Hermeneutic Inquiry in the Study of Human Conduct

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ABSTRACT: Interest is growing in the hermeneutic or interpretive approach to the study of human conduct. This article draws upon the work of Martin Heidegger to compare hermeneutics with the other major paradigms of inquiry and explanation in psychology: rationalism (cognitivism and structuralism) and empiricism (experimentialism and behaviorism). The comparision is threefold: in terms of their view of the form and origin of knowledge, notions of the proper object of study, and the type of explanation each seeks. In the process, the three modes of engagement distinguished by Heidegger are described: the ready-to-hand, the unready-to-hand, and the present-at-hand. Finally, a study of moral conflicts is used as an example of the form a hermeneutic inquiry can take.

In recent years there has been increased questioning of the notion that research in psychology is, or can be, value free. More specifically, there is a growing interest in and curiosity about interpretive or hermeneutic research (e.g., Giddens, 1976; Hookway & Pettit, 1978; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979). Psychologists are showing a growing appreciation of the limitations of both causal empiricist and formal rationalist types of explanation, and hermeneutic theory and methodology can make significant contributions as an alternative paradigm (cf. Bernstein, 1983). My purpose here is to explicate the conceptual background of the hermeneutic approach.

Although hermeneutics is an ancient discipline (Palmer, 1969), its relevance to the human sciences in general, and to psychology in particular, stems largely from the work of Martin Heidegger. In his seminal work, Being and Time, Heidegger (1927/1962) proposed that the hermeneutic method is the appropriate approach for the study of human action. Many recent commentators on hermeneutics have relied on the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975). Gadamer was a student of Heidegger but differed from his mentor in significant ways. Most important, Gadamer failed to maintain Heidegger's distinctions among the practical, reflective, and theoretical modes of engagement. (Heidegger called them the ready-to-hand, unready-to-hand, and present-at-hand). As a consequence, some of the critiques of hermeneutics that have taken Gadamer's work as definitive (e.g., Habermas, 1977) cannot be regarded as final, nor can the claims by essentially rationalist psychologists that they are doing hermeneutics (e.g., Kohlberg, Levine, & Hewer, 1983). To understand hermeneutics, even if then to critique it, requires some familiarity with Heidegger's work.

Recent writers (Blasi, 1980; Locke, 1983) have noted that psychology lacks a method for studying the structure or organization of human action. As Locke (1983) wrote, "It is quite unclear how physical behavior, as such, can have a cognitive structure" (p. 14). The hermeneutic approach can make a particularly valuable contribution because it provides a way of understanding and studying action that is grounded in considering such action as having a semantic rather than a logical or causal organization. Human action is a complex and ambiguous phenomenon. An observer of a social interaction does not have direct, unproblematic access to the unambiguous "meaning" of the acts taking place, because people act in a situation that an observer does not share fully; furthermore they themselves do not comprehend all the pertinent aspects of their own actions. Any act, looked at in isolation from its situation, is likely to be ambiguous to the point of opacity or obscurity. For these reasons, a methodology for the study of action must be specifically tailored to its intricacies and peculiarities. The hermeneutic paradigm takes as its starting point the fact that, despite the ambiguities, any observer has a preliminary practical understanding of what the people studied are "up to." The broad outlines and the theoretical justification of such a methodology have been discussed recently by many writers, though the particular conception I shall describe here cannot be attributed to any specific writer (e.g., Bleicher, 1980; de Rivera, 1981; Gauld & Shottor, 1977; Giddens, 1976; Hookway & Pettit, 1978; McCarthy, 1978; Palmer, 1969; Polkinghorne, 1983; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979; Ricoeur, 1976; E. V. Sullivan, n.d.).

What Is Hermeneutics?

Heidegger proposed that hermeneutic phenomenology is the method of investigation most appropriate to the study of human action. This method is an innovative development of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (e.g., 1931). Hermeneutics involves an attempt to describe and study meaningful human phenomena in
a careful and detailed manner as free as possible from prior theoretical assumptions, based instead on practical understanding. What is meant by practical understanding will become clearer later. Heidegger's method is "hermeneutic" because there is a need for interpretation when one is explicating experience. Hermeneutics was originally a set of techniques for interpreting written texts. Initially it was developed for the examination of biblical texts, carried out to uncover and reconstruct the message from God that it was believed the texts contained but that had become hidden (the term refers to Hermes, messenger of the Greek gods, and himself god of eloquence and cunning as well as of roads and theft). Later it became generalized to a method of textual interpretation that was not restricted to religious works. With Schiermacher and Dilthey, it was generalized still further to apply also to human action (cf. Palmer, 1969). When we adopt a hermeneutic approach to human action, we essentially treat the action as though it has a semantic and "textual" structure. This different understanding of the nature of the "object" of inquiry is one of several differences between hermeneutics and the two currently dominant paradigms of investigation and explanation in the social sciences and in psychology in particular: the rationalist and the empiricist approaches. These differences are the topic of the body of this article.

We can best appreciate the character of the hermeneutic approach by comparing and contrasting it with these two other paradigms. Within rationalism lie structuralism and much of cognitive science; empiricism includes behaviorism and positivist experimentalism. I will contrast these three paradigms in three areas: their assumptions about the nature and origin of knowledge, the kind of object they set out to study, and the type of explanation they seek.

The Origin of Knowledge

Rationalism

The various forms of rationalist inquiry have a common view of the nature and source of knowledge: one that applies to both scientific research and ordinary activity. "Theorizing" is taken as primary for the generation of knowledge: An individual comes to know and act in the world through hypothesis generation and hypothesis testing. This is a central tenet of Piaget's genetic epistemology, for example. Even the sensorimotor intelligence of infancy, which precedes and grounds later operational and theoretical intelligence, proceeds, according to Piaget, by forms of trial and error that are equivalent to scientific experimentation in their basic motivation: the instrumental control of the environment.

Although this has a prima facie validity for logico-mathematical knowledge, structuralists generally consider that the social world becomes known in the same way. For example, Turiel (1983) maintained that social development is a process by which individuals generate understandings of the social world, by making inferences and forming theories about experienced social events. . . . The starting point [for cognitive–developmental research] is the premise that through their social experiences children develop ways of thinking, or theories, about the social world. . . . In coming to understand social systems, people act like social scientists, attempting to observe regularities and explain their existence. (pp. 1–2, emphasis added)

This position has its origins with Kant's transcendental idealism. Kant argued that human knowledge is governed by a set of a priori conditions that determine what can count as an "object" for the human mind. This conception that there are transcendental conditions that structure experience had its influences on Heidegger, but Kant adopted the additional, unargued claim that the a priori structures, the forms of representation, are essentially logical ones: categories, rules, concepts, and principles. For example, according to Kant (1977), "This thought space [i.e., the propositions of geometry] renders possible the physical space [of everyday experience]" (p. 32).

Not only is knowledge essentially deductive in the rationalist paradigm, but an increase or development of knowledge is viewed as proceeding in a logical manner. Both Chomsky (1959) and Piaget (1970) theorized that invariant developmental sequences stem from the inherent logic of the structures guiding theorizing activity, whether they are conceptualized as logico-mathematical schemes or as grammar-acquisition devices. The cognitivist notion of "learning procedures" similarly postulates formal procedures that, through information exchange with the environment, generate new internal structures corresponding to a new organization of knowledge. On such an account, knowledge is procedural and is arrived at through processes of theorizing or logical analysis.

Empiricism

According to the empiricist paradigm, in contrast, the grounding of knowledge for both investigator and human subject is provided by "brute data" observables. These "data" are considered to be facts about the world that can be identified and recorded in a manner free from interpretation. Within this paradigm, a key component of scientific inquiry is theory-free "data collection," which is considered prior to and logically independent of theory construction. In
the human subject, a similar passive accretion of knowledge is held to take place. This passive view of knowledge is now commonly rejected as a model of an organism’s functioning, but it continues to have an underground currency nonetheless, in an odd partnership with a version of rationalism. Computer models of human thought and behavior rely on the notion that there are atomistic “facts” about the world (“bits” of information and features and elements of categories) together with the view that knowledge is produced by means of formal processes. In information-processing models of speech, memory, and perception, context-free information is retrieved from storage or collected from input transducers and then is combined and manipulated by formal procedures.

Hermeneutics

In hermeneutic inquiry and the ontology that grounds it, the primary origin of knowledge is taken to be practical activity: direct, everyday practical involvement with tools, artifacts, and people. Such activity exists prior to any theorizing and has a character distinct from the latter. Most notably, it involves no context-free elements definable in the absence of interpretation. Practical activity also need not be (though it often is) instrumentally motivated. To lay out the hermeneutic interpretation of practical activity more fully—and it is a crucial aspect of interpretive inquiry—I will introduce Heidegger’s notion of modes of engagement.

The modes of engagement. Heidegger distinguished three distinct, though interrelated, modes of engagement or involvement that people have with their surroundings: the ready-to-hand, the unready-to-hand, and the present-at-hand modes.

The ready-to-hand mode of engagement is, for Heidegger, the basic one. This is the mode we are in when we are actively engaged in practical projects in the world, such as mailing a letter, talking to a friend, or, to use Heidegger’s favorite example, using a hammer. When we carry out such activities, our awareness is essentially holistic: We are aware of the situation we find ourselves in, not as an arrangement of discrete physical objects and not as a portion of the physical universe, but globally, as a whole network of interrelated projects, possible tasks, thwarted potentialities, and so forth. This network is not laid out explicitly, but it is present as a “background” to the project we are concerned with, and we can turn to aspects of the network and bring them into focus. There is no deliberate means–ends planning in this mode; indeed, any tools we may be using (and our own body) are not experienced as distinct entities that could be set into a means–ends framework: They “withdraw” in a special manner. When we are involved in ongoing practical activity, we have no need for focal awareness of ourselves and our tools: Both become fused into the activity. Our experience is not of the hammer, nor of the wood and nails as independent entities, but of the hammering, the raising of the wall, the constructing of a home.

The manner in which these aspects of a project are experienced is in turn structured by the personal and historical situation they are part of, so they are not “objectified,” either. Our experience alters as our needs change, and as our emotions structure and restructure our activity in the ready-to-hand mode. It is characteristic of practical activity that we are always already in a situation that, in turn, is structured by the concerns our action expresses. This relationship is not circular so much as it is a tailored fit: If my concern is to catch a train, my situation is organized so that aspects relevant to my concern stand out. The train station becomes salient, as does the time; trains run according to a schedule. Means of transportation stand forth, and I may start to experience the town in which I live in terms of shortest routes, one-way streets, blocks, and free-flowing traffic. My action, also, will manifest my concern in obvious ways: I will be searching for timetables, packing my suitcase, and checking my tickets. My emotion fits, too: I may be flustered and rushed, sad at the prospect of leaving, or excited at what is to come. My action and my situation fit each other, structured on the one hand by my concerns and on the other hand by social and personal styles and habitual practices.

The skills and practices we bring to our everyday activity are, for the most part, so overpracticed and familiar to us, so taken for granted, that we are simply unaware of their existence. We act within them, and they rarely, if ever, become problematic. We are not even aware of our ignorance of them. Indeed, if we were aware of them we would be overwhelmed and unable to continue to act. When driving a car, one very occasionally becomes explicitly aware of the various skills one is putting into practice: shifting gears, engaging and disengaging the clutch, glancing in the mirror, and so on. When this happens, one’s performance deteriorates rapidly. Generally, it is only when we reflect on what we are doing, prompted usually by confronting a problem, that we begin to see the network of interrelated practices, skills, and habits that supports all our apparently simple everyday actions.

The unready-to-hand mode is entered when we encounter some problem or upset in our practical activity. Perhaps we try to mail a letter and discover that the mailbox has been knocked down, or we have to struggle for the appropriate phrase in a conversation. Our experience changes as we become aware that there is a problem and then recognize something of its nature. The source of the breakdown of action now suddenly becomes salient, in a way it was not in the ready-to-hand mode. This source is still seen, however, as
an aspect of the project we are involved in, rather than as a context-free object. For example, my hammer may prove too heavy for the task I am engaged in. Its "weightiness" becomes salient whereas before it was transparent; but I am not aware of the objective "weight" of the hammer (so many pounds), only that it is "too heavy" to do its appointed job successfully. Experience in the unready-to-hand mode has a structure analogous to the figure-ground structure the Gestalt school found in visual experience: Particular aspects of the whole situation stand out but only against a background provided by the project we are engaged in and the interests and involvements guiding it (cf. de Rivera, 1976).

The present-at-hand mode is entered only when we detach ourselves from ongoing practical involvement in a project at hand, usually because we have been unable to find a direct and circumspect way of dealing with a problem that arose. On such occasions we have to "step back," reflect, and turn to more general and abstract (i.e., situation-independent) tools such as logical analysis and calculation in order to solve the problem. At this point our experience changes its character yet again, and we now become aware of, for example, the hammer as an independent entity, removed from all tasks we might pursue by its means, and as endowed with discrete and definite measurable properties, such as a mass, a weight, and a material. These properties are distinct from the situated aspects that characterize the unready-to-hand level, such as the hammer's heaviness.

The ready-to-hand mode, then, gives us the most primordial and direct access to human phenomena. The kind of access of the ready-to-hand mode—emotions, habitual practices, and skills—is radically distinct from the access to phenomena provided by theoretical reflection: "The ready-to-hand is not grasped theoretically at all" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 99). People both constitute and are constituted by cultural and bodily skills and practices with which they make tacit connection in their everyday activities. Heidegger devoted much of his energy in Being and Time to beginning a positive account (a hermeneutic interpretation) of the ready-to-hand mode. Because this is the mode of direct practical engagement in which we actually do much of our everyday living, this task amounts, for him, to the same as describing human being: and this being is itself a practical activity, rather than a special kind of entity or a formal predicate. This leads us to the question of what the character is of the proper object of inquiry in the study of action.

The Nature of the Object of Study

Rationalism

Structuralist inquiry explicitly isolates a special object of investigation. For example, de Saussure (1966) declared that language as an abstract system (la langue) was the focus of interest, not the speech of individuals in actual settings (la parole). Chomsky and Piaget have made equivalent moves; Chomsky (1957) distinguished the linguistic competence of an idealized speaker-hearer from actual language performance and identified the former as the proper object of study. Piaget (1970) traced intelligence as the construction of structures of growing abstraction and reversibility.

These research programs began with a deliberate neglect of the role and relevance of the context of occasions of actual performance. Much effort has been spent since then in trying to reconnect the abstract structures with actual speech and action, with little success. Structuralist linguists have tried to say how syntactic and semantic rules actually work in practice. Cognitive scientists have tried to mimic everyday understanding with rules and "scripts" (Schank & Abelson, 1970; Winograd, 1972). Both have been singularly lacking in success. Specific talk and action evade the rationalist approach, because once the methodological move is made of abstracting a system of formal rules from human action, an unbridgeable and artificial gulf appears between the two. The distinction between competence and performance is an artificial but inevitable consequence of the structuralist approach, and so it cannot be investigated from within that paradigm.

Empiricism

Behaviorism and experimentalism, on the other hand, focus directly on the interaction of organism and environment, but this interaction is regarded merely as the mechanical interplay of causal forces. The object of study here is a physical system, which operates through relations of cause and effect. Underlying this assumption is in turn a view that phenomena are constituted of isolable elements, which mingle and impinge upon each other but which can in principle be observed in isolation. Variables can be independently manipulated; stimuli are organism-independent properties of the physical environment, and so forth.

These two sets of presuppositions about the object of inquiry can be clearly seen in the way action has been regarded in the moral development literature. Blasi (1980) recently reviewed research on moral action and in doing so distinguished two conceptions, that acts have material causes and that they have formal reasons. These two correspond to behaviorist and social-learning approaches on the one hand, and cognitivist and constructivist approaches on the other. The first of the two—the behaviorist, empiricist paradigm—holds that action (actually behavior, for human action and physical movement are barely distinguished here) is the immediate result of causal forces. Causal entities (such as habits) and traits (such as per-
sonality variables and IQ) are assumed to operate in such a way that the resulting action is automatic and objectively determined. An act is the causal outcome of the mechanistic interaction of elemental, objective properties of the setting and the person. It is irrational, the automatically caused outcome of mechanistic processes. The stimulus and response account of classical behaviorism is the most obvious version of such a theory, but a similar view is found in the classical work on moral character by Hartshorne and May (1928), as well as in more recent research, such as that by Mischel and Mischel (1976).

The cognitive, rationalist paradigm, on the other hand, maintains that action is the result of rational and logical procedures. Action is mediated by cognitive processes such as reasoning, categorization, and evaluation, and cognition is necessarily involved behind and before action in the creation of meaning and the determination of truth. Action itself is essentially rational: Meanings are constructed by the logical evaluation of means and ends, based on information about the truth or falsehood of statements about the world. Action is determined, in the same way that a conclusion is determined from a set of premises, or a sentence from a set of grammatical and semantic rules. Situations are evaluated by the application of rules and principles, and the outcome of this process of appraisal determines the action to be performed. Piaget’s account of action is of this general form; Broughton (1981) summarized it in the following terms: “Action is the rational outcome of truth-oriented and reality-oriented judgments of facts and means/ends relationships” (p. 275).

Kohlberg’s latest account of moral action is essentially the same:

Moral action results from a three-step process. The first step is the making of a deontic judgment of rightness or justice in the situation. The second step is the making of a judgment that the self is responsible or accountable for carrying out this deontic judgment in the moral situation. The third step is carrying it out. (Kohlberg, Levine, & Hewer, 1983, p. 48)

Here again, theoretical judgments, based on rational assessments, are assumed to underly action that is simply “carried out” after its formal character has been planned.

Both the empiricist and the rationalist views can be criticized on three counts. First, they fail to provide a convincing description of more than a small number of actions; they represent extreme cases. Although we might all prefer to think that we always reflect and act rationally and logically, evaluating each situation that confronts us in a principled manner, this is only sometimes the case. It happens only when we have the time and ability to sit back and evaluate with detachment our situation and alternate courses of action. But when we do this, we have the special kind of involvement characteristic of the present-at-hand mode. And equally, we infrequently find our behavior caused simply by objective features of the environment: Sneezes, yawns, and other reflexes seem to exhaust this category. Again, it is possible to see everyday action this way only when one removes oneself from it as an active agent. The vast majority of our actions—all the interesting cases, I think—are characterized by the ready-to-hand and unready-to-hand modes rather than by the physical causation and logical determination that reflect the present-at-hand way of seeing things.

Second, both accounts misrepresent and oversimplify the relations that exist among an agent, his or her action, and an observer of that action. Behaviorism proceeds as though an observer has direct, transparent, and unproblematic perception of elements of behavior and can identify and record them objectively, without interpretation. Cognitivist have rightly criticized this view, but they make an equivalent mistake. Chomsky (1959) argued against the possibility of any simple, objective identification of behavior, because “one would naturally expect that prediction of the behavior of a complex organism (or machine) would require knowledge of the internal structure of the organism, the ways in which it processes input information and organizes its own behavior” (p. 13). However, when Chomsky discussed grammars and the rules that generate behavior, he assumed that action is a direct and transparent manifestation of an underlying conceptualization or representation: a “deep structure,” in the case of transformational theories of language behavior. So, although Chomsky granted that an observer must make inferences about hidden structure in order to study behavior, the agent’s knowledge itself is taken to be organized in a formal, transparent, and unambiguous manner, like a computer program. Such an account has no place for all the peculiar phenomena having to do with agents’ knowledge of their own actions: phenomena as complex as weakness of the will, self-deception, and akrasia, and as simple and commonplace as the ambiguity and polysemy to interpretation that every action shows.

Third, behaviorism and cognitivism have a common, inadequate conception of the nature of the world, of how reality is given to us. Dreyfus (1979) summarized this ontological assumption as follows:

It has proved profitable to think of the physical universe as a set of independent interacting elements. The ontological assumption that the human world too can be treated in terms of a set of elements gains plausibility when one fails to distinguish between world and universe, or what comes to the same thing, between the human situation and the state of a physical system. (p. 213)

Both the stimuli and responses of behaviorism and the features and categories of cognitivism are expres-
sions of a view that reality—the human world as well as the physical universe—is composed of context-independent, interpretation-free elements that are only later combined, compared, contrasted, and collated by logical, formal, context-free rules of inference, deduction, calculation, and generation—or, more simply, that interact according to causal forces that can be described in terms of such rules (Shwed, 1982). For example, sociobiologist Edmund Wilson (Lumsden & Wilson, 1983) has talked recently of “cultur-ogens” of behavior, which are supposedly independent of one another, can be studied individually, and are biologically based.

**Hermeneutics**

The object of study in hermeneutic inquiry is neither an abstract system of relations nor a mechanical system of forces but rather the semantic or textual structure of everyday practical activity. The ready-to-hand mode of engagement is the starting place for herme- neutic inquiry.

What the hermeneutic investigator studies, then, is what people actually do when they are engaged in the everyday practical tasks of life rather than in the detached contemplation that characterizes pencil-and-paper tasks and most interview situations. Interviewing tells us primarily about the present-at-hand mode, because an interviewee is encouraged to adopt a reflective, disengaged attitude to the topic of discussion. If we are to gain understanding of everyday practical activity, we must examine what people actually do in practical circumstances, not what they speculate that they, or fictional others, might do in a hypothetical situation. Such a methodological stance is not restricted only to hermeneutics; as Broughton (1982) pointed out, Piaget’s conception of the relationship between thought and action, though different from Heidegger’s, logically calls for action rather than judgments about hypothetical stories as the object of inquiry. Yet the clinical interview, often about hypo- thetical situations, has become the staple of structur- alist practice. Although Piaget used hypothetical interviews himself, he was aware of their limitations (“[When a child] simply has stories told to him, he will be led to make judgements devoid of pity and lacking in psychological insight . . . whereas in real life he would undoubtedly sympathize with those who from afar he regards as the greatest sinners” [Piaget, 1965, p. 185]).

What is unique to hermeneutics is the character that practical action is taken to have. I have said that it is semantic or textual, rather than abstract or causal. As social agents ourselves, we always find meaning in a course of action, not by abstracting from it a logical structure but by understanding what human purposes and interests the action serves. Hermeneutics is concerned with meaning, as a sensibleness that can be found to be present or absent in a course of action or in an account of that action. This explication of meaning has several distinct characteristics.

The first characteristic of practical activity, in the hermeneutic account, is that it is perspectival: From one point of view it may seem sensible, whereas from another it may not. From one perspective an action has one meaning, from a different perspective it has another. Social action is understood by people in a manner that is influenced by their own interests and projects and is just not available in the same way to an objective, detached, and disinterested observer (indeed, from the hermeneutic point of view, such a stance is not possible). This plurivocality, this openness to several interpretations, does not lead into total subjectivism, however; there is not a total lack of constraint on the alternative ways of understanding a given act. Our understanding of action seems rather like our perception of multistable visual figures: Each act is seen predominantly in only a few alternative ways, corresponding to the typical contexts of its occurrence. The action of handing a woman a flower may be a peace offering, a bribe, or a gesture of appreciation, but not (or not usually) a threat, the giving of advice, or the making of a dental appointment.

Second, practical activity has a holistic character: Understanding a particular act is not possible without understanding the context within which it occurs. The ready-to-hand mode involves a complexly woven network that Heidegger called the **referential totality**. Action and situation fit together hand in glove in this mode: A situation is experienced primarily as the actual, possible, and thwarted relevant actions, and action in turn is experienced in terms of its fittingness and appropriateness to the task at hand (de Rivera, 1976). Heidegger used the example of the workshop. When we sit at the workbench with a project before us, we find ourselves in a gestalt of courses of action: cutting a wire, drilling a board, soldering a joint. If we do not own an electric drill, certain actions are blocked, although alternatives are possible. We have a constant sense of where we have brought the project and where we are taking it, with a consequent feeling of pride and satisfaction or frustration. This network of actions melds into a background of diffuse cultural and bodily practices that are taken for granted and as a consequence ordinarily go unnoticed. There are conventions for making electric connections; screws and bolts ordinarily have threads with an orientation derived from the common practices of handedness; we have practiced ways of orienting and comporting ourselves as we work that are taken for granted until they break down (fatigue develops or an injury occurs). Any single act that is performed in the workshop—soldering a resistor into a stereo amplifier, for example—is understood in terms of all these layers.

This dependence of the “facts” of human phe-
nominal entities and objects. In the present-at-hand mode, our experience is of detached, object-like entities, removed from the activities they were part of and from the people who were involved with them. Such entities may be material things: Tools such as the hammer become mere physical objects. They may be characteristics of the world: Valencies and directions around us become reduced to metric, measurable dimensions. They may be facets of people: Situated responsibilities such as the cares and concerns a man has for his son get reified and rigidified into "roles," where "father" and "son" possess prescribed and explicit values and characteristics that are seen as though they can be isolated from the person's concrete circumstances and from the culture in which that person lives. Heidegger proposed that it is the structure of experience in the present-at-hand mode that is behind the ontological assumption common to both empiricism and rationalism. Both of these paradigms give priority to detached theoretical reflection, and it is when we give credence only to the present-at-hand mode that we mistakenly identify the human world with the physical universe, human action with mechanical processes, and knowledge with formal procedures.

If Heidegger's view is correct, we understand human action—and act ourselves—within a background of practices (bodily, personal, and cultural) that is always present, although it can never be made fully explicit. To attempt analytically to do away with this background and treat human acts as though they are object-like entities is a methodological error, because it would be to remove the conditions for genuine comprehension of the phenomena being studied. Our interests and involvements, our habits and our cultural practices, play a constitutive role for the entities and events that we create and experience around us. In practice, researchers working within the rationalist and empiricist paradigms also employ practical understanding of what they study, but they do so uncritically and unsystematically, because their respective schools of thought minimize the importance of this form of knowledge. Heidegger's argument implies that a structuralist researcher can develop so-called objective knowledge only by employing involved practical understanding, but at the same time, the researcher views this understanding as secondary and unreliable or as irrelevant to the goals of scientific inquiry. The hermeneutic paradigm provides an alternative to the objectivist epistemology common to both empiricist and rationalist paradigms and at the same time gives an account of the origin of that epistemology and the distortions inherent in it.

Type of Explanation

Each of the three paradigms seeks a particular type of explanation that fits its conception of that object of inquiry and of the origin of knowledge.
Rationalism

The type of explanation that rationalist approaches seek is one of formal characterization. Structuralism, for example, comprises two main camps differing primarily in the kind of formalism employed. The first is the original de Saussurian version, in which binary oppositions and systems of differences are sought (Pettit, 1975). For example, phonemes are defined in terms of minimal differences between sound pairs: [p] and [b] differ in their voicing but have identical places of articulation. By extension, semantic units are sought in terms of conceptual differences between terms: sister and mother differ in their family relations but are identical in gender. The second form of structuralism is the Piagetian kind where mathematical and logical structures (groups, rings, etc., characterized primarily by operations of transformation) are the model of explanation (Piaget, 1970). In either case the aim is to characterize human phenomena (language; logico-mathematical knowledge) as formal structures, where logical rules operate on abstract elements whose only “context” is the formal system they define. All reference to the occasions of actual use or occurrence is deemed irrelevant to the extension of these elements and to the explanations that make use of them.

Chomsky’s structuralist linguistics has the same fundamental aims and is a development from de Saussure’s beginnings (Pettit, 1975). A generative grammar is a set of recursive syntactic rules that operate on linguistic elements, defined in terms of their abstract features. Even when constructing the semantic component of a transformational grammar, the linguist attempts to analyze word meaning into a combination of elements and features that are independent of the context of actual speech—indeed, that are often intended to be culture independent. The attempt is made to reduce “meaning” to isolable, interpretation-free elements and formal rules.

Similarly, cognitive science (artificial intelligence, cognitive psychology) generally seeks explanations that take the form of algorithms or procedures that “model” phenomena. Computer programs are rationalist in the form of their operation: Logical rules (ultimately, rules of binary addition) operate upon abstract elements (“bits” or “variables,” depending on the level of description).

Empiricism

The empiricist approach to explanation is, in contrast, to seek covering laws that reflect the regularities of co-occurrence of observables. The laws are not logical rules but statements that express causal and empirical contingencies. In behaviorism, for example, laws are sought that link observed “stimuli” and “responses” in a straightforward causal manner. Those psychologists who work within this paradigm have adopted one of the tenets of positivism that “an explanation is not fully adequate unless its explanans [what is doing the explaining], if taken account of in time, could have served as a basis for predicting the phenomenon under consideration” (Hempel & Oppenheim, 1948, p. 138, emphasis added). That is to say, “the goals of inquiry—explanation and prediction—are identical, as is the form in which they are realized: the subsumption of individual cases under hypothetically proposed general laws” (McCarthy, 1978, p. 138). These general laws, which take the form of statements that certain events would occur given the existence of specified necessary initial conditions, should allow both explanation of the occurrence of a past event (working backward to argue that the initial conditions must have been present) and also prediction of future occurrences (working forward to argue from observing the presence of the causal or predisposing initial conditions). This search for prediction has been traced back to our instrumental interest in bringing phenomena under control in order to understand them (Habermas, 1971).

Another version of the positivist form of explanation underlies experimental design and statistical analysis. The appeal to manipulable variables and dependent measures assumes a network of connections that are causal and predictable. It is designed to generate an empiricist kind of explanation. Statistical correlation and probabilistic association replace the rigid causal laws of classical physics, but the overall goals for explanation are unchanged. Although we teach that “correlation is not the same as causation,” we do this to stress that inference about the presence of causal relationships must proceed with care, not that correlational connections are epistemologically distinct from causal ones.

Hermeneutics

In contrast to both formal structures and causal laws, the hermeneutic approach seeks to elucidate and make explicit our practical understanding of human actions by providing an interpretation of them. It is a historically situated approach, regarding explanation as first and foremost the giving of an account that is sensible in the way it addresses current interests and concerns, not a search for timeless and ahistorical laws and formal structures.

In an interpretation, accounts are given of events and actions, principally in narrative, natural language form. There is an architeconic, a structure, to such accounts, but it is one whose elements are not context free in their identification and definition. The hermeneutic approach recognizes that issues of understanding and interpretation arise in the very observation and identification of “data” (McCarthy, 1978) and that there is more to this than a simple statement.
that data are "theory laden" (Dreyfus, 1980). The structure of a hermeneutic characterization is a semantic one, not a logical or causal one: Its relationships are meaningful ones, sensible and necessary, but only in terms of the particular historical and cultural situation under investigation.

The character of hermeneutic accounts. Developing an interpretation has a well-defined relationship with the three modes of engagement. In the ready-to-hand mode, we have an ongoing understanding of a situation. (More accurately, we have an understanding of ourselves and a disclosure of the situation, but I am glossing over this and several other Heideggerian distinctions here. Human agents are reflexive: Our acts reflect and express a grasp of the situation we find ourselves in, together with a tacit understanding of what we are as we act.) This ready-to-hand understanding is ontologically fundamental, prior to, and distinct from explicit propositional knowledge. It is the grounding for all interpretation. When we begin circumspexion in the unready-to-hand mode, then we begin interpreting. There is not enough space here to give a full account of the several characteristics of interpretation that Heidegger described. Such an account would need to lay out in detail the relationship of interpretation to understanding; it must suffice here simply to state that interpretation is "the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 189). Heidegger further argued that "the 'world' which has already been understood comes to be interpreted. The ready-to-hand comes explicitly into ... sight" (p. 189). However, if we push interpretation into the present-at-hand mode, we find ourselves left with "assertions": context-free propositions about abstract objects and their predicates. Our understanding in the ready-to-hand mode is prepredicative, and assertion is a derivative and privative form of interpretation. Interpretation continues to make reference to the historical and personal background, whereas assertion ignores it. "The ready-to-hand is always understood in terms of a totality of involvements" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 191).

The ready-to-hand mode is in two respects actually the starting point for the hermeneutic investigation of human action. First, the ready-to-hand mode is the proper object of inquiry for such an investigation. Second, it is the primary source of a researcher's understanding of whatever he or she is studying. Our skillful recognition of social acts, our emotional evaluations, inform us when we observe and study people and their actions. Dreyfus (1979) put it in the following terms: "In general, we have an implicit understanding of the human situation which provides the context in which we encounter specific facts and make them explicit." The hermeneutic method aims at a progressive uncovering and explication (which is, of course, never fully completed) of the researcher's practical understanding of what is being studied. This in turn involves becoming more aware of some of the interests, habits, and practices that form the background against which the phenomena appear and take form.

The hermeneutic method, then, employs a detailed, progressive description of episodes of social interchange and gradually articulates more and more of their organization. The grounding of interpretation in ready-to-hand understanding should not suggest that such an understanding is fully trustworthy (free from contradictions or from personal bias), but simply that there is no place to begin an inquiry other than with this practical, everyday understanding. However, everyday action is generally taken for granted and goes unexamined. We understand people so facilely, ordinarily, that we fail to appreciate the complexity of what we understand, its implications for psychology, or what concerns we have when we interact with others. One task of the hermeneutic method is to push this understanding into the unready-to-hand mode and thereby make it accessible to thematic description. One way in which this is done is by attending to what is problematic in the original understanding: the lacunae, the gaps, and the contradictions that, in our everyday practice, we habitually gloss over (cf. Cicourel, 1964). Focusing on these has the consequence of bringing to light those aspects of the interaction that we do understand. Significant details of the events being interpreted become "lit up." When we do this, we frequently find that practical activity is confusing, ambiguous, and contradictory and requires some kind of work to be understood, some kind of clarification and elucidation. Our understanding of a person's action (like a written text) is never comprehensive or straightforward at the outset. Some sort of articulation and correction of our understanding is necessary, and a hermeneutic inquiry undertakes this in a systematic and coherent manner.

The resulting interpretation has the potential to be what Giddens (1976) called "revelatory": It can go beyond what our original, unreflective understanding showed us and also beyond what the agents report they were doing. At the same time, it must attempt to explain why agent and observer initially failed to grasp certain aspects of what occurred. Hermeneutics thus avoids the subjectivism that could result from building an explanation entirely upon agents' own accounts of their actions (though it has to face some equally complex issues). This is because reflection—even by agents themselves—is never considered incorrigible or complete. Understanding is not seen as a "searchlight" that scans over a field of potential knowledge but rather as a kind of appreciation that is necessarily partial (in both senses of the word: incomplete and with its own point of view).

I have said that a hermeneutic explanation will
be neither causally predictive nor formally generative, and the reason for this should now be clear: Causal laws and formal logic characterize our knowledge in the present-at-hand mode, whereas interpretation is an articulation of ready-to-hand practical understanding. The structures of action and ready-to-hand experience are not formal or causal ones but meaningful ones. In their most unproblematic character, prior to reflection, they are holistic and dynamic. For example, emotions, as we experience them, are holistic gestalts that move us to action and restructure our entire situation (Sartre, 1948; Solomon, 1980). When we reflect upon them in the unready-to-hand mode, we can distinguish different regions of movement and interrelations among families of emotion (de Rivera, 1977). We can proceed further still and strip away the flesh of experienced emotions and consider them theoretically, as caused and causal “states”, as sets of “components”—physiological processes, facial expressions, and so on—as have many theorists, from James (1890) to Arnold (1968) and Ekman (1980). These formal and mechanical accounts are not without utility, but they would not be possible at all if we did not all have a prerelative understanding of emotion. Without the direct experience of emotions, we could have no theoretical structuralist or causal account of affect, yet the structure of this practical experience itself is neither a formal nor a causal one (Zajonc, 1980).

Illustrating Hermeneutic Analysis

I recently conducted an interpretive study of moral conflicts between young adults, and an account of this study can serve to illustrate some aspects of hermeneutic methodology. The research is described in detail elsewhere (Packer, 1985), and here I necessarily summarize and condense the course of the interpretive work. The conflicts were ones that developed between college students—groups of friends—as they took part in a modified version of the Prisoners’ Dilemma Game (Luce & Raiffa, 1957).

I wanted to look at the details of the students’ social interaction during the conflicts in a manner as free as possible from both causal and rational preconceptions. But any hermeneutic inquiry begins with a preliminary and tentative reunderstanding of what is to be studied, of the question being asked, and of what will count as an answer to this question. I needed, then, some preliminary path that would grant me access to their interaction as ready-to-hand practical activity, and to this end I borrowed from recent phenomenological studies of emotion (especially de Rivera, 1977; and Solomon, 1983), from Aristotle’s analysis of the rhetorical or persuasive character of discourse (Aristotle, 1954), and from Heidegger’s description of emotion and mood as forms of disclosure in the ready-to-hand mode. Together, these pointed to three different aspects of social interaction: the moral status ascribed to themselves and others as they acted, the kind of interpersonal intimacy their actions produced or maintained, and the “mythology” of their talk—what it was about.

I now had a threefold scheme to guide my study of the conflicts. Using video recordings, I followed these three aspects, trying to understand why people acted as they did, if, as I assumed, they were neither caused to do so nor were they following logical principles or scripts. The young people I was trying to understand typically made an agreement to cooperate, broke the agreement, responded to this “burning” with amusement and pleasure on the one hand, and outrage and withdrawal on the other, and found themselves faced with a protracted breakdown of joint action. In the course of describing as fully as possible the way I understood (or failed to understand) this breakdown, I came to see a distinction between the concerns that underlay interpersonal action in its moral status and intimacy aspects, and the issues that the young adults were ostensibly talking—and disagreeing—about. Whereas the concerns—over trust and responsibility—were moral and valuative, the issues—generally the number of game points won and lost during the burning—were on the face of it factual and pragmatic. The concerns were acted upon but not voiced. They played a central role in the ready-to-hand activity of the conflict but were not at first articulated in the accounts people gave one another. The following transcript, for example, is of a heated conversation between Len (on the losing, and burned, team) and Bob (one of the burners). The issue they talked about was how many points should be paid back, but concerns of status and responsibility were evident throughout the exchange:

Len: No! We want . . . [He raises his index finger in emphasis.]
Bob: You want? [He is incredulous. His teammates laugh.]
Len: No, listen . . .
Bob: [Interrupting] You’re not in much of a position to demand . . .
Len: [Interrupting] No, listen, listen. We want four rounds where we get to use four and you guys go zero. That’s the first four. And then the fifth one, we’ll, we’re willing to go zero, zero every time. You guys violated the trust, not us.
Bob: That’s pretty stupid.
Len: Right now we’ll just go four, four every time . . .

Terms like “a position to demand,” “violation of trust,” and “stupid” point up the concerns, but the issue the two men squabbled over was one of points owed and lost. Though they talked of “trust,” this concern was reduced to a pragmatic and factual issue: the number of times competitive play occurred.
An incommensurability in ways of understanding the conflict also became apparent; this too can be seen in the example above. The two teams in the conflict, the burned and the burners, understood events very differently, but they were not themselves aware that their understanding was not shared; it was so self-evident that it could not be doubted. I gradually came to see that these ways of understanding were grounded, first, in the emotions that followed the burning and, more deeply, in the situation people found themselves in at the start of the session, as well as in the background of their friendships. At the beginning of each session, the two teams had, essentially randomly, found themselves “winners” and “losers,” with a large disparity in points. This gave the teams different interests and aims, and these in turn led first to the burning, then to different ways of understanding “the facts” of what had happened.

Next, I began to see people deliberating about the events of the burning and giving fresh accounts of “the facts.” Their deliberation was motivated by the practical need to influence recalcitrant others. The accounts developed from global, undifferentiated reports (“you blew it,” “you’re so illogical”) to more articulated accounts of the circumstances of the burning (rather than of principles justifying or denouncing it). Three phases were distinguishable here, although groups differed in how far they went. As they negotiated, the young adults eventually came to recognize that theirs was not the only way to understand events. Their accounts began to take a conditional form (“We were going to . . .”). Then they began to articulate the grounds for their understanding, no longer able to leave it unquestioned. One team went so far as to bring up the disparity in points, the breaking of trust, and the teams’ different aims. Their own accounts were of topics that I could also identify as concerns at work in their action.

What differences are there, then, between this investigation and what a structuralist or behaviorist would do with the same subject matter? Most obviously, I used no fixed and precisely defined categories of events: The identification of aspects of the interaction was allowed to develop as they were studied. Second, the relationships I uncovered among these aspects were not quantified co-occurrences or logical links. I ended up unable to predict the precise form future conflicts might take (the conflicts differed in ways I did not seek causes for) and unable to “model” such conflicts with a computer program. I had, however, a greatly increased and differentiated sensitivity to the concerns at work in such conflicts.

Several more specific differences can be seen. First is the treatment of the distinction between unreflective activity (and its attendant concerns) and more or less deliberated accounts (with their issues). The distinction seems rarely to be made by behavioralists; if it is, the accounts are typically seen as mere rationalization. Although structuralists may distinguish between the form and function of an act, between semantics and pragmatics, they attempt to describe each in formal terms, whereas I tried to spell out the relation between action and reflection as a socially motivated articulation of one’s grounds for acting—an articulation that requires a certain suspension and questioning of those grounds.

The hermeneutic approach is sensitive to both purposive and unintended covering up; interpretation will on occasion identify disavowed motivational elements of action (Fingarette, 1969). It also attends to discrepancies between intended and unintended consequences of action: What we intend when we act is often not what actually happens, because of mistakes on our part, misunderstandings on the part of others, and unanticipated or ambiguous aspects of the situation. Awareness of such characteristics of human action requires a willingness to take emotion seriously as a mode of understanding and as a structuring of action, which is also, I believe, unique to hermeneutically oriented approaches.

A further unique characteristic of hermeneutic inquiry is its openly dialogical nature: the returning to the object of inquiry again and again, each time with an increased understanding and a more complete interpretive account. An initial understanding becomes refined and corrected by the work of interpretation; fresh questions are raised that can be answered only by returning to the events studied and revising the interpretation. This dialogical character means that we must generally employ some way of recording what we are studying—audio- or video-recording it, or at least making detailed field notes—so we can return to it to check out and correct our interpretations. Developing a new interpretation will often change the very form of the “facts” we are dealing with; we shall view our recording in a new way, as fresh aspects of the conduct leap to the foreground. We must be willing to go through experiences much like the young adults I have described, suddenly discovering that our taken-for-granted way of understanding is only one partial way among many. Both rationalism and behaviorism, in contrast, so constrain the way their data is approached that, although formal and causal explanations can be attempted after the fact to explain the various phenomena in the moral conflicts that I have briefly described here, the actual discovery of these phenomena is unlikely, perhaps impossible, within their objectivist frameworks.

The difference between a rationalist or empiricist explanation and a hermeneutic interpretation is a little like the difference between a map of a city and an account of that city by someone who lives in it and walks its streets. The map is the product of detached description (though the description relies on kinds of
direct practical involvement, guided by specialized tools and instruments—measuring rods, theodolites—whose role is covered up when the map is finally drawn). Different maps will emphasize different aspects of the city: its street layout, its transportation, or its phone lines. However, all these maps are abstract formalizations, capturing only those features of the place that would be unchanged if no one lived there. They are designed to serve a stranger to the city as much as—perhaps more than—a resident. The account one would give of living in a city on a daily basis, on the other hand, is likely to be personal, incomplete, and prejudiced. Therein lies its usefulness to a newcomer who has come to stay or (to make the simile more accurate) to someone who already lives in the city, but now wishes to get to know it better and to live it more fully. The professional mapmaker must regard a city as merely a juxtaposition of physical objects. For its inhabitants, it is a system of possibilities and resources, frustrations and obstacles, and two people will find both commonalities and differences in their accounts of it.

Conclusion

I have tried to show, by argument and by illustration, how psychologists can profitably use a hermeneutic approach in their study of human conduct. Such an approach considers action and social intercourse in the rich complexity that we all, in our everyday dealings, know them to have. It does not provide the forms of explanation that we have been taught to consider characteristic of scientific rigor, and some will reject it on this basis. The end product of a hermeneutic inquiry—an interpretive account—is more modest in its aims than is a formal set of rules or a causal law, but at the same time it is, I believe, subtle and complex, intellectually satisfying, and more appropriate to human action, embracing the historical openness, the ambiguity and opacity, the deceptions, dangers, and delights that action manifests.

I know I have not done justice to hermeneutics in this brief summary; its philosophy is an involved one, and I have dealt briefly with complex issues in comparing it with the currently dominant paradigms of inquiry. It is also barely possible to give a flavor of the practice of interpretation by merely discussing an example excerpted from a much larger analysis and presented in isolation. I hope, however, that I have been able to convey a little of the fascination and satisfaction that I have found in this new approach and that my discussion will encourage others to explore the growing literature on hermeneutic methodology.

REFERENCES