Interpretive sufficiency of meaning: A philosophically coherent criterion for sample adequacy in hermeneutic phenomenology

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ABSTRACT

Saturation has become a widely used criterion for determining sample adequacy in qualitative research, including hermeneutic phenomenology, despite its origins in grounded theory and its association with theoretical and categorical development. This paper explores whether saturation is philosophically compatible with hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry and develops an alternative criterion for judging sample adequacy. Drawing on Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, Schutz's lifeworld perspective, and contemporary methodological scholarship, the paper uses a conceptual methodological analysis to explore how different approaches understand what constitutes "enough" in qualitative inquiry. The analysis shows that saturation, information power, and emerging uses of interpretive sufficiency address sample adequacy in different ways, but that none fully articulates adequacy in terms of the interpretive openness and contextuality of hermeneutic phenomenology. In response, the paper develops interpretive sufficiency of meaning, understood as the point at which sustained movement within the hermeneutic circle produces an interpretation sufficiently rich, coherent, contextually grounded, and phenomenologically illuminating to address the research question, without implying that meaning has been exhausted. Five interrelated dimensions—phenomenological depth, interpretive coherence, hermeneutic maturity, contextual resonance, and reflexive transparency—provide a basis for judging whether interpretation has developed sufficiently to support a defensible decision about continuing or concluding data generation. The paper concludes that sample adequacy in hermeneutic phenomenology is better understood through the quality and maturity of interpretation than through the presumed exhaustion of new information. It recommends that researchers, supervisors, examiners, reviewers, and editors consider these five dimensions when evaluating sample adequacy rather than treating saturation as a universal requirement. The framework contributes to qualitative methodological debates by aligning decisions about adequacy more closely with the philosophical commitments of hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry.

Keywords: Hermeneutic Phenomenology; Lived Experience, Interpretive Sufficiency of Meaning; Qualitative Methodology; Sample Adequacy; Saturation

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I. INTRODUCTION

Qualitative researchers have long grappled with determining when sufficient data have been generated to support a credible and meaningful interpretation of a phenomenon. This question has increasingly been addressed through the concept of saturation, which is commonly used to justify sample adequacy across qualitative research (Lyhne & Norlyk, 2026; Roberts *et al.*, 2026; Tight, 2024). Whether described as data, theoretical, thematic, code, or meaning saturation, the underlying assumption is that data generation can reach a point at which additional interviews or observations contribute little substantively new to the analysis (Bouncken *et al.*, 2026; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024; Roberts *et al.*, 2026; Saunders *et al.*, 2018).

Saturation, however, originated within grounded theory, where it served a specific purpose: determining when emerging theoretical categories had developed sufficient properties, dimensions, and relationships to support theory construction (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Saunders *et al.*, 2018; Tight, 2024). As qualitative research diversified, the concept was increasingly transferred to phenomenology, narrative inquiry, ethnography, case study, and other approaches, often without sufficient consideration of whether its underlying assumptions were compatible with their different philosophical orientations (Ahmed, 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Lyhne & Norlyk, 2026; Naeem *et al.*, 2024; Saunders *et al.*, 2018; Tight, 2024).

This concern is particularly important in hermeneutic phenomenology, where the purpose is not to establish exhaustive categories but to interpret how meaning is disclosed through lived experience. Drawing primarily on Heideggerian phenomenology, lived experience is understood as situated within *Being-in-the-world* and shaped by history, language, context, relationships, and the researcher's fore-understanding (Heidegger, 2010). Interpretation therefore develops through movement between participants' accounts, the developing understanding of the phenomenon, and the researcher's evolving interpretive horizon. The hermeneutic circle represents this ongoing movement rather than a linear progression towards analytical closure (Crowther & Thomson, 2023; Gadamer, 2013).

From this perspective, the application of saturation to hermeneutic phenomenology raises a philosophical tension. Saturation generally implies that inquiry can reach a point at which further engagement contributes little substantively new (Dibley *et al.*, 2020; Lyhne & Norlyk, 2026). Hermeneutic phenomenology, by contrast, understands meaning as historically and contextually situated and continually open to further interpretation. Each return to participants' narratives and each movement between the parts and the whole can disclose further dimensions of meaning (Dibley *et al.*, 2020; Farrell, 2020; Frechette *et al.*, 2020; Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). The issue is therefore not whether interpretation can be exhausted, but whether a sufficiently rich and coherent interpretation has been developed to illuminate the phenomenon under investigation.

Alternative approaches have begun to challenge the universal application of saturation. *Information power*, for example, shifts attention from numerical expectations towards the richness, relevance, and specificity of the information generated in relation to the study aim (Malterud *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, Hennink *et al.* (2017) distinguish between code saturation and meaning saturation, recognising that the absence of new codes does not necessarily indicate that deeper understanding has been achieved. These contributions demonstrate growing recognition that sample adequacy should be considered in relation to the purpose and philosophical orientation of qualitative inquiry. More recently, the term *interpretive sufficiency* has begun to appear in hermeneutic phenomenological research. Antúnez-Calvente *et al*. (2026), for example, used interpretive sufficiency rather than numerical saturation to justify sample adequacy, while Ekinci (2026) associated it with the point at which additional interviews no longer substantially expanded experiential meanings. However, these applications primarily use the concept as a practical justification for concluding data generation rather than as a clearly defined methodological construct with explicit philosophical foundations.

This paper addresses this gap by proposing *interpretive sufficiency of meaning* as a philosophically coherent criterion for determining sample adequacy in hermeneutic phenomenological research. Interpretive sufficiency is understood as the point at which sustained engagement within the hermeneutic circle produces an interpretation that is sufficiently rich, coherent, contextually grounded, and phenomenologically illuminating to address the research question, while recognising that interpretation remains open to further understanding. The argument is not that saturation is inherently inappropriate across all qualitative research. Rather, saturation is grounded in a methodological tradition concerned with theoretical or categorical development, whereas hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the disclosure and interpretation of lived meaning. The paper therefore argues that sample adequacy should be judged according to the philosophical logic of the methodology employed. It develops five interrelated dimensions of interpretive sufficiency—phenomenological depth, interpretive coherence, hermeneutic maturity, contextual resonance, and reflexive transparency—and considers how these dimensions can guide methodological decisions concerning sample adequacy in hermeneutic phenomenological research.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The central methodological problem addressed in this paper is the lack of a sample-adequacy criterion explicitly aligned with the interpretive logic of hermeneutic phenomenology. Although saturation remains widely used to justify when qualitative data generation can be concluded (Lyhne & Norlyk, 2026; Roberts *et al.*, 2026; Tight, 2024), its underlying logic is primarily concerned with the emergence, development, or redundancy of categories and information (Bouncken *et al.*, 2026; Saunders *et al.*, 2018). Applied to hermeneutic phenomenology, this can encourage researchers to treat the absence of substantially new information as evidence that interpretive work has reached an adequate endpoint.

This creates a tension between the criterion used to justify sample adequacy and the philosophical commitments of hermeneutic inquiry. In hermeneutic phenomenology, meaning is not simply contained in participants' accounts waiting to be exhausted; it is disclosed through interpretation and can deepen as the researcher moves between parts and whole, experience and context, and participants' accounts and the researcher's fore-understanding (Dibley *et al.*, 2020; Farrell, 2020; Frechette *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, sample adequacy cannot be determined solely by whether additional interviews generate new codes, categories, or information. Existing alternatives do not fully address this methodological problem. *Information power* provides a valuable basis for considering the richness and relevance of information in relation to the study aim (Malterud *et al.*, 2016), while distinctions between code and meaning saturation draw attention to differences between identifying new codes and developing deeper understanding (Hennink *et al.*, 2017). However, neither approach specifies how researchers can determine that an interpretation has become sufficiently developed within the hermeneutic-philosophical logic of phenomenological inquiry.

The emerging use of interpretive sufficiency points towards such an approach, but its methodological meaning remains underdeveloped. Recent applications have used the concept to justify sample adequacy in phenomenological research, including Antúnez-Calvente *et al.* (2026) and Ekinci (2026). However, these applications primarily employ interpretive sufficiency as a practical basis for concluding data generation rather than as an explicitly articulated methodological criterion with defined philosophical and interpretive dimensions. The resulting gap is therefore both conceptual and practical: hermeneutic phenomenology requires a basis for judging sample adequacy that does not depend on the exhaustion of new information, yet existing guidance provides limited criteria for determining when interpretive understanding has become sufficiently developed. This paper addresses this gap by developing *interpretive sufficiency of meaning* as a philosophically aligned criterion for sample adequacy, shifting the basis of adequacy from informational exhaustion to the richness, coherence, maturity, contextual grounding, and reflexive quality of the interpretation produced through sustained engagement with the phenomenon.

1.2 Research Objective

The objective of this paper is to develop interpretive sufficiency of meaning as a philosophically coherent criterion for determining sample adequacy in hermeneutic phenomenological research.

Specifically, the paper conceptualises interpretive sufficiency, distinguishes it from saturation and information power, identifies its dimensions, and considers how it can guide decisions about continuing or concluding data generation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Heideggerian Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology provides the primary philosophical foundation for this paper. Heidegger's conception of human existence as *Being-in-the-world* positions experience as inherently situated within historical, cultural, linguistic, relational, and practical contexts (Heidegger, 2010). Phenomena are therefore not encountered as detached objects that can be exhaustively captured through data collection; rather, their meanings are disclosed through situated engagement and interpretation. This orientation has direct implications for sample adequacy. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the purpose of inquiry is to develop an interpretive understanding of lived experience rather than to establish exhaustive categories or achieve theoretical completeness (Gadamer, 2013; Heidegger, 2010). Adequacy must therefore be considered in relation to the quality of the interpretation produced from participants' accounts and the extent to which that interpretation illuminates the phenomenon under investigation.

2.1.2 The Hermeneutic Circle

The hermeneutic circle describes the movement between the parts and the whole through which understanding develops. Individual accounts are interpreted in relation to the emerging understanding of the phenomenon, while that developing understanding is repeatedly reconsidered in light of particular accounts. This movement is informed by the researcher's fore-understanding and remains open to further interpretation (Dibley *et al.*, 2020; Farrell, 2020; Frechette *et al.*, 2020). The hermeneutic circle is therefore not a procedural sequence that concludes when sufficient data have been accumulated. Each return to participants' narratives and each encounter between the researcher's fore-understanding and the phenomenon can disclose further meaning. This openness creates an important distinction between interpretive sufficiency and the notion of reaching a final or exhaustive endpoint.

2.1.3 Schutz's Lifeworld Perspective

Schutz's phenomenological sociology complements the Heideggerian foundation by emphasising the lifeworld as the everyday world of meanings within which people experience and interpret their circumstances (Schutz, 1967). Experience is shaped by biography, social context, accumulated knowledge, and practical concerns. Participants therefore disclose experiences that are embedded within meaningful everyday worlds rather than providing isolated units of information. This perspective reinforces the importance of contextuality in judging adequacy. For hermeneutic phenomenological research, an adequate sample should enable sufficiently rich engagement with the lived meanings and contexts through which the phenomenon is experienced.

2.1.4 Theoretical Implications for Sample Adequacy

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that sample adequacy in hermeneutic phenomenology cannot be determined solely by the disappearance of new informational units. If lived experience is situated, interpretation is historically informed, and understanding develops through the hermeneutic circle, then adequacy should relate to the maturity and quality of the interpretation produced through engagement with the phenomenon. This distinction is central to the present argument: the openness of phenomenological understanding does not preclude methodological adequacy; rather, it requires adequacy to be judged by the development of interpretation rather than by the presumed exhaustion of new information (Dibley *et al.*, 2020). This theoretical position provides the foundation for examining whether existing approaches to sample adequacy are sufficiently aligned with hermeneutic phenomenology.

2.2 Empirical Review

The empirical and methodological literature was reviewed in relation to four aspects of the research objective: the conceptualisation of interpretive sufficiency, its distinction from saturation and information power, the dimensions through which it can be assessed, and its implications for decisions about continuing or concluding data generation.

2.2.1 Conceptualising Interpretive Sufficiency

Existing literature has raised concerns about treating saturation as a universal criterion for determining sample adequacy. Saturation originated within grounded theory, where it refers to the point at which additional data no longer contribute substantively to the development of theoretical categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Saunders *et al.*, 2018; Tight, 2024). As the concept has been adopted across different qualitative methodologies, however, questions have emerged about its broader applicability, particularly because these approaches pursue different forms of understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Lyhne & Norlyk, 2026).

This concern is especially relevant to hermeneutic phenomenology. Rather than seeking theoretical or categorical completeness, it is concerned with interpreting lived experience. Meaning is situated and remains open to further interpretation as the researcher moves between participants' accounts, the developing interpretation, and their own fore-understanding (Dibley *et al.*, 2020; Farrell, 2020; Frechette *et al.*, 2020). Sample adequacy, therefore, needs to be considered in terms of whether the interpretation has developed sufficiently to illuminate the phenomenon, rather than simply whether informational novelty has been exhausted.

Recent phenomenological studies have begun to use *interpretive sufficiency* when justifying sample adequacy. Antúnez-Calvente *et al.* (2026), for example, used interpretive sufficiency rather than numerical saturation in a hermeneutic phenomenological study, while Ekinci (2026) associated the concept with the point at which additional interviews no longer substantially expanded experiential meanings. Although these studies demonstrate its practical relevance, they mainly use interpretive sufficiency to justify concluding data generation and do not fully develop its philosophical foundations or evaluative dimensions.

The literature therefore points towards the need to conceptualise interpretive sufficiency in a way that reflects the interpretive logic of hermeneutic phenomenology. In this study, it refers to the point at which sustained engagement within the hermeneutic circle produces an interpretation that is sufficiently rich, coherent, contextually grounded, and phenomenologically illuminating to address the research question, without suggesting that meaning itself has been exhausted.

2.2.2 Distinguishing Interpretive Sufficiency from Saturation and Information Power

The literature reveals important differences between saturation, information power, and interpretive approaches to sample adequacy. Saturation is primarily concerned with diminishing informational, conceptual, or thematic novelty (Hennink *et al.*, 2017; Saunders *et al.*, 2018; Tight, 2024). Its central concern is whether additional data are likely to generate substantially new codes, themes, meanings, or theoretical categories.

Information power approaches the question differently. Malterud *et al.* (2016) argue that the number of participants required depends on factors such as the study aim, sample specificity, theoretical foundation, quality of dialogue, and analytical strategy. The focus consequently shifts towards the amount and relevance of information contained within the sample rather than a predetermined numerical requirement.

Interpretive sufficiency takes a different position again. While saturation asks whether novelty is diminishing and information power considers the informational value of the sample, interpretive sufficiency is concerned with the development and maturity of phenomenological understanding. An account may add little new information and yet deepen, qualify, or challenge an emerging interpretation. The question in hermeneutic phenomenology is therefore not simply whether new information continues to appear, but whether further engagement is still materially transforming the interpretation.

For this reason, interpretive sufficiency should not be understood merely as another term for saturation. Rather, it represents a methodology-specific criterion grounded in the interpretive purpose of hermeneutic phenomenology.

2.2.3 Dimensions for Assessing Interpretive Sufficiency

Although existing literature offers useful principles for evaluating qualitative adequacy, it does not sufficiently specify the dimensions through which interpretive sufficiency can be assessed within hermeneutic phenomenology. Information power emphasises the relevance and richness of information, while phenomenological scholarship draws attention to depth of engagement with lived experience, contextuality, interpretation, and reflexivity (Dibley *et al.*, 2020; Heidegger, 2010; Malterud *et al.*, 2016).

Recent applications of interpretive sufficiency demonstrate its potential, but its evaluative dimensions remain underdeveloped (Antúnez-Calvente *et al.*, 2026). Drawing on this literature and the philosophical commitments of hermeneutic phenomenology, the present study identifies five interrelated dimensions: phenomenological depth, interpretive coherence, hermeneutic maturity, contextual resonance, and reflexive transparency. These dimensions are understood as complementary qualities rather than sequential stages or numerical thresholds.

Phenomenological depth concerns movement beyond surface description towards the meanings and structures of lived experience. Interpretive coherence considers whether individual accounts and emerging interpretations come together to form a convincing whole. Hermeneutic maturity concerns the extent to which initial understandings have been questioned, challenged, and developed through sustained movement within the hermeneutic circle. Contextual resonance considers whether interpretation remains grounded in participants' historical, social, cultural, and situational lifeworlds. Reflexive transparency, in turn, concerns whether the researcher can make clear how fore-understandings and interpretive decisions shaped the developing interpretation. Taken together, these dimensions provide a basis for judging whether interpretation has developed sufficiently for methodological purposes.

2.2.4 Interpretive Sufficiency and Decisions about Continuing or Concluding Data Generation

Ultimately, sample adequacy needs to support a defensible decision about whether further data generation is warranted. Saturation commonly informs this decision through the diminishing emergence of new information or analytical content, whereas information power considers whether the sample contains sufficient relevant information (Malterud *et al.*, 2016; Saunders *et al.*, 2018).

In hermeneutic phenomenology, however, interpretive sufficiency shifts the basis of this decision from informational exhaustion towards interpretive development. Further data generation remains warranted when new accounts substantially transform the developing interpretation, either by revealing previously unrecognised dimensions or by challenging existing understandings. By contrast, sufficiency may be approaching when subsequent accounts mainly reinforce, clarify, contextualise, or enrich an interpretation that is already coherent without materially changing it.

This approach does not prescribe a predetermined participant number. Instead, researchers need to demonstrate how the interpretation developed, how subsequent accounts influenced it, and why further engagement was unlikely to produce substantive transformation. Sample adequacy is consequently justified through the quality and development of interpretation rather than through numerical sufficiency alone.

2.2.5 Synthesis of the Empirical Review

The literature reviewed across these areas shows that existing approaches address different dimensions of sample adequacy. Saturation focuses primarily on diminishing informational or conceptual novelty, whereas information power emphasises the relevance and richness of information within the sample. Emerging applications of interpretive sufficiency come closer to the interpretive requirements of phenomenological inquiry, but its philosophical foundations and evaluative dimensions remain insufficiently developed.

The literature therefore supports the development of *interpretive sufficiency of meaning* as a methodology-specific criterion for hermeneutic phenomenology. Its contribution is to conceptualise adequacy through the quality and maturity of interpretation, distinguish it from saturation and information power, identify five dimensions through which it can be assessed, and provide a basis for determining whether continued data generation is likely to substantively transform the developing interpretation. In this way, it directly addresses the research objective of developing a philosophically coherent criterion for sample adequacy in hermeneutic phenomenological research.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

This paper adopts a conceptual methodological approach to explore sample adequacy in hermeneutic phenomenological research. Rather than generating or analysing new participant data, the paper critically synthesises philosophical and methodological literature to develop interpretive sufficiency of meaning as a criterion for determining when sufficient interpretive understanding has been achieved. The analysis therefore focuses on the relationship between philosophical assumptions, methodological practice, and the justification of sample adequacy.

3.2 Philosophical Orientation

The analysis is grounded primarily in Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology, which understands lived experience as situated within Being-in-the-world and meaning as disclosed through interpretation. The hermeneutic circle provides the central interpretive logic, emphasising movement between individual accounts, the developing understanding of the phenomenon, and the researcher's fore-understanding. Schutz's concept of the lifeworld provides a complementary perspective by emphasising the biographical and social contexts within which everyday meanings are constituted (Heidegger, 2010; Schutz, 1967). This philosophical orientation is important because the paper does not treat sample adequacy as a purely procedural question. Rather, it asks whether the criterion used to justify adequacy is consistent with the assumptions about meaning, understanding, and interpretation underlying hermeneutic phenomenology.

3.3 Basis of the Conceptual Analysis

The conceptual analysis draws on three interconnected bodies of literature. First, it explores methodological scholarship on saturation and qualitative sample adequacy, including theoretical, data, code, thematic, and meaning saturation. Second, it considers alternative approaches, particularly information power and emerging applications of interpretive sufficiency. Third, it engages with philosophical and methodological literature on hermeneutic phenomenology, Heideggerian interpretation, the hermeneutic circle, and the lifeworld. These bodies of literature were examined comparatively to identify differences in how they conceptualise “enough” within qualitative inquiry and to determine whether existing approaches adequately reflect the interpretive character of hermeneutic phenomenology.

3.4 Development of the Conceptual Framework

The analysis proceeded through critical comparison of the assumptions underlying saturation, information power, and interpretive approaches to sample adequacy. Particular attention was given to whether each approach conceptualises adequacy in terms of informational redundancy, conceptual completeness, informational richness, or interpretive understanding. This analysis led to the formulation of interpretive sufficiency of meaning as a distinct criterion for hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry. The framework was subsequently developed around five interrelated dimensions: phenomenological depth, interpretive coherence, hermeneutic maturity, contextual resonance, and reflexive transparency. These dimensions are not proposed as sequential stages or independent measures but as complementary aspects of the quality of interpretive understanding. The resulting framework is intended to provide a philosophically coherent and practically defensible basis for justifying decisions about continuing or concluding data generation without implying that the meaning of a phenomenon has been exhausted.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This paper forms part of a doctoral study approved by the University of Zambia Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) under reference HSSREC-2026-JAN-064. The paper presents a conceptual methodological analysis and involves no additional participant recruitment or data generation. Ethical integrity was maintained through accurate representation and acknowledgement of sources and clear distinction between literature-derived arguments and the paper’s conceptual contribution.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Defining Interpretive Sufficiency of Meaning

The analysis developed interpretive sufficiency of meaning as a criterion for determining sample adequacy in hermeneutic phenomenological research. Interpretive sufficiency refers to the point at which sustained engagement with participants' accounts and movement within the hermeneutic circle have produced an interpretation that is sufficiently rich, coherent, contextually grounded, and phenomenologically illuminating to address the research question. It does not imply that all possible meanings of a phenomenon have been discovered or that interpretation has reached a final endpoint. Rather, it indicates that the interpretation has developed sufficient depth and coherence to provide a credible understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

This distinction is important because hermeneutic phenomenology does not assume that meaning can be completely exhausted. Participants’ experiences are historically and contextually situated, while researchers approach those experiences through their own fore-understandings. Interpretation consequently remains open to further understanding. Interpretive sufficiency therefore concerns adequacy of understanding rather than completion of meaning. An interpretation may be sufficient for the purposes of a particular inquiry while remaining open to subsequent interpretation. The criterion consequently shifts the central question of sample adequacy. Rather than asking whether additional participants would produce new codes, themes, or information, the researcher asks whether continued engagement is still fundamentally transforming the interpretation of the phenomenon. Where further accounts primarily deepen, clarify, illustrate, or nuance an already coherent interpretation, interpretive sufficiency may be approaching. Where new accounts continue to reveal dimensions that substantially alter the developing interpretation, further engagement remains warranted.

4.2 Interpretive Sufficiency Compared with Existing Approaches

4.2.1 Interpretive Sufficiency and Saturation

Interpretive sufficiency differs fundamentally from saturation in what each treats as evidence of adequacy. Saturation generally directs attention towards the emergence of new information, codes, themes, meanings, or theoretical categories, with adequacy indicated by diminishing novelty or redundancy (Hennink *et al.*, 2017; Saunders *et al.*, 2018; Tight, 2024). Interpretive sufficiency instead directs attention towards the quality and maturity of interpretation.

The distinction is therefore not simply between two different techniques for deciding when to stop interviewing. It reflects different understandings of what constitutes “enough” in qualitative inquiry. Saturation asks whether further data are likely to add substantively new analytical content, whereas interpretive sufficiency asks whether continued engagement is still substantially transforming the interpretation of the phenomenon. In hermeneutic phenomenology, an account may contribute little new informational content while nevertheless deepening, qualifying, or challenging the developing interpretation. Conversely, the absence of new codes or themes does not necessarily demonstrate that phenomenological understanding has become sufficiently developed (Dibley *et al.*, 2020; Lyhne & Norlyk, 2026). The relevant question is therefore not whether further accounts could possibly reveal additional meaning, because hermeneutic interpretation remains open to further disclosure, but whether further accounts are still producing a substantive transformation of the interpretation. Table 1 summarises this distinction.

Table 1
Contrasting Saturation and Interpretive Sufficiency of Meaning

Dimension	Saturation	Interpretive Sufficiency of Meaning
Primary concern	Informational or conceptual redundancy	Adequacy of interpretive understanding
Philosophical orientation	Often associated with grounded theory and related analytic approaches	Hermeneutic phenomenology
Central question	What new information, codes, themes, or categories are still emerging?	Has interpretation developed sufficient depth to illuminate the phenomenon?
Analytical emphasis	Identification of diminishing novelty	Development and refinement of understanding
View of knowledge	Knowledge can reach a point of sufficient conceptual or informational completeness	Understanding remains situated and open to further interpretation
Adequacy criterion	Limited emergence of substantively new material	Sufficient depth, coherence, contextual grounding, and phenomenological illumination
Endpoint	Relative analytical or conceptual closure	Sufficient interpretive maturity without claiming exhaustion of meaning

Note. Author’s synthesis, informed by the literature.

The distinction does not imply that saturation is inherently inappropriate. Saturation remains conceptually meaningful where the methodological purpose involves theoretical development or category completion. The issue arises when it is transferred uncritically to hermeneutic phenomenology, where the purpose of inquiry is fundamentally interpretive rather than the achievement of theoretical completeness.

4.2.2 Interpretive Sufficiency and Information Power

Interpretive sufficiency also differs from information power. Information power assesses the extent to which a sample contains sufficient information relevant to the study aim, with adequacy influenced by factors such as the specificity of the sample, theoretical foundation, quality of dialogue, and analytical strategy. Both approaches move beyond predetermined numerical sample-size requirements. However, their central concerns differ. Information power focuses primarily on the informational value of the sample, whereas interpretive sufficiency focuses on whether sustained engagement with that information has produced a sufficiently developed interpretation of lived experience. Thus, information power can help explain why a particular sample may contain sufficient information, while interpretive sufficiency addresses a different question: when has that experiential material been interpreted sufficiently to illuminate the phenomenon?

4.3 Dimensions of Interpretive Sufficiency

Interpretive sufficiency is conceptualised through five interrelated dimensions: phenomenological depth, interpretive coherence, hermeneutic maturity, contextual resonance, and reflexive transparency. These dimensions should not be understood as sequential stages or independent thresholds. Rather, they represent complementary qualities through which the adequacy of an interpretation can be considered.

4.3.1 Phenomenological Depth

Phenomenological depth concerns the extent to which the interpretation moves beyond surface descriptions of what participants said towards an understanding of how the phenomenon is experienced and what it means within participants’ lived worlds (Creswell & Poth, 2025; Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). A sufficiently deep interpretation does not merely reproduce participants’ accounts or summarise recurring statements. It explores the structures, tensions, relationships, emotions, practical concerns, and meanings through which the phenomenon is experienced. Depth is therefore not equivalent to the amount of data generated. A smaller body of richly interpreted accounts may provide greater phenomenological depth than a larger body analysed primarily for recurring content. Phenomenological depth is consequently an interpretive quality rather than a numerical property of the sample.

4.3.2 Interpretive Coherence

Interpretive coherence refers to the extent to which the developing interpretation forms a logically and phenomenologically convincing whole. Individual accounts, interpretive insights, and broader themes should relate to one another in ways that produce an integrated understanding of the phenomenon. Coherence does not require all participants to provide identical experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows for difference, ambiguity, and tension within lived experience. What matters is whether these differences can be interpreted meaningfully within the developing whole rather than appearing as disconnected observations. An interpretation demonstrates coherence when the relationship between its parts and whole can be convincingly explained and when the conclusions remain supported by the experiential accounts from which they emerged.

4.3.3 Hermeneutic Maturity

Hermeneutic maturity concerns the degree to which interpretation has developed through sustained movement between the researcher’s fore-understanding, participants’ accounts, and the emerging interpretation. Early interpretations may be provisional and strongly shaped by initial assumptions (Gadamer, 2013). Continued engagement can challenge those assumptions, reveal contradictions, introduce alternative perspectives, and require the researcher to reconsider the developing interpretation. Maturity therefore emerges when the interpretation has undergone sufficient critical and reflexive development to move beyond an initial or superficial reading. Hermeneutic maturity does not mean that interpretation becomes final. It indicates that the researcher has engaged sufficiently deeply with the hermeneutic process to produce a considered and defensible interpretation.

4.3.4 Contextual Resonance

Contextual resonance concerns the extent to which the interpretation remains grounded in the historical, social, cultural, relational, and situational context within which the phenomenon is experienced (Heidegger, 2010). An interpretation may appear coherent while nevertheless becoming detached from participants’ lived circumstances. Contextual resonance requires the researcher to demonstrate how meanings are connected to the lifeworld in which they arise (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006). This dimension is particularly important for hermeneutic phenomenology because meaning is not treated as an abstract property that can be separated from the context of existence. An interpretation is therefore more adequate when it resonates with the conditions and contexts through which the phenomenon becomes meaningful.

4.3.5 Reflexive Transparency

Reflexive transparency concerns the researcher's ability to make visible how interpretations developed and how their own fore-understandings influenced the inquiry. Because hermeneutic phenomenology does not assume that researchers approach participants’ experiences from a position of complete neutrality, methodological adequacy requires transparency concerning interpretive decisions. The researcher should be able to explain how initial understandings were challenged, refined, confirmed, or transformed through engagement with the data (Dodgson, 2023; Galdas, 2017; Hopkins *et al.*, 2017). Reflexive transparency therefore strengthens the credibility of interpretive sufficiency by demonstrating why the researcher considers the interpretation sufficiently developed, rather than simply asserting that sufficient data were collected.

4.4 Operationalising Interpretive Sufficiency

The practical value of interpretive sufficiency depends on whether researchers can use it to make defensible decisions about continuing or concluding data generation. It should therefore not remain solely a philosophical proposition. Interpretive sufficiency is best understood as an ongoing judgement developed throughout analysis, rather than a decision made only after all interviews have been completed. As interpretation develops, researchers can continually assess whether new accounts are substantially transforming their understanding of the phenomenon or primarily reinforcing, clarifying, and enriching an interpretation that is already coherent.

A particularly useful distinction is therefore between interpretive transformation and interpretive refinement. When a new account reveals a previously unrecognised dimension that requires substantial reconstruction of the developing interpretation, the hermeneutic understanding has not yet reached sufficient maturity. Further engagement may therefore be warranted. By contrast, when subsequent accounts primarily provide additional illustrations, contextual detail, clarification, or nuance without materially changing the interpretation, interpretive sufficiency may be approaching (Dibley *et al.*, 2020; Lyhne & Norlyk, 2026).

This process requires continued movement between the parts and the whole (Crowther & Thomson, 2023). Individual accounts should be considered in relation to the developing interpretation, while the developing interpretation should remain open to revision when new experiential material challenges it. Interpretive sufficiency is therefore reached not when the hermeneutic circle stops, but when continued movement within it produces progressive clarification without fundamental transformation of the interpretive whole.

The researcher should also document this interpretive development reflexively. A decision to conclude data generation should be supported by an account of how the interpretation evolved, what challenges were encountered, how alternative understandings were considered, and why further participants were no longer expected to produce a substantive transformation of the interpretation. Importantly, interpretive sufficiency does not establish a predetermined participant number. A small sample cannot be justified simply by claiming that interpretive sufficiency was achieved. Conversely, a large sample does not demonstrate interpretive adequacy by itself. The criterion requires researchers to demonstrate the quality, development, and coherence of the interpretation that supports the decision.

4.5 Conceptual Model of Interpretive Sufficiency

The five dimensions should be understood as interrelated qualities rather than sequential stages. Phenomenological depth, interpretive coherence, hermeneutic maturity, contextual resonance, and reflexive transparency collectively contribute to the development of interpretive sufficiency. The conceptual model therefore represents interpretive sufficiency as emerging through sustained movement within the hermeneutic circle, with the five dimensions interacting throughout the process. Once interpretation demonstrates sufficient maturity across these dimensions, the researcher can make a reasoned judgement about whether continued data generation is likely to produce substantive transformation of the interpretation. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this relationship, showing how engagement with participants' lived experiences and the researcher's fore-understanding within the hermeneutic circle interact with the five dimensions to support a reasoned judgement regarding interpretive sufficiency.

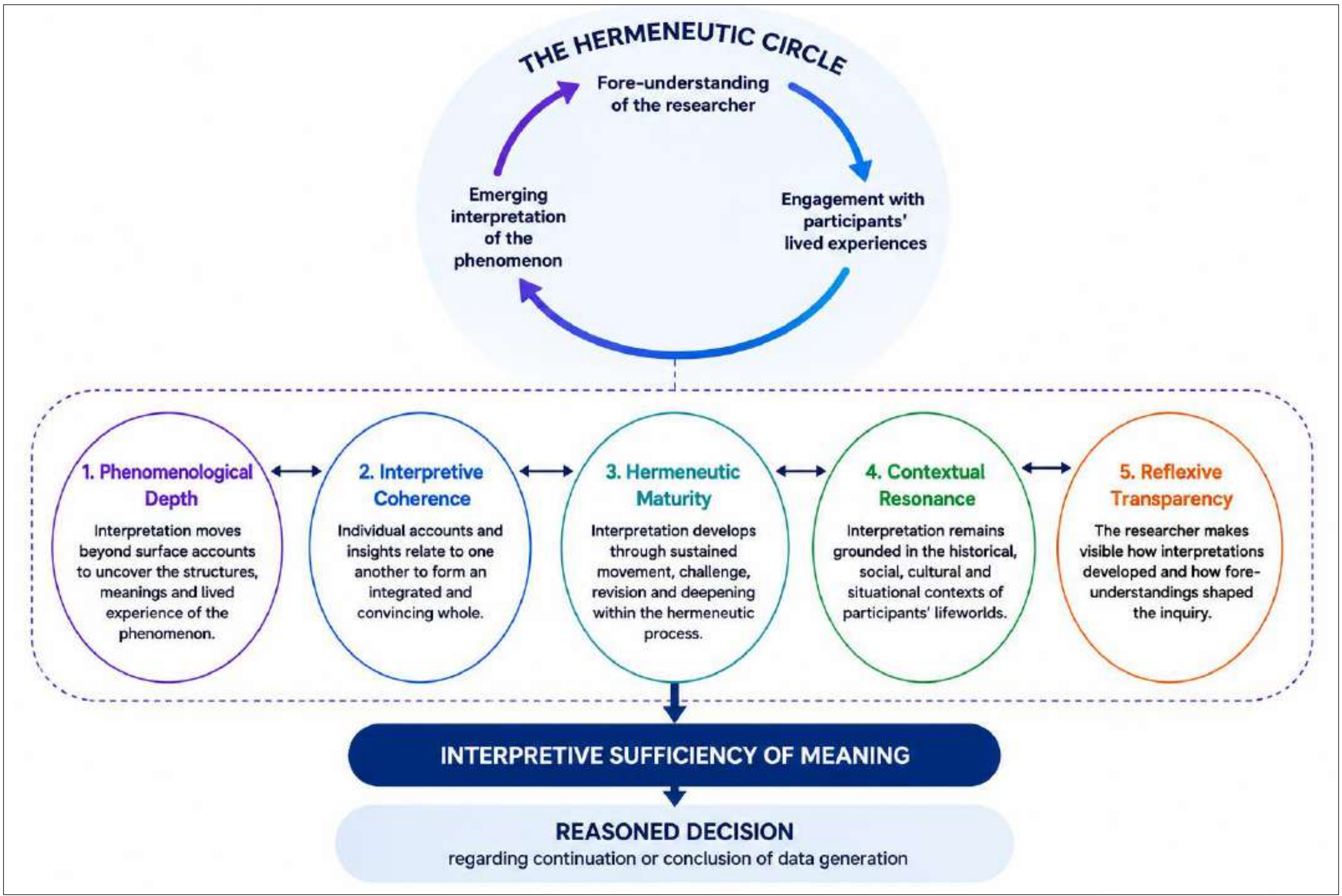

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Interpretive Sufficiency of Meaning

Note. Author's conceptualisation, informed by Heidegger's (2010) account of the hermeneutic circle.

The model deliberately avoids presenting interpretive sufficiency as a linear endpoint. The hermeneutic circle remains open, but the researcher can nevertheless reach a point at which the interpretation is sufficiently developed to answer the research question in a rigorous and meaningful manner.

4.6 Conceptual Contribution to Methodological Theory

The principal contribution of this paper is the development of interpretive sufficiency of meaning as a distinct criterion for sample adequacy in hermeneutic phenomenology. Unlike saturation, which is principally concerned with diminishing informational or conceptual novelty, interpretive sufficiency directs attention to the maturity and quality of phenomenological understanding. The contribution is therefore not simply to replace the term "saturation" with another methodological label. Rather, it is to establish a criterion whose logic is consistent with the philosophical assumptions of hermeneutic phenomenology. Saturation, information power, and interpretive sufficiency represent different ways of understanding what constitutes adequacy because they reflect different assumptions about what qualitative inquiry seeks to accomplish.

Interpretive sufficiency also introduces a distinction between the openness of meaning and the sufficiency of interpretation. Meaning does not become exhausted merely because a researcher concludes data generation. What becomes sufficient is the interpretation developed for the purposes of a particular inquiry. This distinction allows researchers to acknowledge the continuing openness of phenomenological understanding while still making a defensible methodological decision about sample adequacy. The five dimensions provide a framework through which this judgement can be articulated and evaluated. Together, they shift the assessment of adequacy from procedural compliance towards interpretive quality, requiring researchers to demonstrate how their understanding developed and why it provides a convincing account of the phenomenon.

4.7 Implications for Methodological Practice

Researchers undertaking hermeneutic phenomenological studies can use interpretive sufficiency to provide a more philosophically coherent justification of sample adequacy. Rather than reporting simply that saturation was achieved, researchers can explain how interpretation developed, how additional accounts affected the developing understanding, and why further engagement was no longer producing substantive transformation. For doctoral researchers, interpretive sufficiency provides a basis for discussing sample adequacy with supervisors and examiners in terms of the philosophical and methodological logic of the study. This can encourage researchers to demonstrate interpretive depth, coherence, maturity, contextual grounding, and reflexivity rather than relying primarily on a predetermined participant number or an assertion of saturation.

The concept also has implications for qualitative peer review. Reviewers may evaluate hermeneutic phenomenological sample adequacy by considering whether the interpretation demonstrates sufficient phenomenological depth, interpretive coherence, hermeneutic maturity, contextual resonance, and reflexive transparency, rather than automatically requiring evidence that saturation has been achieved. Such an approach would allow methodological quality to be evaluated according to the philosophical commitments of the methodology being used. At the same time, interpretive sufficiency should not become another universal methodological requirement. Its value lies precisely in its methodological specificity: it is proposed for inquiries whose central purpose is the interpretation and disclosure of lived meaning. Saturation remains relevant where theoretical or categorical completeness is the intended methodological goal.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This paper explored the problem of sample adequacy in hermeneutic phenomenological research and questioned the uncritical use of saturation as a universal criterion for determining when data generation should end. Although saturation remains appropriate within methodological traditions concerned with theoretical or conceptual development, its transfer into hermeneutic phenomenology can create tension with an interpretive orientation in which lived meaning is situated, relational, and open to further understanding. In response to this problem, the paper developed interpretive sufficiency of meaning as a philosophically coherent criterion for sample adequacy. Interpretive sufficiency refers to the point at which sustained engagement within the hermeneutic circle produces an interpretation that is sufficiently rich, coherent, contextually grounded, and phenomenologically illuminating to address the research question. It therefore concerns the sufficiency of interpretation rather than the exhaustion of meaning.

The paper further conceptualised interpretive sufficiency through five interrelated dimensions: phenomenological depth, interpretive coherence, hermeneutic maturity, contextual resonance, and reflexive transparency. These dimensions are not sequential stages or numerical thresholds. Rather, they provide complementary considerations through which researchers can assess whether their interpretation has developed sufficient maturity to support a defensible decision about continuing or concluding data generation. The central contribution is therefore methodological and philosophical. Interpretive sufficiency provides a way of justifying sample adequacy that is aligned with the interpretive commitments of hermeneutic phenomenology while avoiding the assumption that phenomenological meaning can be exhausted. It does not seek to replace saturation across qualitative research generally, but offers a methodology-specific criterion for inquiries concerned with the interpretation and disclosure of lived experience. Ultimately, the paper argues that criteria for methodological adequacy should be coherent with the philosophical assumptions of the methodology in which they are applied. For hermeneutic phenomenology, adequacy is better understood through the maturity and quality of interpretation than through the presumed exhaustion of new information.

5.2 Recommendations

Researchers undertaking hermeneutic phenomenological studies should consider interpretive sufficiency of meaning when justifying sample adequacy rather than relying automatically on saturation. Decisions to continue or conclude data generation should be supported by evidence of phenomenological depth, interpretive coherence, hermeneutic maturity, contextual resonance, and reflexive transparency. Researchers should also document how their interpretations develop throughout the hermeneutic process, including how new accounts confirm, challenge, refine, or transform the developing interpretation. This would make decisions about sample adequacy more transparent and philosophically defensible.

Supervisors and examiners of hermeneutic phenomenological research should evaluate sample adequacy in relation to the philosophical and methodological orientation of the study. Rather than treating a particular participant number or achievement of saturation as sufficient evidence of adequacy, they should consider the depth, coherence, maturity, contextual grounding, and reflexivity of the resulting interpretation. Qualitative reviewers and journal editors should avoid treating saturation as a universal requirement for hermeneutic phenomenological studies. Where researchers explicitly justify an alternative criterion such as interpretive sufficiency, assessment should focus on whether the criterion is philosophically coherent, transparently applied, and adequately supported by the interpretation. Future research should examine the applicability of interpretive sufficiency across different hermeneutic phenomenological studies and contexts. Empirical methodological studies could further explore how the five dimensions operate in practice and whether additional dimensions or indicators are necessary. Such research would help refine the framework and establish its usefulness as a criterion for sample adequacy in phenomenological inquiry.

Declaration of Interest

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