‘I-thou relationships’ is clearly beneficial,

“to help situate and thus clarify the nature of the historically operative consciousness: (these are)

(1) the thou as object within a field,...

(2) the thou as reflexive projection, and

(3) the thou as tradition speaking. Only the third is the hermeneutical relationship Gadamer has in mind as authentic historical awareness”.

(Palmer (1969: 191-193).

In achieving an authentic Gadamerian ‘fusing of horizons’ it is quite clear that only an receptive ‘I’ -interpreter- ‘who allows something to be said *to* him is in a fundamental way open’(in Palmer (1969) pp.193).

ANALYSIS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC EMPIRICAL DATA

A Gadamerian hermeneutic approach to an ethnographic investigation commands that the meaning of the data be viewed as:

- a) the record of a joint process by which two individuals have negotiated a ‘fusion of horizons, ...and
- b) is to be understood as an account of the way certain situations are interpreted or understood (Ashworth (1996) pp.18).

With this view in mind, the presentation of the data is to be such that it ‘lends coherence, render less confusing and makes understandable’ aspects of the social world. To practicably enable the presentation of such an adequate description, an analytical strategy of ‘categorising’ data is employed. Here field data is ‘systematically’ organised, and re-organised into ‘themes’.

Maykut and Morehouse (1994) provide an outline for the procedural techniques and methods for developing structure in the data. It is realised though that these techniques are not directly transferable to the analytical process of all investigations, but appreciation of such an account provides informative guidance. In undertaking the categorisation process in accordance with the interpretive philosophy of ethnographic research, themes must *emerge* from the data. This can be achieved by ‘systematic’ application of the researcher to the data. Re-visiting, over and over again, observation notes, transcripts and memories, developing interpretation and understanding of the data.

“Interpretations are attained not only through a combination of anthropological knowledge and textual scrutiny, but also through the memory of field experience, unwritten yet inscribed in the fieldworker’s being” (Okely, J (1994) pp.33).

‘Organisation’ and ‘re-organisation’ of the data is enabled by continually developed understanding.

It is important to point out that the ‘organising’ of data is undertaken by the researcher with a conscious awareness of the purpose of the investigation - to produce and present a description of the phenomena of investigation ‘which is in some ways clearer and more open to understanding than the individuals would have been able to provide unassisted’. With this in mind the ‘organised’ outcome of this conscious analysis is ‘themes’. These ‘themes’ are what is considered, through ‘empathic approach’ (Ashworth (1987) pp.20) of the researcher to interpretation, and re-interpretation, to be relevant ‘aspects’ of the lifeworlds of members of investigated phenomenon. They are structured so as to provide ‘narrative themes’ that assist in enabling adequate description in the presentation of the research investigation.

THE POST-MODERN MEANING OF ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA

The interpreted description presented is, in no way objective, it does not ‘make any claims’ or present ‘a reality’. It cannot do, and must not be understood as attempting to. The position held is suitably defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985 pp.83).

“Those who see reality as a construction in the minds of individuals asserts that it is dubious whether there is a reality. If there is, we can never know it. Furthermore, no amount of inquiry can produce convergence on it. There is, in this ontological position, always an infinite number of constructions that can be made and hence there are multiple realities”.

This is recognised by Bannister (1971), and reinforced by Ashworth (1996 pp.10), who comments that research can take the position that

“the social world is the multi-faceted outcome of the interaction of human agents; it is a world which does not have unequivocal reality”.

In recognising this, the description presented by a research investigation is not, ‘of a reality’ but is an interpreted account of ways in which social interaction - ‘situations’ - of the text, are ‘interpreted or understood’. The description focuses on the lifeworld of the individuals in the text and presents through both interpreted observation and a ‘fusion of horizons’ a clear description of lifeworlds phenomena within the text.

Such description attempts to be recognisable to individuals within the text.

“It is important to maintain the integrity of the experience of members and to describe it in terms that are understandable by them. This is an aspect of the adequacy of the description and hence validity” (Ashworth (1987) pp.23).

The presented description also attempts to be

“accurate as a description so that non-members could be correctly informed about the world of the members” (Ashworth (1987) pp.25).

There is no, and cannot be any, attempt to infer that the presented description is in itself the reality of the studied social environment. The presented description is an interpreted account of the interactive fusing of the researcher and the researched. The account is one of ‘singularities’ (Bassey (1995)).

It is not a positivistic presentation of ‘knowledge’ in an objective context of generalisation. There is no aim, intention, or possibility of enabling prediction. Instead the presented outcome is a descriptive interpretation of a social phenomenon or *event*.

“The *event* involves one or more people at a particular place and a particular time having a particular experience..... ‘Particular’ means having its own characteristics and these characteristics can be related to other people, places, times and experiences”(Bassey M 1995 pp.10).

Here the ‘knowledge-meaning’ of the presented research ‘findings’ is of a singular experiential nature. It is the account of an inductive researcher-interpreted experience of the social phenomenon. In this context the meaning of the presented research ‘findings’ may be considered as being post-modern. They are a researcher’s interpretation, or reinterpretation of an experienced social phenomena. The ‘findings’ are specific to that researcher, at that time, in that social phenomena. They may be *related* to aspects of other studies, situations and events, possibly for the informing and development of policy. Clearly it is not the case that ethnographic ‘findings’ have no utilitarian worth, rather it is the case that in their meaning they do not imply any objective reality-representation.

SUMMARY

This paper has underlined the necessity for clarity of researcher understanding of the investigative process. It has also highlighted that without such an understanding, appreciation of the meaning that can be applied to research data and ‘findings’ cannot be held, and vice-versa. This paper has also outlined a process of, and the meaning that can be applied to, a non-rationalistic construction management research investigation. Through the provision of such an account the novice construction management researcher is able to clarify understanding of the process and meaning applicable to a historically unconventional approach to construction management research.

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