



Hermeneutic phenomenology as methodological practice: Interpreting lived experience in qualitative research

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research frequently claims to investigate lived experience, yet many studies provide limited methodological articulation of how lived experience is interpreted, situated, and constituted in context. This article advances hermeneutic phenomenology as a rigorous methodological approach for qualitative inquiry, clarifying how lived experience is understood and interpreted within the interpretivist and constructivist research traditions. Drawing exclusively on philosophical and methodological sources commonly employed in qualitative research, including Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, Schutz's phenomenological sociology, and van Manen's phenomenology of practice, the paper develops a conceptual and methodological synthesis. Hermeneutic phenomenology is explicated as a practical methodological framework that informs research design, data generation, and interpretive analysis through principles such as being-in-the-world, lifeworld, temporality, fore-structures of understanding, intersubjectivity, co-constitution, reflexivity, and the hermeneutic circle. The paper demonstrates that hermeneutic phenomenology provides a coherent methodological logic for interpreting lived experiences as meaningfully embedded in everyday practice rather than as decontextualised accounts. By foregrounding interpretation, temporality, and reflexive engagement, the framework clarifies how meaning emerges through iterative movement between pre-understanding and interpretive insight, thereby strengthening the analytical depth and transparency of qualitative research. This article contributes to qualitative research in organisations and management by positioning hermeneutic phenomenology not merely as a philosophical orientation but as an operational methodological practice. In doing so, it addresses ongoing concerns about methodological vagueness in qualitative studies of lived experience. It offers a robust, reflexive framework for researchers seeking to investigate meaning, practice, and lived experience with greater interpretive rigour. In conclusion, the article positions hermeneutic phenomenology as an operational methodological practice capable of enhancing interpretive rigour in qualitative studies of lived experience in organisational and management contexts. It recommends that researchers explicitly articulate their interpretive stance, embed reflexivity throughout the research process, and evaluate rigour through philosophically aligned criteria that prioritise interpretive coherence, transparency, and contextual grounding over procedural validation techniques.

Keywords: Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Interpretation, Interpretivism, Lived Experience, Lifeworld, Reflexivity, Qualitative Methodology

I. INTRODUCTION

Across the social sciences, qualitative research has increasingly foregrounded lived experience as a means of understanding human action, meaning, and practice. In organisational and management research, qualitative methods are widely employed to examine how individuals experience work, technology, leadership, and organisational change (Chambers, 2024; Jemal *et al.*, 2025; Nigar & Kostogriz, 2025; Vogl, 2021). Interviews, narratives, and reflective accounts are commonly used to access these lived experiences, often with the stated aim of capturing participants' perspectives or accounts in their own words (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Ho *et al.*, 2026; Lim, 2025).

Despite this emphasis on lived experience, methodological clarity regarding how experience is interpreted and analysed remains uneven. Many qualitative studies implicitly assume that lived experience is readily accessible through participants' accounts and that meaning can be extracted directly from what is said. Such assumptions risk treating experience as transparent and self-evident rather than as interpretive, situated, and socially constituted (Blaikie, 2010; Crotty, 1998).

Interpretivist scholarship challenges this view by emphasising that experience is always already embedded in historical, cultural, and relational contexts. Meaning does not exist independently of interpretation; rather, it emerges

through engagement with the world and with others (Gadamer, 1989; Heidegger, 1996). From this perspective, qualitative research that claims to investigate lived experience must articulate how interpretation is understood, enacted, and justified.

This paper argues that hermeneutic phenomenology provides a coherent and rigorous methodological framework for addressing this challenge. Rooted in Heidegger's ontology of *being-in-the-world* and extended through Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, Schutz's phenomenological sociology, and van Manen's phenomenology of practice, hermeneutic phenomenology offers a systematic way of engaging with lived experience as meaningful, situated, and interpretive (Gadamer, 1989; Heidegger, 1996; Schutz, 1967; van Manen, 1990, 2023).

The purpose of this paper is to explicate hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodological practice rather than abstract philosophy. By clarifying its ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments, the paper contributes to qualitative research in organisations and management by strengthening interpretive depth, reflexivity, and methodological transparency.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Qualitative research frequently claims to examine lived experience, yet many studies provide a limited methodological explanation of how experience is interpreted and situated in context (Lim, 2025). Participant accounts are often treated as transparent representations of meaning, resulting in descriptive analyses that under-theorise interpretation, reflexivity, and contextual embeddedness (Dibley *et al.*, 2020; Ho *et al.*, 2026). Although hermeneutic phenomenology is commonly cited as a philosophical orientation, it is often applied without sufficient methodological clarity regarding how its concepts inform research design, data generation, analysis, and claims of rigour (Al-Sheikh Hassan, 2025). This lack of methodological articulation contributes to ongoing concerns about interpretive vagueness in qualitative studies of experience (Frechette *et al.*, 2020), particularly within organisations and management research.

1.2 Research Objective

To articulate hermeneutic phenomenology as a coherent and operational methodological framework for interpreting lived experience in qualitative research within the interpretivist and constructivist traditions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 The Need for Methodological Clarity in Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is often praised for its ability to capture complexity, nuance, and context. However, critics note that qualitative studies sometimes rely on methods such as interviews without adequately theorising how meaning is constructed through the research process (Blaikie, 2010). Treating participants' narratives as direct representations of reality risks overlooking the interpretive work involved in both speaking and analysis.

From an interpretivist standpoint, meaning is socially constructed rather than objectively given (Crotty, 1998). Experience is shaped by language, history, power relations, and shared cultural understandings. Consequently, qualitative research cannot simply "collect" experience; it must interpret it. This interpretive work requires a clear methodological orientation that explains how understanding is achieved.

Hermeneutic phenomenology addresses this concern by positioning interpretation as fundamental rather than supplementary to qualitative inquiry. Rather than seeking to describe experience as it supposedly "is," hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to understand how experience is lived and made meaningful within particular contexts (Lavery, 2003; Neubauer *et al.*, 2019). This distinction is critical for organisational and management research, where experiences of work, technology, and organisation are embedded in complex social and institutional arrangements.

Without such methodological grounding, qualitative studies risk remaining descriptive, offering thematic summaries without engaging the deeper structures of meaning that shape practice. Hermeneutic phenomenology provides conceptual tools for moving beyond description toward interpretive understanding.

2.1.2 Hermeneutic Phenomenology as a Methodological Orientation

Hermeneutic phenomenology is grounded in phenomenology and hermeneutics; however, in research practice, it functions less as an abstract philosophy and more as a methodological orientation for studying lived experience as meaningfully interpreted within its context. Hermeneutic phenomenology emerges from the fusion of two longstanding philosophical traditions: phenomenology, the study of lived experience as it is encountered, and hermeneutics, the art and practice of interpretation. As Ajjawi and Higgs (2007) observe, understanding hermeneutic phenomenology requires considering both traditions independently before appreciating their synthesis. Whereas phenomenology seeks to uncover how individuals experience the world, hermeneutics addresses how meaning is

interpreted within that world (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Neubauer *et al.*, 2019). When combined, most notably in Martin Heidegger's reinterpretation of phenomenology, these traditions form an ontological approach that views human existence as fundamentally interpretive. Methodologically, this synthesis frames qualitative research as an inquiry into how experiences are both lived and interpreted, positioning meaning rather than measurement as the primary object of analysis (Laverty, 2003).

From phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology inherits a commitment to attending closely to lived experience; that is, how phenomena are encountered, felt, and made meaningful in everyday life. Phenomenology, originating with Edmund Husserl, focused on describing experience as it appears to consciousness, emphasising intentionality and the structures that shape perception. Husserl advocated bracketing (*epoché*), a suspension of assumptions intended to uncover the "essences" of phenomena (Cudjoe, 2023). Essence, in this sense, refers to the essential meanings that make a phenomenon what it is (van Manen, 2023). While classical Husserlian phenomenology sought descriptive purity through bracketing, later phenomenological research has adapted this stance methodologically by encouraging researchers to adopt a reflective and questioning orientation toward their assumptions rather than attempting their complete suspension (Dodgson, 2019; Ho *et al.*, 2026). In practice, this methodological inheritance translates into research designs that prioritise rich, first-person accounts and sustained engagement with participants' descriptions of experience, while acknowledging the researcher's interpretive involvement.

Hermeneutics contributes a complementary methodological emphasis on interpretation, recognising that meaning is not self-evident but emerges through interaction between the researcher, the participant, and the context (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). Rather than treating experience as transparent or immediately accessible, hermeneutics foregrounds the role of history, culture, language, and prior understanding in shaping how meaning is constituted (Laverty, 2003). This has direct implications for qualitative analysis: data are not treated as neutral representations of reality but as texts requiring careful, situated interpretation. Understanding is therefore approached as provisional and evolving, shaped by historical, cultural, and relational conditions rather than fixed analytical procedures.

Heidegger's reinterpretation of phenomenology provides the core methodological shift that distinguishes hermeneutic phenomenology from descriptive approaches. Challenging Husserl's focus on consciousness, Heidegger reframed phenomenology as an inquiry into being. In *Being and Time* (1996), he argued that humans, whom he termed *Dasein*, do not simply perceive the world but are always already involved in it. To understand experience, therefore, is to interpret it within the context of one's *being-in-the-world* (Heidegger, 1996). For Heidegger, interpretation is not a secondary analytical step but constitutive of existence itself; human beings do not first observe and then interpret, but interpret as a fundamental mode of being. Methodologically, this implies that experience cannot be analytically separated from context, practice, or temporality, and that interpretation begins at the point of data generation rather than being deferred to a later stage of analysis.

Hans-Georg Gadamer later expanded Heidegger's ideas by emphasising the dialogical, historical, and relational dimensions of understanding. Meaning, Gadamer argued, arises not from detached analysis but from the interaction, or fusion of horizons, between the interpreter's historically situated understanding and that of the phenomenon or text (Gadamer, 1989). In research practice, this entails recognising that understanding emerges through continual engagement with participants, context, and text (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019). Methodologically, this perspective foregrounds reflexivity and iterative interpretation, requiring researchers to critically engage with their own pre-understandings and remain open to having initial interpretations reshaped through ongoing dialogue with the data.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, therefore, rejects the idea of objective detachment. Instead, it embraces interpretation as a dynamic, recursive process grounded in the lifeworld, the pre-reflective, taken-for-granted world that individuals inhabit (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019; Zahavi, 2025). As van Manen (2023) notes, hermeneutic phenomenology aims not at abstract theorisation but at capturing the meaningful structures of experience as they are lived. As a methodological approach, this orientation directs researchers toward in-depth, context-sensitive inquiry, iterative engagement with data, and interpretive writing that seeks to illuminate lived meaning rather than produce generalisable claims.

Taken together, these philosophical foundations function as methodological commitments rather than abstract theory. They inform the formulation of research questions centred on lived meaning, guide data generation methods that privilege experiential accounts, and shape analytic practices characterised by reflexivity, iteration, and contextual interpretation. In this way, hermeneutic phenomenology provides a coherent methodological framework for studying experience as it is lived, interpreted, and made meaningful in everyday life.

2.1.3 Heidegger: Being-in-the-World and Interpretation

Hermeneutic phenomenology is grounded in Martin Heidegger's reworking of phenomenology as an ontological rather than epistemological project. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argued that human beings (*Dasein*) are

always already situated in the world they seek to understand (Heidegger, 1996). At the centre of Heidegger's ontology is the concept of *being-in-the-world*, which asserts that human existence is always embedded in and inseparable from the world. Human beings do not stand outside the world as neutral observers; rather, they are immersed in it through relationships, practices, histories, and concerns. Understanding is not a detached cognitive activity but a mode of existence.

Heidegger emphasised that experience does not occur in isolation but is always shaped by the contexts and practices that define the world one inhabits (Farrell, 2020). He used the metaphor of "coming to a clearing in the woods" to illustrate how understanding emerges when something becomes meaningfully disclosed within the flow of lived experience. Drawing on this notion of *Dasein*, hermeneutic phenomenologists argue that being-in-the-world is "always already interpretive" because individuals are continually engaged in making sense of their experiences (Gadamer, 1989; van Manen, 2023).

From this perspective, experience is disclosed through practical engagement with the world rather than through reflective observation. People encounter phenomena through use, involvement, concern, and care. Interpretation, therefore, is not an optional methodological step but a fundamental aspect of being human. For qualitative research, this implies that experience cannot be accessed as a neutral object. Researchers and participants alike are embedded in worlds of meaning that shape what is noticed, articulated, and understood. Hermeneutic phenomenology embraces this condition rather than attempting to overcome it.

2.1.4 Gadamer: Historicity and the Fusion of Horizons

Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1989), extended Heidegger's ontological turn in hermeneutics by emphasising the historical and dialogical nature of all understanding. For Gadamer, interpretation is always shaped by prejudices; pre-judgements grounded in one's history, culture, and lived experience. Rather than viewing prejudices as obstacles, Gadamer (1989) described them as productive conditions that make understanding possible. These pre-understandings form what Gadamer called a *horizon*, a boundary of meaning that is never fixed but constantly shifting as individuals encounter new perspectives and experiences. A horizon does not have "a rigid boundary, but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further" (Gadamer, 1989).

Understanding emerges through dialogue, where the interpreter's horizon and the horizon of the phenomenon or participant gradually merge in what Gadamer termed a *fusion of horizons* (Blaikie, 2010; Crotty, 1998; Gadamer, 1989). This fusion does not imply identical perspectives; rather, it reflects the creation of new meaning through openness, reflexivity, and genuine engagement. Understanding is therefore not an act of extraction but an encounter, an interpretive meeting in which the researcher and participant co-create meaning.

Crucially, Gadamer rejected the idea that researchers could *bracket* or suspend their pre-understandings. Instead, prejudices are understood as conditions of understanding rather than sources of error. Reflexive engagement with these pre-understandings enables deeper and more accountable interpretation (Dibley *et al.*, 2020). Methodologically, this requires researchers to make their interpretive positions visible through deliberate reflexive practices, such as maintaining analytic or reflexive journals, writing interpretive memos during data analysis, and engaging in peer debriefing to surface and interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions. In qualitative research, this insight underscores that meaning is co-produced through dialogue between researcher and participant. Understanding, therefore, develops through sustained engagement, iterative interpretation, and reflexive questioning, rather than through attempts at methodological control or detachment.

Gadamer further emphasised the interpretive significance of art, symbolism, and embodied experience, arguing that understanding can arise holistically through evocative expressions that cannot be fully captured in propositional language (Crotty, 1998). This reinforces the idea that hermeneutic interpretation is both intellectual and experiential, resonating deeply with phenomenological commitments to lived meaning.

2.1.5 Schutz: Lifeworld and Intersubjectivity

Alfred Schutz brought phenomenology into the social sciences by focusing on the lifeworld, the taken-for-granted world of everyday experience shared with others (Schutz, 1967). The lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), is Schutz's term for the everyday world of experience that individuals take for granted as the natural and unquestioned backdrop to their lives. Drawing on Husserl, Schutz describes the lifeworld as the "paramount reality" in which people act with a natural attitude, accepting the world as it appears without subjecting it to reflective scrutiny (Pula, 2024; Schutz, 1967). It is a pre-reflective environment shaped by shared routines, cultural norms, and common-sense knowledge that enable individuals to navigate daily life. Importantly, this world is not private but socially and historically constituted, having been shaped through generations of accumulated practices, linguistic traditions, and collective experiences (Zahavi, 2025). Therefore, knowledge of the world, including scientific knowledge, cannot be possible without the lifeworld.

Central to Schutz's phenomenological sociology is the idea that everyday life is inherently intersubjective. This implies that individuals experience the world as a shared social reality shaped by interaction with others, and meaning arises through participation in culturally grounded communicative practices (Schutz, 1967). This intersubjective world is sustained through typifications: generalised, socially shared categories that allow people to interpret situations and others without beginning anew each time. Typifications form an individual's "stock of knowledge at hand," a socially derived reservoir of assumptions, expectations, and shared understandings that guide interpretation (Pula, 2024).

Schutz's work highlights the intersubjective nature of experience. Meaning does not arise solely within individual consciousness but through interaction with others. For qualitative research, this emphasises the importance of examining social relations, shared practices, and collective understandings.

2.1.6 Ontological and Epistemological Positioning

Ontology concerns the nature of reality and what can be said to exist (Blaikie, 2007). In social research, ontological assumptions determine whether reality is viewed as singular or multiple, stable or fluid, and independent or socially constructed (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Epistemology refers to how knowledge is created, validated, and understood (Blaikie, 2007). Hermeneutic phenomenology is underpinned by a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology, consistent with interpretivist and constructivist paradigms (Blaikie, 2010; Crotty, 1998). Reality is understood as multiple and socially constructed rather than singular and objective. Knowledge emerges through interpretation rather than measurement.

Methodologically, this orientation supports an idiographic focus, privileging depth and contextual understanding over generalisation; it stands in contrast to nomothetic approaches, which prioritise generalisation and law-like explanation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In organisational and management research, this aligns with approaches that seek to understand meaning, sense-making, and practice rather than prediction.

2.2 Empirical Review

Empirical studies employing hermeneutic phenomenology demonstrate its utility for interpreting lived experience in complex social, organisational, and institutional contexts (Jemal *et al.*, 2025; Nigar & Kostogriz, 2025; Vogl, 2021; Walløe *et al.*, 2024). Recent research shows how hermeneutic phenomenological designs provide rich insight into professional identity and workplace experience (Nigar and Kostogriz, 2025) and how leaders interpret lived experience in organisational practice (Jemal *et al.*, 2025). Such studies show how meaning is disclosed through everyday practice rather than measured as discrete variables.

Applications in organisational, professional, and technology-mediated settings illustrate how hermeneutic phenomenology enables researchers to examine how experience is shaped by context, history, and social relations. Across empirical applications, several methodological patterns are evident. First, data generation is treated as a dialogical and co-constitutive process rather than a neutral extraction of experience, a point emphasised in recent methodological contributions to reflexivity in hermeneutic analysis (Ho *et al.*, 2026). Second, analysis proceeds through iterative engagement with the hermeneutic circle, allowing interpretations to evolve and deepen over time. Third, rigour is demonstrated through reflexive transparency, contextual richness, and philosophical coherence rather than procedural validation techniques (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006).

These empirical works illustrate how core hermeneutic phenomenological principles, such as being-in-the-world, lifeworld, intersubjectivity, temporality, and reflexivity, are operationalised in research practice. By explicitly linking philosophical commitments to methodological decisions, empirical studies using hermeneutic phenomenology address longstanding concerns about methodological vagueness in qualitative research and provide concrete models for conducting interpretively rigorous studies of lived experience.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Core Principles of Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology is structured around several interrelated methodological principles that guide both research design and interpretive analysis. In this study, these principles were not treated as abstract concepts. They were operationalised as practical guides shaping the formulation of research questions, the conduct of interviews, and the iterative interpretive analysis. Each principle informed concrete methodological decisions, ensuring that interpretation remained grounded in participants' lived meanings while remaining reflexively accountable.

3.1.1 Lifeworld and Lived Experience

The concept of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), first articulated by Husserl (1970) and subsequently deepened by Heidegger (1996), Schutz (1967) and Gadamer (1989), refers to the everyday world of meanings, routines, relationships, and practices through which individuals understand and navigate their existence. It constitutes the pre-reflective horizon within which all experience becomes intelligible. Hermeneutic phenomenology centres on the lifeworld as the primary site of meaning (Schutz, 1967; van Manen, 1990). Researchers seek to understand phenomena as they appear within everyday life rather than imposing external theoretical categories. Lived experience is approached as embodied, relational, and situated. van Manen (1990, 2023) emphasises that phenomenological research aims to illuminate meanings that are often implicit and taken for granted. This requires attentiveness to language, context, and lived detail.

In this study, the lifeworld orientation was enacted by designing interview questions that invited participants to describe concrete situations, routines, interactions, and moments of engagement related to the phenomenon under investigation, rather than abstract opinions or general attitudes. Participants were encouraged to recount how experiences unfolded in their everyday settings, allowing meanings to emerge from practice rather than from retrospective rationalisation.

During analysis, interpretations were anchored in these everyday accounts, with close attention paid to participants' language, metaphors, emotional expressions, and references to social and material contexts. This ensured that findings remained grounded in lived experience as it is enacted in daily life, rather than abstracted into decontextualised thematic categories.

3.2 Fore-Structures of Understanding

Heidegger argued that all interpretation is grounded in what he termed the fore-structures of understanding: *fore-having*, *fore-sight*, and *fore-conception* (Heidegger, 1996). These structures describe the pre-understandings individuals inevitably bring to any encounter with the world and, by extension, to the research process.

Fore-having refers to the background familiarity, practical know-how, and experiential knowledge a person already possesses. In research practice, this may include a researcher's prior professional experience, disciplinary training, or long-term engagement with a field. For example, a researcher studying farmers' use of digital technologies may already "have in advance" practical knowledge of agricultural cycles, extension systems, or past technology interventions, which shapes what is immediately recognisable as meaningful in participants' accounts.

Fore-sight denotes the vantage point or orientation from which interpretation proceeds, shaped by one's social, cultural, and experiential positioning. Methodologically, this influences what the researcher attends to during data generation and analysis. For instance, a researcher trained in organisational studies may be particularly attentive to issues of coordination, trust, or institutional arrangements in interview data, while another researcher might foreground economic or technological dimensions. *Fore-sight* thus guides interpretive focus without rigidly determining outcomes.

Fore-conception involves the anticipations, expectations, or preliminary understandings that guide how meaning is initially projected and subsequently revised. In qualitative research, this may appear as early interpretive assumptions or sensitising concepts that orient initial analysis. For example, a researcher may begin with an expectation that farmers adopt digital tools primarily for economic reasons, only to have this *fore-conception* challenged and reshaped as social, relational, or experiential motives emerge through sustained engagement with the data.

Researchers inevitably bring prior knowledge, assumptions, and experiences into the research process. These fore-structures do not distort understanding; rather, they make understanding possible. Because individuals always stand within a horizon of pre-understanding, interpretation never begins from a neutral or empty standpoint. The hermeneutic task is therefore not to eliminate these pre-understandings but to work through them reflexively.

Reflexivity involves making these fore-structures explicit and open to interrogation. Practices such as reflexive journaling, analytic memo-writing, and dialogue with peers enable researchers to surface how *fore-having*, *fore-sight*, and *fore-conception* shape interpretation over time. Reflexivity is thus an aspect of being open to unexpected ideas (Dibley *et al.*, 2020). Interpretation deepens as fore-structures are engaged, questioned, and transformed through ongoing dialogue and reflection. This recognition underscores the centrality of pre-understanding within the interpretive process of research, and making pre-understandings visible strengthens rather than weakens interpretive rigour.

In this study, *fore-having* was addressed by explicitly acknowledging the researcher's prior familiarity with the field and documenting how this background shaped initial interpretations. Reflexive notes were maintained to identify moments where familiarity influenced what was immediately noticed or taken for granted in participants' accounts. *Fore-sight* informed the initial interpretive orientation during data generation and analysis; however, these orientations were treated as provisional and were continually revised as participants' narratives revealed unexpected

4.1.2 The Hermeneutic Circle

Heidegger described understanding as unfolding through the hermeneutic circle, a dynamic movement between part and whole, and between pre-understanding and emerging insight (Heidegger, 1996). This circularity is not a methodological flaw but the very condition of interpretive understanding. In research, this means that early interpretations inevitably guide subsequent inquiry, while newly emerging insights continually reshape and refine those earlier understandings. Meaning, therefore, evolves iteratively and relationally through an ongoing dialogue between what is already understood and what comes into view as interpretation deepens.

Later scholars, including Gadamer (1989), Conroy (2003) and Dibley et al. (2020), have suggested that this process is better represented as a hermeneutic spiral rather than a closed loop. The spiral metaphor emphasises the cumulative and expanding nature of understanding: each encounter enlarges the horizon of meaning, allowing interpretations to deepen over time, across participants, and through iterative engagement with data. This view highlights that “interpretation always supposes a shared understanding” (Conroy, 2003), and that meaning emerges dialogically rather than through solitary analysis. In qualitative research, this process involves revisiting data, literature, and emerging interpretations in dialogue with one another.

4.2 Interpretation, Co-Constitution, and Reflexivity

4.2.1 Co-Constitution and Reflexivity

Co-constitution is a central concept in hermeneutic phenomenology and reflects the inseparable relationship between the person and their world, as well as between people engaged in meaning-making (Dibley *et al.*, 2020). In Heideggerian thought, the self does not exist independently from the world; rather, self and world are mutually constituting (Heidegger, 1996). Human beings become who they are through their involvement in the world, and the world becomes meaningful only through this involvement. Meaning is therefore not a pre-existing object waiting to be discovered; instead, it arises through interpretive participation.

This co-constitutive structure also applies directly to the relationship between researcher and participant. Understanding does not arise solely from the participant nor solely from the researcher but is shaped in the dialogical space where horizons meet. As Dibley *et al.* (2020) explain, interpretation in hermeneutic phenomenology is always shared: both participant and researcher bring backgrounds, expectations, prejudices, and pre-understandings that shape how meaning unfolds. This stands in contrast to Husserl’s notion of the *epoché*, which sought to suspend pre-understandings to reach a transcendental essence. Heidegger rejected this possibility, arguing that pre-understanding is not a methodological contamination but a necessary condition of interpretation. Because interpretation always emerges from within a lived context, both researcher and participant participate unavoidably in the interpretive event (Dibley *et al.*, 2020; Galdas, 2017).

Co-constitution is therefore not only a philosophical principle but also a central technique for managing the influence of self, demonstrating rigour, and ensuring that hermeneutic inquiry remains faithful to its ontological grounding. It shapes both data generation and data analysis, informing how meaning is disclosed, interpreted, and communicated in the final account.

4.2.2 Co-Constitution in Data Generation

In hermeneutic phenomenology, data generation is not a process of extracting “truth” from participants but a relational encounter in which meaning is co-created. A participant never presents a neutral or objective depiction of an experience; what is revealed during an interview is already an interpreted version of their lifeworld, shaped by the context in which the experience occurred. Similarly, the researcher does not enter the interview as a blank slate. The preconceptions, professional background, cultural situatedness, and theoretical grounding that the researcher brings are not obstacles to understanding but essential components of the interpretive process (Dibley *et al.*, 2020; Galdas, 2017).

Because of this, interviews are not simply procedural data-generation activities. They are interpretive dialogues requiring deep, iterative engagement. As meaning emerges, the researcher and participant engage in a process of clarification, refinement, and co-interpretation. This iterative quality, *meaning* unfolding recursively through repeated engagement, is fundamental to hermeneutic phenomenology.

The co-constitutive nature of the interview challenges the conventional practice of *member checking*, commonly used in qualitative research to verify the “accuracy” of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking presumes that meaning is static and that participants can confirm or deny the truthfulness of a transcript or thematic interpretation. Hermeneutic phenomenology rejects this assumption. Meaning is not fixed at the moment an interview ends; both the researcher and participant continue to reinterpret and reflect afterwards (Birt *et al.*, 2016; Dibley *et al.*, 2020). A participant may even arrive at a new understanding of their own experience after narrating it, an insight that cannot be “checked” retroactively.

For these reasons, scholars increasingly argue that member checking is not philosophically aligned with hermeneutic phenomenology. It risks imposing a positivist notion of verification onto an interpretive methodology (Birt *et al.*, 2016; Dibley *et al.*, 2020). Instead of relying on member checking, interpretive rigour is strengthened through co-constitution during the interview itself. Clarifying questions, reflective listening, and researcher responsiveness help ensure that the participant's lay account is understood as fully as possible in that moment. These interactions support a partial fusion of horizons during the interview, enabling shared meaning-making while acknowledging that understanding remains dynamic and open.

4.2.3 Co-Constitution in Data Analysis

Co-constitution continues to shape the interpretive process during data analysis. The researcher moves repeatedly between the participants' lay accounts, their own pre-understandings, and relevant philosophical and empirical literature. Meaning arises not from the data alone but from the interplay between these elements, guided by the hermeneutic circle. As transcripts are revisited, interpretations evolve, deepen, and shift; earlier understandings give way to new insights; and emergent meanings reshape the orientation of subsequent analysis.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the outcome of analysis is never presented as an objective or universal truth. Instead, the phenomenologist offers interpretive disclosures; situated understandings grounded in lived experience and supported by philosophical insight (Dibley *et al.*, 2020). These disclosures aim to reveal something essential about how the phenomenon shows itself to those who experience it, while recognising that other interpretations remain possible.

Traditional notions of validation, such as member checking, assume that participants can verify the accuracy of an interpretation. However, hermeneutic phenomenology understands knowledge as co-constructed rather than discovered, making such verification inappropriate. Participants may not always recognise the deeper meanings revealed through phenomenological analysis because interpretation often goes beyond what is immediately available in everyday self-understanding. Rather than undermining credibility, this reflects the interpretive depth of the method.

Rigour in hermeneutic phenomenology is supported instead by reflexivity. Reflexivity requires the researcher to continually examine how their positionality, background, and pre-understandings shape the analytic process (Galdas, 2017; Saunders *et al.*, 2023). It makes visible the interpretive lens through which meaning is disclosed and prevents unexamined assumptions from dominating interpretation. Consultation with philosophical and empirical literature also serves as a check on interpretive excess, grounding meaning in a broader intellectual horizon and ensuring that findings reflect shared, rather than idiosyncratic, understanding.

In this way, co-constitution functions both as a methodological stance and an assurance of quality. Through dialogical engagement, reflexive awareness, and continual movement between part and whole, the researcher produces interpretations that are credible, contextually grounded, and philosophically coherent. Reflexivity is embedded throughout the research process, not as a procedural step but as a continual practice underpinning understanding (Dodgson, 2019; Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2023).

The takeaway is that Hermeneutic phenomenology recognises that meaning is co-constituted through interaction between researcher and participant. The researcher is not an external observer but an interpretive participant in the research process. Reflexivity is therefore central to methodological rigour. Researchers must critically examine how their positionality, disciplinary background, and assumptions shape interpretation. Reflexive transparency enhances trustworthiness by making interpretive processes visible.

4.2.4 Ensuring Interpretive Trustworthiness Beyond Member Checking

While member checking is often promoted as a marker of credibility in qualitative research, hermeneutic phenomenology requires alternative strategies that are philosophically aligned with its interpretive ontology (Gadamer, 1989; Heidegger, 1996). Because meaning is understood as dynamic, situated, and co-constituted rather than fixed and verifiable, interpretive trustworthiness is not secured through participant validation of findings, but through methodological transparency, reflexive engagement, and sustained interpretive accountability (de Witt and Ploeg, 2006; Dibley *et al.*, 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

First, prolonged and dialogical engagement during data generation serves as a primary mechanism for credibility (Dibley *et al.*, 2020; Gadamer, 1989). Trustworthiness is enhanced through in-interview practices such as clarifying questions, reflective listening, and interpretive probing, which allow meanings to be jointly explored and refined *in situ* (Dibley *et al.*, 2020). These dialogical practices support a partial fusion of horizons during the research encounter, ensuring that participants' accounts are understood within their intended lifeworld contexts rather than retrospectively "checked" after interpretation has already evolved (Gadamer, 1989).

Second, systematic reflexive documentation provides a transparent account of how interpretations develop over time (de Witt and Ploeg, 2006; Dibley *et al.*, 2020). Reflexive journals and analytic memos enable researchers to record emerging insights, interpretive shifts, and moments of tension between pre-understandings and empirical

material (Dibley *et al.*, 2020). Rather than eliminating subjectivity, this practice renders the researcher's interpretive involvement visible and open to scrutiny, thereby strengthening confirmability and dependability (de Witt and Ploeg, 2006; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Third, iterative engagement with the hermeneutic circle functions as a core analytic safeguard (Gadamer, 1989; Heidegger, 1996). Moving repeatedly between parts and whole, participant accounts, contextual understanding, and empirical material and philosophical concepts ensure that interpretations are not prematurely fixed (Dibley *et al.*, 2020). This recursive movement allows early interpretations to be challenged, revised, and deepened, providing an internal coherence check grounded in the logic of the methodology itself (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006).

Fourth, peer dialogue and interpretive debriefing offer an additional layer of rigour (Dibley *et al.*, 2020; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Engaging with philosophically informed peers allows researchers to test the plausibility, resonance, and coherence of interpretations without reverting to positivist notions of verification (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006). Such dialogue helps identify blind spots, interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions, and ensure that interpretations remain grounded in shared interpretive horizons rather than idiosyncratic readings (Gadamer, 1989).

Finally, thick description and analytic transparency in reporting enable readers to assess transferability and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By providing rich contextual detail, illustrative excerpts, and clear articulation of interpretive decisions, the researcher invites readers into the interpretive process (van Manen, 1990, 2023). Trustworthiness is thus achieved not through confirmation by participants, but through resonance, coherence, and the recognisability of lived meaning (Dibley *et al.*, 2020).

Taken together, these practices demonstrate that hermeneutic phenomenology does not reject rigour; rather, it reconfigures it. Interpretive trustworthiness is secured through dialogical engagement, reflexive transparency, iterative analysis, and philosophical coherence, offering robust alternatives to member checking that remain faithful to the ontology and epistemology of hermeneutic inquiry.

4.3 Rigour and Trustworthiness in Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Ensuring trustworthiness and rigour in hermeneutic phenomenological research requires approaches consistent with its philosophical foundations. Unlike positivist paradigms, which emphasise objectivity, replicability, and neutrality, hermeneutic phenomenology recognises that understanding is historically and contextually situated, and that the researcher is inevitably implicated in the interpretive process (Gadamer, 1989; Heidegger, 1996). Rigour in this tradition, therefore, arises not from eliminating subjectivity, but from engaging with it reflexively, transparently, and systematically. The conceptualisations of trustworthiness developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), together with the philosophical expressions of rigour articulated by de Witt and Ploeg (2006), can be used to guide the assessment of methodological quality.

4.3.1 Engagement with Contemporary Methodological Debates

Recent methodological discussions in hermeneutic phenomenology have focused less on defending its philosophical legitimacy and more on strengthening methodological utility in complex empirical settings, including organisational and technology-mediated contexts. Current debates emphasise (i) how researchers document interpretive decision-making without reducing interpretation to procedural checklists, (ii) how reflexivity is practised as an audit-able and iterative activity (e.g., structured journaling, memo trails, peer debriefing), and (iii) how interpretive work is sustained across time, sites, and digitally mediated organisational practices. These developments reinforce the need for transparent "interpretive accountability" (rather than verification), while also encouraging more explicit reporting of how the hermeneutic circle, reflexive practice, and contextual interpretation are enacted step-by-step in organisational research (Al-Sheikh Hassan, 2025).

Empirical work in organisational and management-related contexts also shows how hermeneutic phenomenology is being operationalised in practice. For example, hermeneutic phenomenological analysis has been used to interpret how organisational practices and meaning structures shift with the introduction of enterprise systems and the reconfiguration of organisational memory and routines (Vogl, 2021). Similar interpretive designs have also been used to explore organisational change and restructuring through lived-experience accounts analysed through iterative movement between parts and whole, thereby demonstrating how interpretive rigour can be enacted through analytic transparency, contextual description, and reflexive engagement rather than post-hoc participant "verification" (Chambers, 2024).

4.3.2 Trustworthiness Criteria

Trustworthiness refers to the integrity with which a qualitative study is designed, conducted, and reported, and comprises credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These criteria align with the interpretivist and constructivist paradigm underpinning this study and serve as methodological safeguards ensuring that the interpretations presented are grounded in participants' lived accounts while remaining coherent with

hermeneutic phenomenological commitments. Because phenomenological meanings are emergent, situated, and relational, the research process requires ongoing reflexive engagement, iterative interpretation, and transparent documentation. Trustworthiness is therefore fostered through careful attention to how meanings are generated, interpreted, and represented.

4.3.3 Expressions of Rigour

Beyond trustworthiness, hermeneutic phenomenology requires attention to expressions of rigour that preserve philosophical integrity. de Witt and Ploeg (2006) identify five expressions: balanced integration, openness, concreteness, resonance, and actualisation. Balanced integration is evident in the way philosophical concepts such as being-in-the-world, fore-structures of understanding, and the hermeneutic circle are woven into both methodology and analysis. Openness is demonstrated through explicit reflexive practice and transparent documentation of interpretive decisions. Concreteness emerges in the practical implications and contextual grounding of findings, reflecting participants' real-world engagements with the phenomenon of interest. Resonance is evidenced when readers recognise or "feel" the meanings articulated; the phenomenological "nod" signals that the interpretation authentically conveys lived experience (Dibley *et al.*, 2020). Actualisation refers to the potential for resonance to extend into future contexts, enabling the insights to inform practice, policy, or further research.

Together, these expressions of rigour ensured that the study upheld both methodological quality and philosophical coherence. Rather than striving for objectivity, the emphasis was placed on demonstrating interpretive integrity, reflexive transparency, and contextual richness. Through these commitments, the study achieved trustworthiness in a manner fully aligned with hermeneutic phenomenology's ontological and epistemological foundations.

4.4 Methodological Contribution to Qualitative Research in Organisations and Management

This paper contributes to qualitative research methodology by clarifying hermeneutic phenomenology as a distinct methodological approach, articulating its ontological and epistemological foundations, demonstrating how interpretation, reflexivity, and context underpin rigour, and offering guidance for researchers studying experience, meaning, and practice. For organisational and management research, hermeneutic phenomenology provides a framework for producing context-sensitive and theoretically grounded qualitative insights.

To strengthen practical relevance, organisational researchers can draw on published hermeneutic phenomenological applications that demonstrate alignment between lived-experience questions, dialogical interviewing, and iterative interpretation. For instance, studies have applied hermeneutic phenomenology to interpret organisational or administrative practices shaped by enterprise technologies and institutional routines, illustrating how meaning is disclosed through practice rather than measured as variables (Vogl, 2021). Other applications in organisational change contexts demonstrate how interpretive outcomes can be presented as context-sensitive disclosures supported by thick description, an explicit interpretive trail, and reflexive documentation, offering concrete models for enacting trustworthiness beyond member checking (Chambers, 2024).

4.5 Methodological Limitations and Scope of Hermeneutic Phenomenology

While hermeneutic phenomenology offers a powerful framework for producing context-sensitive and theoretically grounded qualitative insights, particularly in organisational and management research, it also entails important methodological limitations that warrant acknowledgement. Its commitment to depth, interpretive richness, and idiographic understanding prioritises nuanced accounts of lived experience over statistical generalisability (Lim, 2025). As a result, findings generated through hermeneutic phenomenology are not intended to be generalised across populations but to offer transferable insights grounded in thick contextual description. In addition, hermeneutic phenomenological research is resource-intensive, requiring prolonged engagement with participants, iterative interpretation, and sustained reflexive practice, which can limit sample size and increase demands on time and analytic labour (Lim, 2025). Interpretation is also inherently shaped by the researcher's positionality and pre-understandings, raising the risk of subjectivity if reflexivity is not rigorously practised. Nevertheless, when these limitations are addressed through transparency, reflexive journaling, iterative analysis, and careful contextualisation, hermeneutic phenomenology remains well-suited for illuminating how meaning is constructed and negotiated in complex, real-world settings such as organisational, managerial, and technological contexts.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Hermeneutic phenomenology offers a philosophically grounded and methodologically rigorous approach for interpreting lived experience in qualitative research. By foregrounding being-in-the-world, lifeworld, temporality, and

interpretive engagement, this methodology enables researchers to move beyond descriptive accounts toward a deeper understanding of meaning as it is lived and situated. For qualitative research in organisations and management, hermeneutic phenomenology strengthens methodological coherence, reflexivity, and interpretive depth.

Methodologically, this approach entails a set of interrelated practices that guide the research process. Researchers begin by formulating research questions oriented toward lived meaning rather than causal explanation. Data generation prioritises in-depth, dialogical engagement with participants through methods such as phenomenological interviews that invite rich first-person accounts. Throughout the study, researchers engage reflexively with their own pre-understandings, using practices such as reflexive journaling, analytic memoing, and peer dialogue to make interpretive positions visible and open to revision. Analysis proceeds iteratively through the hermeneutic circle, moving between parts and whole, description and interpretation, and participant accounts and contextual understanding, culminating in interpretive writing that seeks to illuminate the essential meanings of experience rather than produce generalisable claims.

Future methodological development would benefit from further articulation of how hermeneutic phenomenology can be adapted to complex empirical settings, including digital, organisational, and technologically mediated contexts. There is scope for developing clearer methodological guidance on integrating hermeneutic phenomenology with abductive reasoning, longitudinal designs, and multi-sited studies, as well as for strengthening transparency in documenting interpretive decision-making. Advancing practical tools for reflexivity, audit trails, and collaborative interpretation would further enhance rigour while remaining faithful to the interpretive foundations of the approach. In this way, hermeneutic phenomenology can continue to evolve as a robust and flexible methodology for qualitative inquiry into lived experience.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the conceptual synthesis and methodological clarifications advanced in this paper, the following recommendations are proposed for qualitative researchers, reviewers, and editors engaging with studies of lived experience.

First, researchers adopting hermeneutic phenomenology should explicitly articulate their interpretive positioning at the outset of a study. This includes making transparent the ontological and epistemological commitments underpinning the research, as well as the researcher's fore-structures of understanding. Rather than presenting phenomenology as a generic qualitative label, studies should clearly demonstrate how concepts such as being-in-the-world, lifeworld, temporality, and the hermeneutic circle inform research questions, data generation, and analysis.

Second, qualitative studies of lived experience should treat interpretation as integral to all stages of the research process, not as a discrete analytic phase. Researchers are encouraged to demonstrate how interpretation begins during data generation through dialogical interviewing, reflexive engagement, and co-constitutive meaning-making, and how it continues iteratively during analysis. This requires moving beyond thematic description toward interpretive disclosure that situates experience within its social, historical, and practical contexts.

Third, researchers employing hermeneutic phenomenology should strengthen reflexive practice through systematic documentation. Reflexivity should be enacted as an ongoing methodological activity rather than a retrospective statement. Practices such as reflexive journaling, analytic memo-writing, and peer interpretive dialogue should be reported explicitly, showing how pre-understandings are engaged, challenged, and transformed through the hermeneutic process. Such transparency enhances interpretive accountability without resorting to positivist validation criteria.

Fourth, journals, reviewers, and doctoral supervisors are encouraged to evaluate phenomenological studies using philosophically aligned criteria of rigour. Rather than privileging procedural techniques such as member checking, assessments of quality should attend to coherence between ontology, epistemology, and method; the clarity of the interpretive trail; the depth of contextual engagement; and the resonance of findings. Emphasising interpretive trustworthiness over verification supports methodological pluralism while preserving philosophical integrity.

Finally, future methodological research should focus on extending hermeneutic phenomenology into complex empirical settings, including digitally mediated, organisational, and multi-sited contexts. There is particular scope for developing guidance on longitudinal hermeneutic designs, abductive interpretation, collaborative phenomenological analysis, and transparent reporting of interpretive decision-making. Such work would further operationalise hermeneutic phenomenology as a flexible yet rigorous methodological practice capable of addressing contemporary qualitative research challenges.

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