

## Reinterpreting the Member Checking Validation Strategy in Qualitative Research Through the Hermeneutics Lens

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### Abstract

This review proposes that exploring hermeneutics could reveal significant potential for reassessing the essence and structure of qualitative research, particularly in refining validation methods like member-checking. This inquiry suggests that embracing a hermeneutic perspective might provide fresh insights into how we understand and validate qualitative data, potentially enhancing our comprehension and improving the robustness of research practices in this field. The review is divided into multiple sections and subsections to build the argument that the hermeneutic viewpoint offers greater explanatory and exploratory potential for guiding specific validation strategies, such as member-checking, in qualitative research. This review's main argument begins with an overview detailing which aspects and how-aspects of qualitative research and its validation strategies. Subsequently, this review delves into the member-checking strategy as a central validation approach in high-quality qualitative research. The review then introduces hermeneutics within the qualitative research paradigm. Moreover, the present review explores how hermeneutics can serve as a tool for thinking in research endeavors. Finally, the current review integrates the focus on member-checking with the perspective of hermeneutics to achieve a broader and more holistic understanding. Concluding remarks and research-based implications are offered for the use of future qualitative researchers.

### Keywords

qualitative research, hermeneutics, member-checking

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## Introduction

### *Justification for the review*

The present review posits an intriguing hypothesis: delving into the realm of hermeneutics could unveil significant potential in reevaluating the essence and framework of qualitative research (Paterson & Higgs, 2005; Reiter, 2006; Thirsk & Clark, 2017), focusing on refining validation methodologies like *member-checking*. Member checking, also known as participant validation, is a strategy in qualitative research where researchers return to participants to verify the accuracy of the data, findings, and interpretations derived from their interviews or observations. This process ensures that the participants' perspectives are accurately represented and can help identify misinterpretations or biases. It enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the study by involving participants in validating the research outcomes. This exploration suggests that adopting a hermeneutic perspective may offer fresh insights into how we perceive and validate qualitative data, potentially enriching our understanding and enhancing the rigor of research practices in this domain (Gillo, 2021; Peck & Mummery, 2018; Rennie, 2012). The hypothesized linkage between the hermeneutics perspective and qualitative research and its core validation strategies can be justified in many ways (Crowther et al., 2017; Ramsook, 2018). First, the relevance of linkage may be rooted in the premise that every form of communication, whether written, spoken, or even visual, involves some level of interpretation. Hermeneutics is not just an academic or philosophical but a practical tool used in interpreting everyday communications—from reading news articles and interpreting legal documents to understanding personal emails and social media posts or participants' verbal externalizations given during a one-to-one interview within a naturalistic inquiry (Roberge, 2011).

Secondly, hermeneutics is essentially about delving deeper into texts (e.g., the utterances of a participant in qualitative research) to extract meanings that are not immediately apparent. It advocates for a thoughtful engagement with texts (e.g., written reflections of a participant within a case study), suggesting that understanding comes from a superficial reading and a careful interpretation that considers multiple dimensions, such as the author's intent, the cultural context, and the intended audience. This is also primarily valid for qualitative research (Kutsyuruba & McWatters, 2023; McCaffrey et al., 2012; Nigar, 2020). To justify, from a qualitative research perspective, the above-located statement underscores the importance of approaching texts with a nuanced and thorough examination. It implies a methodology that involves delving beyond the surface of the text to unearth more profound layers of meaning. This approach suggests that comprehension arises not solely from skimming the text but from an intricate analysis that considers various facets, including the author's purpose, the socio-cultural backdrop in which the text was produced, and the target audience. In qualitative research, this perspective aligns with methodologies like thematic analysis or grounded theory, which emphasize exploring multiple dimensions to derive rich insights from the data (Kakkori, 2009).

In addition, hermeneutics underscores equipping individuals with the skills to navigate the complex world of information by fostering a critical approach to reading and understanding

texts. This is crucial in an era characterized by information overload, where the ability to discern and interpret accurately is increasingly essential. From the perspective of validation strategies in qualitative studies, this highlights the relevance of hermeneutics in enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of research findings (Anderson, 2014). Hermeneutic approaches emphasize developing skills necessary for robust interpretation and analysis of textual data. Researchers can ensure the accuracy and reliability of their interpretations by employing techniques such as member checking, peer debriefing, and prolonged engagement. In information overload within a qualitative research program, distinguishing between credible and unreliable sources is paramount; hermeneutic validation strategies enable researchers to cultivate a critical mindset among participants and readers alike (Shaw & DeForge, 2014). This fosters a rigorous approach to textual analysis, essential for generating meaningful insights and contributing to advancing knowledge in qualitative research characterized by abundant information (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991).

#### *Structure of the review*

The present review includes several sections and sub-sections to develop the argument that the hermeneutics perspective holds greater explanatory and exploratory potential for informing specific validation strategies such as member-checking conducted in qualitative research. The review, therefore, starts with an outline incorporating what aspects and how-aspects of qualitative research and its validation strategies. The review's focus, which is the member-checking strategy as a core validation strategy in high-quality qualitative research, is then presented. From the perspective of the current review, hermeneutics is outlined in the qualitative research paradigm. In the following episodes, the review addresses how hermeneutics can be considered and used as a thinking tool for research purposes. Finally, the focus (the member-checking strategy) and the study's perspective (the hermeneutics) are combined to reach a broader and holistic understanding.

### **Researchers' Understanding and Position Regarding Qualitative Research Perspectives**

Before presenting a comprehensive insight into qualitative research, at least three overarching and guiding perspectives are introduced to take a rational position in combining the propositions of hermeneutics perspective and member-checking strategy. We believe that "realist," "constructivist," and "social constructivist" qualitative research perspectives inform qualitative researchers who may have different research purposes for uncovering reality within a naturalistic inquiry (Madill et al., 2000). Realist qualitative research is grounded in the assumption that an objective reality exists independently of human perceptions and beliefs (Maxwell, 2012). This perspective holds that phenomena can be observed, measured, and understood as they indeed are. The realist approach accepts some epistemological underpinnings: knowledge reflects the objective reality, and researchers can uncover this reality through careful observation and systematic inquiry. Therefore, emphasis is placed on the accuracy and validity of findings, striving for objectivity (Danermark et al., 2002). From the realist perspective, once objectivity is centralized, the values and biases of the researcher are seen as potential threats to objectivity and should be controlled or minimized.

Ethical considerations focus on maintaining neutrality and avoiding influencing the data or participants. Realist research often employs logical positivist methods, including systematic data collection and analysis techniques. From this perspective, findings are expected to be replicable and generalizable in similar contexts or populations. Realist qualitative researchers often use structured interviews, standardized observation protocols, and other data-gathering strategies that aim to limit researcher influence. Therefore, data analysis identifies patterns and relationships that reflect the underlying reality. Examples of realist methodologies include content analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

On the other hand, the constructivist perspective posits that reality is socially constructed and multiple realities exist (Fox, 2008). In this perspective, it is well-accepted that individual experiences and perspectives shape how reality is perceived and understood (Costantino, 2008; Schwandt, 1994). Therefore, the epistemology of the constructivist perspective incorporates specific assumptions, such as knowledge being seen as subjective and co-constructed between the researcher and participants or understanding is achieved through exploring the meanings and interpretations that individuals assign to their experiences. The axiology of the constructivist perspective contends that the values and perspectives of both the researcher and participants are acknowledged as integral to the research process, and reflexivity is emphasized, with researchers continuously reflecting on how their background and biases influence the study (Merriam, 1998). Constructivist research employs flexible and iterative methods that allow for the exploration of participants' lived experiences. The focus is on depth of understanding rather than generalizability. Qualitative researchers adapting to a constructivist perspective often use open-ended interviews, participant observation, and other methods that facilitate deep engagement with participants (Moustakas, 1994). Data analysis involves thematic coding and narrative analysis to uncover the meanings and interpretations of participants. Constructivist methodologies include phenomenology and narrative inquiry.

Moreover, social-constructivist qualitative research holds that reality is constructed through social interactions and shared understandings (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen & Gergen, 2003). Socio-cultural theorists (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991) contend that this qualitative research perspective emphasizes the role of culture, language, and context in shaping how individuals perceive and construct reality. In epistemic terms, within the socio-constructivist perspective, knowledge is believed to be a product of social processes and interactions. Hence, understanding is achieved by exploring how social contexts and relationships influence individual and collective meaning-making (Burr, 2003). Axiologically, a socio-constructivist researcher accepted that values, beliefs, and power dynamics within the social context are integral to the research process (Andrews, 2012). Therefore, researchers are encouraged to be aware of and critically examine the socio-cultural influences on their research. In the logic of this perspective, qualitative researchers employ methods that highlight the co-construction of meaning within social interactions and focus on the dynamic and relational aspects of knowledge construction (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Researchers adopting this perspective generally employ strategies to gather, analyze, and interpret data, such as focus groups, discourse analysis, and ethnography, that capture knowledge construction's interactive and contextual nature. Therefore, analysis of qualitative data

involves examining how social interactions and language shape understanding and meaning. Consequently, social-constructivist methodologies include discourse analysis and ethnographic studies.

In the current study context, a hermeneutics perspective is taken and centralized. This choice is underpinned by the fundamental tenets of hermeneutics, which argue that the generation of knowledge claims inherently requires the interpretation of subjective individual minds. These interpretations are deeply influenced and shaped by the diverse and bounded contextual, social, cultural, and institutional settings in which individuals are embedded. Therefore, the hermeneutic approach aligns closely with the core principles of constructivist and social-constructivist perspectives, making them the most suitable frameworks for the present study. We acknowledge that interpreting subjective experiences is central to understanding the phenomena under investigation by positioning the current study within a hermeneutic framework. This interpretive process is inherently tied to the contexts within which individuals operate, aligning with constructivism and social constructivism principles. These perspectives emphasize the role of individual and collective meaning-making processes, making them appropriate for a study focused on understanding participants' nuanced, contextually bound interpretations.

### **The Nature of Qualitative Research and Its Validation Strategies**

Qualitative research is a vital methodology in the social sciences, designed to provide a deep understanding of human behavior and the factors that govern such behavior (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research emphasizes subjective assessment of attitudes, opinions, behaviors, and the social contexts within which these occur (Creswell, 2007; 2013). The qualitative research perspective is inherently exploratory, often aimed at gaining insights into underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations (Miles et al., 2013). It helps to uncover trends in thought and opinions and dive deeper into the problem to develop hypotheses for potential quantitative research (Merriam, 2014). Below, we delve into the nature and methodology of qualitative research, detailing its core features, techniques, and procedural nuances.

Qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive and descriptive and focuses on individuals' experiences and interpretations of the world (Tracey, 2013). It acknowledges the researcher's influence on the research rather than striving for objectivity and seeks to understand phenomena in depth rather than quantifying how many people share a particular view (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A qualitative researcher recognizes the importance of context in understanding social phenomena. It examines how cultural, societal, and personal interactions shape individual experiences (Maxwell, 2013). Research designs can evolve while conducting a qualitative inquiry as new insights emerge during data collection and analysis. Qualitative research primarily focuses on understanding complex human behaviors, societal trends, and the nuances of subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to quantify data and generalize results

across populations using statistical tools, qualitative research delves into rich, detailed descriptions of people's lives and actions to extract meanings (Silverman, 2011). Because of its interpretative nature, maintaining the integrity and credibility of qualitative research relies on robust validation strategies (Creswell, 2005; Guba, 1981). Here, we will elaborate on the importance of these strategies, emphasizing their role in enhancing the trustworthiness and quality of the research findings.

One of the primary concerns in qualitative research is the credibility of the findings (Hadi & José-Closs, 2016; Stenfors et al., 2020). To do this, triangulation (e.g., utilizing multiple theories, sources, methods, or investigators to cross-verify data), member checking (e.g., involving participants in the process of verifying the data and interpretative results) and reflexivity (e.g., encouraging researchers to constantly reflect on their assumptions, cultural biases, and expectations that they bring into the research process) techniques can be used (Pyett, 2003). Triangulation reduces bias and allows researchers to approach the data from various angles, ensuring that the interpretations do not result from a single method or source (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009). Member checking allows participants to confirm the accuracy of the accounts and interpretations, providing a check against researcher bias. Reflexivity helps to mitigate potential biases and enhance the depth of the analysis (Sousa, 2014).

Secondly, transferability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other contexts or settings with similar characteristics. Qualitative researchers should provide thick descriptions (e.g., a detailed account of the research context and the assumptions underlying the research.). This detailed description enables other researchers to determine if the findings apply to other contexts or if there are significant differences that would limit transferability (Kihn & Ihantola, 2015). In addition, qualitative researchers conduct detailed case studies using particular cases to illustrate the findings, providing a comprehensive view of how conclusions were drawn and offering a blueprint that other researchers might consider in similar contexts (Weis & Willems, 2017).

Third, qualitative researchers have to ensure that the dependability and confirmability of the data are enhanced over time and across various conditions, as well as the extent to which the respondents shape the findings and not researcher bias (Kihn & Ihantola, 2015). For this layer of the validation of a qualitative study, an audit trail, which keeps detailed records of all data, decisions, and activities in the research process, allows for an external check to be required. To put it differently, an audit trail provides transparency and an outline of the research process, helping others to follow the decisions made and assess whether similar outcomes might be reached under similar conditions. External checks can be maintained through peer debriefing by engaging with peers who review and critique the research process, which helps identify any blind spots or biases and enhances the analytic rigor (Weis & Willems, 2017).

Overall, validation strategies in qualitative research are indispensable tools that strengthen the study's trustworthiness. They ensure that the findings represent the phenomenon under investigation rather than reflections of the researchers' preconceptions. Researchers can robustly defend their findings' credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability by employing triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, and maintaining a thorough audit trail (Amin et al., 2020). This systematic approach enhances the integrity of qualitative



research and boosts its impact and relevance in understanding complex, real-world issues. However, it is not a simple task for qualitative researchers to easily bracket their conceptual, ontological, epistemological, and axiological mental frameworks in collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting data (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Therefore, the current review aims to represent the ways of enhancing the trustworthiness of a qualitative study by focusing on the value of the hermeneutics perspective for re-understanding and re-considering what aspects and how-aspects of the trustworthiness issues in qualitative research.

### **Focus: Member checking as a core validation strategy in the naturalistic inquiry**

Member checking, also known as participant or respondent validation, is a crucial validation strategy in qualitative research to enhance the credibility and reliability of the study's findings (Birt et al., 2016). This technique returns the data collected and the interpretations and conclusions drawn from that data to the participants for confirmation (Doyle, 2007). This iterative process allows researchers to ensure their interpretations accurately reflect the participants' experiences and perspectives (Slettebø, 2021).

For an elaborated member checking, the researcher gathers data through interviews, focus groups, observations, or other qualitative methods and then analyzes the data to develop themes, categories, or theories (Morse, 2015). The most crucial mechanism of member checking is sharing the findings with participants. The researcher shares specific outcomes or findings with the original participants (Lindheim, 2022). This could be summarized data, a synthesis of interpretations, or a draft of the final report. These are needed to obtain feedback from participants. In this manner, participants are asked to confirm the accuracy of the findings, provide additional insights, or challenge the interpretations where they see discrepancies (Morse et al., 2002). Based on the feedback, the researcher refines the findings, clarifies misunderstandings, and incorporates participants' inputs to deepen and correct the analysis. The refined data and interpretations are then finalized for reporting with a more apparent assurance of their validity (Zairul, 2021).

Member checking serves multiple critical purposes in qualitative research. By involving participants in the verification process, researchers can enhance the accuracy and credibility of the data. Participants can confirm whether the findings are accurate to their experiences and expressions, which helps portray a more authentic picture of the phenomenon under study (Bygstad & Munkvold, 2007). Researchers bring their own biases and preconceptions to a study. Member checking helps mitigate these biases by allowing participants to point out where personal perspectives rather than the data may have influenced the researcher's interpretations. This strategy respects participants' perspectives as co-contributors to the research. It acknowledges their role as subjects and collaborators with a say in representing their information. Feedback from participants can provide deeper insights or highlight aspects that the researcher might have overlooked. This process often leads to more prosperous, more nuanced data.

A member-checking process incorporates some tangible challenges for qualitative researchers (Hallett, 2013; Thomas, 2017). It can be time-consuming and require additional resources to

re-engage with participants, especially if they are dispersed or hard to reach. Participants may not always understand the technical aspects of data interpretation, which can lead to challenges in validating theoretical constructs rather than factual accuracy (Koelsch, 2013). Just as researchers have biases, participants might also provide self-serving feedback or be skewed by their desires about the research outcome. Despite these challenges, member checking remains a highly respected validation technique in qualitative research, known for adding depth, authenticity, and robustness to qualitative findings (DeCino & Waalkes, 2019). It underscores a commitment to a participatory research process, where findings are not only about the participants but also about them, reinforcing the research project's ethical integrity and scholarly validity. In this manner, the current study aims to reassess the value and functionality of member checking by re-considering it from the lens of the hermeneutics perspective, detailed in the sections below.

### **Perspective: Hermeneutical thinking and knowing -What aspects and how aspects of the hermeneutics perspective**

The current review hypothesizes that there may be a potential in understanding the hermeneutics perspective to re-comprehend the nature and structure of qualitative research, especially a specific version of validation strategy such as member-checking (Brogan, 2020; Borim-de-Souza et al., 2020; Iivari, 2018). Based on this hypothesis, some working definitions of hermeneutics and its etymology are presented in this section. The term “hermeneutics” has its roots in ancient Greek. It comes from the Greek word “hermeneutikos,” which means “interpretive” or “interpreter.” This, in turn, is derived from the Greek god Hermes, the messenger of the gods and the god of language, communication, and interpretation in Greek mythology. The connection to Hermes underscores the idea of interpretation and communication being central to hermeneutics. Over time, the term evolved to refer to the theory and methodology of interpretation, particularly in understanding written texts. Therefore, hermeneutics as a thinking and knowing system is mainly about the relation between the interpretation and being interpreted. In philosophy, the relationship between the knower and the known (or knowing and the knower) concerns the connection between the subject (the one who knows) and the object (that which is known). This relationship explores how knowledge is acquired, how the mind perceives and processes reality, and the extent to which our subjective experiences shape our understanding of the world. Key philosophical debates revolve around whether knowledge is primarily constructed by the knower (constructivism) or if it reflects an objective reality independent of the knower's perceptions (realism). This relation also has a more significant place and exploratory role in the qualitative research paradigm.

Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation, especially the interpretation of written texts and various discourses in verbal externalizations between individuals (George, 2021). It originated in ancient Greek philosophy but has since become an interdisciplinary field encompassing various methods and approaches to understanding texts, symbols, and cultural phenomena (Gadamer, 2004; 2007). Hermeneutics is applied to religious and literary texts, legal documents, artworks, historical events, and everyday communication in contemporary contexts. It involves analyzing a text or artifact's context, language, culture,



and historical background to uncover its meaning and significance (Gadamer, 1996). This point is related chiefly to the very nature of qualitative research in which institutional, contextual, historical, cultural, and sociolinguistic entities are closely considered when data is gathered, analyzed, interpreted, and communicated.

The key concept related to hermeneutics is “interpretation,” which has been widely and intentionally used by qualitative researchers who are the secondary narrators or interpreters of the externalized latent meanings provided by the participants (Heidegger, 2002). Therefore, from the perspective of hermeneutics, the interpretation should be interpreted and explained in the philosophical context. In hermeneutics, the meaning of “interpretation” goes beyond its everyday usage. It refers to understanding and making sense of texts, symbols, or cultural phenomena. This process involves more than just translating words or deciphering meanings; it entails uncovering more profound layers of significance, context, and intention behind the text or artifact being interpreted. In hermeneutics, interpretation is viewed as a dynamic and dialogical engagement between the interpreter (the researcher in qualitative research) and the object of interpretation (e.g., What are the lived experiences of first-generation college students in navigating the transition from high school to university, and how do these experiences influence their sense of belonging and academic success?), wherein the interpreter inherently brings their perspectives, biases, and experiences to bear on the text, while also seeking to grasp the author’s (participants in qualitative research) intentions and the cultural context in which the text (discourse in qualitative research) was produced (Brogan, 2020; Warnke, 2013).

Thus, interpretation in hermeneutics involves a multifaceted and often recursive process of understanding, where meaning is continuously negotiated and reconstructed through interaction with the text and its context. However, the interpretation in qualitative research and hermeneutics should be considered cautiously. A scientific study ultimately seeks to reach a truth. However, how and by whom this reality is constructed can raise interpretive issues. The interpreter begins to deviate from the truth as soon as they start interpreting. As should be accepted, truth or reality exists in an uninterpreted format. As truth or reality begins to be interpreted, it moves away from its primary meaning, giving rise to a secondary meaning that includes interpretation. This should not lead to a ‘skeptical’ situation such as “then we cannot know the truth.” To explain, what is known needs the commentator’s comment to be known to a degree. In other words, an essential way of knowing is to interpret, but interpretation distorts the truth; things cannot be known without interpretation, or they can only be known partially through interpretation (Brogan, 2020; Walsh, 1996; Zimmerman, 2015).

Moreover, modern hermeneutics also puts a severe distance between what is known grammatically and what is known as intention. We interpret a poet’s words, a writer’s descriptions, or a participant’s discursive expressions of learning and teaching on two layers: the layer based on the grammatical scope and the intention. Grammatical interpretation lacks intent and may fall short of or differ significantly from the intended meaning. For this reason, the hermeneutic perspective tries to benefit from the intention layer, rather than the grammatical scope, in depicting the meaning, truth, or reality that is tried to be created through meaning. This means that in qualitative research, how will the meaning of

the “experiential” content of the person transcribed verbatim into the “text” after the audio recording be interpreted, taking into full consideration the intention of the owner of the text? (Brogan, 2020; Ihde, 1999)

Qualitative researchers recommend the participant verification technique in this sense, which appears to be an effective validation strategy in many qualitative studies. But here, another hermeneutical problem arises: Is the owner of the text or the owner of the statement aware of the intention with which s/he utters those words, that is, his own original or authentic intention? The answer to this question of modern hermeneutic interpretation is “no.” Therefore, if the meanings have moved away from the real meaning due to the existence of the interpretation of the person who put it forward, or at least does not give the real meaning completely, how will the qualitative researcher, as a person who tries to look at the meaning from a secondary perspective, know that he has interpreted a valid meaning? This could mean that the problem of the hermeneutic perspective and the qualitative researcher is the same. The primary purpose of hermeneutics is to justify the proposition that “the main thing is not “understanding,” but the main thing is “non-understanding,” therefore “meaning” needs “interpretation.” On the other hand, the qualitative researcher aims to “understand” and “interpret” a discourse, feeling, thought or experience that is secondary to him/her. However, since interpreting as the hermeneutic perspective “warns” the qualitative researcher can distort or confuse understanding, the qualitative researcher must employ interpretive strategies most meticulously to “get closer to the real meaning.” it can be therefore inferred that the meaning is primary, but the interpretation is secondary.

On the other hand, it must also be noted that modern hermeneutics sees every understanding as an interpretation and goes beyond that idea, proposing that there is no understanding. Still, every understanding is a version of interpretation. From this perspective, the interpretation as it constitutes the meaning of natural or social phenomena is primary (Brogan, 2020; Roberge, 2011; Thiselton, 2009).

### **The Analytical Purpose of Hermeneutics as Knowing by Interpreting**

Hermeneutics aims to uncover and understand the meaning of texts, symbols, or cultural phenomena. It seeks to interpret and interpret the significance of these elements within their context, whether that context is historical, cultural, linguistic, or social. The ultimate goal of hermeneutics is to bridge the gap between the text and its reader or interpreter, facilitating a deeper understanding and appreciation of the message conveyed. Hermeneutics’ generic and diverse aims can be associated with the very nature of qualitative research. First, hermeneutics is to understand. Hermeneutics aims to facilitate understanding by deciphering the meaning of texts or symbols. This understanding often involves delving into the text’s historical, cultural, and linguistic context. Second, the hermeneutics perspective involves interpreting texts or symbols to uncover their significance and relevance. Interpretation may involve analyzing the author’s intentions, the cultural milieu in which the text was produced, and the audience for which it was intended. Third, hermeneutics incorporates a communicative nature. Hermeneutics helps to facilitate communication between different times, cultures, and perspectives. Understanding the meaning of texts within their context

enables hermeneutics to communicate across boundaries and fosters dialogue between individuals or groups with different backgrounds or viewpoints. Moreover, hermeneutics requires critical exploration. Hermeneutics encourages critical analysis of texts and symbols, allowing for a deeper exploration of their implications and interpretations. This critical approach helps to uncover layers of meaning and challenge assumptions, leading to a richer understanding of the text. It should be noted that hermeneutics is not only about understanding and interpretation but also about applying the insights gained to real-world situations. It allows for applying textual understanding to contemporary issues, ethical dilemmas, and practical challenges (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Whitehead, 2004).

#### *Scholarly-oriented research-based purposes of the hermeneutics*

The research-based purpose of hermeneutics involves utilizing its methodologies and principles to conduct rigorous and systematic investigations into the interpretation and understanding of texts, symbols, and cultural phenomena. In a research context, hermeneutics serves several vital purposes. It should be noted herein that there may be concrete and close associations between the research-based goals of the hermeneutics and the generic aims of the qualitative researchers. To justify, for instance, hermeneutics copes with textual analysis. In other words, hermeneutics provides a framework for analyzing texts in depth, examining their linguistic, historical, and cultural context to uncover layers of meaning. Research in hermeneutics often involves close reading and interpretation of texts, identifying themes, symbols, and rhetorical devices to elucidate their significance. As known, the qualitative research paradigm has been informed by many scholarly-oriented fields and disciplines that inform these fields of inquiry (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Whitehead, 2004).

Similarly, hermeneutics encourages interdisciplinary approaches to research, drawing on insights from philosophy, literary criticism, anthropology, sociology, and theology. Researchers may apply hermeneutical methods to diverse texts and cultural artifacts, exploring connections and patterns across disciplines. Like naturalistic inquiries, the hermeneutics perspective tries to establish a historical understanding of a phenomenon under investigation. Hermeneutics facilitates historical understanding by situating texts within their historical context and tracing the evolution of ideas over time. Researchers use hermeneutical methods to uncover the historical background of texts, discerning how social, political, and cultural factors shape their meaning. Critical reflection, as a fundamental explorative goal of hermeneutics, involves a deep and thorough examination of one's thought processes, assumptions, and biases during the interpretive act. Hermeneutics, which is the study of interpretation, particularly of texts, encourages researchers to continuously question and analyze the lenses through which they view and interpret their subjects. This reflective practice entails researchers engaging in self-reflexive analysis, actively considering and articulating how their personal backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints might shape their interpretations. By doing so, they aim to uncover and understand the preconceptions and biases that may influence their understanding of the texts they study. This process helps to ensure that the interpretations are not merely projections of the researchers' views but are grounded in a more objective and balanced understanding of the text.

Moreover, critical reflection in hermeneutics seeks to mitigate the impact of subjective biases. Researchers strive to recognize and address these biases, adjusting their interpretive approaches to minimize their influence. This practice enhances the validity and reliability of the research findings and fosters a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the texts. Critical reflection in hermeneutics is an ongoing, iterative process that demands constant vigilance and self-awareness from researchers. It involves a commitment to transparency and honesty about one's interpretive stance, fostering a deeper engagement with the text and promoting more rigorous and insightful scholarship. By continuously reflecting on and refining their interpretive methods, researchers contribute to a more robust and credible body of knowledge (Paterson & Higgs, 2005; Reiter, 2006; Thirsk & Clark, 2017).

Furthermore, the hermeneutics perspective can be applied to research purposes. Hermeneutics is applied in various research contexts, including literature, theology, jurisprudence, psychology, and education. Researchers may use hermeneutical methods to analyze legal texts, interpret religious scriptures, explore psychological narratives, or examine literary works, among other applications. Like the ground theory approach in qualitative research, the perspective of hermeneutics can be used for theory development. Hermeneutics contributes to the development of theoretical frameworks for understanding interpretation and meaning-making. Researchers engage in theoretical inquiry, refining concepts such as authorial intention, reader response, textual ambiguity, and the hermeneutical circle, advancing our understanding of how meaning is constructed and communicated (Gillo, 2021; Peck & Mummery, 2018; Rennie, 2012).

#### *Combining qualitative research perspective with hermeneutic perspective*

Combining qualitative research with a hermeneutic perspective can lead to a rich and nuanced approach to understanding human experiences, texts, and cultural phenomena. First and foremost, qualitative research often emphasizes the importance of context in understanding phenomena. When combined with a hermeneutic perspective, researchers delve deeply into the context surrounding texts or experiences, considering historical, cultural, and social factors that shape meaning (Gillo, 2021). This contextual approach enriches interpretation by comprehensively understanding the background against which texts or experiences are situated.

Both qualitative research and hermeneutics prioritize interpretation and sense-making. Researchers utilizing these perspectives engage in interpretive analysis to uncover underlying meanings, symbols, and themes within texts or qualitative data. They recognize that meaning is not fixed but is constructed through dialogue between the text and the interpreter and within the broader socio-cultural context. Qualitative research often involves direct engagement with participants or texts. Researchers adopt a hermeneutic perspective approach to this engagement as a dialogical process, where understanding emerges through interaction and interpretation. They value participants' perspectives and seek to understand their lived experiences within their cultural and social contexts (Nigar, 2020).

Both qualitative research and hermeneutics acknowledge the role of the researcher's subjectivity in the interpretive process. Researchers employing these perspectives engage

in reflexivity, critically reflecting on their assumptions, biases, and preconceptions that may influence interpretation. They recognize that interpretation is not value-neutral and strive to be transparent about their positionality. Qualitative research often adopts a narrative approach, focusing on the stories and narratives of participants. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method that studies stories or narratives to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences and construct their identities. It involves collecting and analyzing personal accounts, often through interviews or written documents, to explore the meanings and interpretations that people attach to their life events. Narrative inquiry emphasizes these stories' context and temporal aspects, acknowledging that they are shaped by cultural, social, and historical factors (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In narrative studies, researchers pay close attention to the structure, content, and function of narratives and how they are told. This method allows for a rich, detailed understanding of individual experiences and can reveal insights into broader social and cultural phenomena (Riessman, 2008). It is beneficial for exploring complex, nuanced aspects of human life that more traditional research methods might overlook. When combined with a hermeneutic perspective, researchers explore the narrative structures and themes within texts or qualitative data, recognizing the narrative as a means through which meaning is conveyed and constructed. Qualitative research and hermeneutics encourage the integration of theory and data in the interpretive process. Researchers draw on theoretical frameworks to guide their analysis while allowing the data to inform and enrich theoretical understandings. This iterative process of theory-data interaction enhances the depth and complexity of interpretation. Integrating qualitative research with a hermeneutic perspective offers a holistic approach to understanding human experiences, texts, and cultural phenomena. It combines the rigor of qualitative research methods with the interpretive depth of hermeneutics, leading to nuanced insights and a deeper appreciation of meaning and context (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Pérez-Vargas et al., 2020).

#### *Combining member-checking validation strategy with the hermeneutic perspective*

Combining a checking validation strategy with a hermeneutic perspective can enhance the rigor and credibility of interpretive research. Member checking, a qualitative research method, involves verifying the accuracy and validity of findings by returning them to participants for feedback or validation. For instance, Birt et al. (2016) discussed the application of member checking in health research and explored its effectiveness in enhancing the trustworthiness of qualitative data. Hermeneutics emphasizes the dialogical nature of interpretation, viewing understanding as emerging through dialogue between the text and the interpreter. Similarly, member-checking involves engaging participants in a dialogue about the researcher's interpretations. By incorporating member checking into the hermeneutic process, researchers invite participants to contribute to interpreting their experiences, ensuring that their perspectives are accurately represented (McConnell-Henry et al., 2011). For example, Doyle (2007) illustrated member checking in research with older women, detailing how the process helps negotiate and validate the meaning of the data collected.

Hermeneutics recognizes that meaning is co-constructed through interaction between the text and the interpreter. Member checking aligns with this perspective by acknowledging



the importance of participants' contributions to the interpretive process. Through member checking, researchers validate their interpretations against participants' lived experiences, enriching the depth and authenticity of the findings (Carlson, 2010). For example, Koelsch (2013) provided an example of a study involving educators where member checking was used as an iterative process. Participants were involved in several rounds of feedback, which allowed for a deeper co-construction of meaning and helped mitigate researcher bias. Hermeneutics encourages researchers to be reflexive about their biases and assumptions that may influence interpretation. Similarly, member checking requires researchers to be transparent about their interpretations and open to participant feedback. By integrating member checking with a hermeneutic perspective, researchers engage in reflexive dialogue with participants, critically examining their interpretations and considering alternative perspectives (Turner & Coen, 2008).

Member checking enhances the trustworthiness and credibility of interpretive research by allowing participants to validate or challenge the researcher's interpretations. This iterative validation process contributes to the research's rigor, strengthening the findings' validity and reliability. By incorporating member checking into the hermeneutic process, researchers demonstrate a commitment to transparency and accountability, enhancing their interpretations' credibility (Bradshaw, 2001). Hermeneutics recognizes interpretation as an iterative process that evolves. Member checking facilitates this iterative approach by allowing researchers to refine their interpretations based on participants' feedback (Buchbinder, 2011). By revisiting interpretations in collaboration with participants, researchers deepen their understanding of the phenomena under study and produce more nuanced and contextually grounded interpretations. In summary, combining a member-checking validation strategy with a hermeneutic perspective enriches the interpretive process by fostering dialogue, co-construction of meaning, reflexivity, and trustworthiness. This integrated approach enhances the rigor and credibility of interpretive research, yielding insights that are more authentic, nuanced, and contextually situated (Madill & Sullivan, 2018).

### **Concluding Remarks**

This review yields several conclusions in attaching the member-checking strategy to the hermeneutics. First and foremost, the review implies the importance of interpretation. The qualitative researcher with a hermeneutics lens should capture the point that interpretation is not just an additional layer of understanding but the primary means through which we engage with participants' verbal or written externalizations. This is a crucial departure from previous beliefs where participants' verbal or written externalizations were considered clear and straightforward and were thought not to require further interpretation. Therefore, a qualitative researcher adapting hermeneutics should challenge traditional or positivistic research views. Traditionally, it is assumed that participants' verbal or written externalizations with clear language and straightforward instructions do not need interpretation; their meanings are taken at face value. However, the modern hermeneutic approach challenges this by suggesting that no text (e.g., participants' verbal or written externalizations) is genuinely straightforward. Every text reading involves an interpretive act, where the reader's (coder's)

context, background, and perspective influence their understanding. In other words, from the lens of hermeneutics, the qualitative researcher should act in a way that all human-based discourses inherently involve an interpretive process. This process is not just about deciphering words or sentences but engaging with the verbal/written discourses in a manner that considers the intent behind it, the context in which it was written, and its relevance to the present. Interpretation is thus seen as an essential activity that is dynamically intertwined with comprehension, which is the primary purpose of the qualitative researcher.

Moreover, the qualitative researcher adapting the hermeneutics perspective has to interrogate the role of the reader's perspective. In hermeneutics, each reader (the qualitative researcher and the participant) brings unique experiences and cognitive frameworks to a text, which can alter the interpretation. This subjective element of text interpretation underscores the complexity of understanding texts and the need for a hermeneutic approach. Therefore, the qualitative researcher inherently needs the interpretation of their preliminary analysis by the participants. To support this, the qualitative researcher should not see hermeneutics as merely a tool for academic or philosophical analysis but as a necessary component of understanding any written or spoken material in our daily lives to invite the participants as co-interpreters or co-commentators. In this manner, as a whole, it should be accepted by the qualitative researcher that hermeneutics proposes a more reflective and interpretive approach to understanding, and this reflection and interpretation is not only the primary assignment of the researcher but also the participant as a co-researcher.

The qualitative researcher has to re-consider hermeneutics more broadly to apply this perspective in a wide-ranging sense. The modern hermeneutics emphasizes that it applies universally to all forms of text. This universality means that each invites a hermeneutic approach, whether the text is a complex legal document, a piece of classic literature, or simple everyday instructions or conversations. This approach involves examining beyond the literal meanings to uncover deeper insights and implications. In hermeneutic theory, a text is any written, printed, or digital communication that conveys a particular message or information. The centrality of the text implies that hermeneutics is not just about interpreting traditional texts but also encompasses all forms of written communication, reflecting its broad applicability. Viewing every text (the content the qualitative research analyzes and interprets) as central to hermeneutics highlights the importance of context, authorial intent, and the cultural and historical background in which the text was produced. This broadens the scope of interpretation and insists on a more nuanced understanding of all communicative acts.

In addition, the qualitative researcher has to see hermeneutics as a fundamental dialoguing tool to interact with the participant and foster the qualitative study's credibility. It can be accepted that hermeneutics facilitates an ongoing dialogue between the text (the content), the reader (the qualitative researcher), and the participant. This dialogue is not a literal conversation but an interpretive exchange where the text speaks to the reader or the participant, and the reader and the participant respond based on their understanding and interpretation as the core strategy in the member-checking strategy. In this dynamic interaction, the text (the content) is not a passive object but an active participant that

influences and is influenced by the reader and the participant. The reader's or the participant's preconceptions, experiences, and the context in which they engage with the text all contribute to this dialogue (Harvey, 2015). Therefore, the text (the content) can mean different things to different readers/participants or even to the same reader/participant at different times. This ongoing dialogue underscores that understanding a text as material analyzed in a qualitative study is never final but continuously evolves. As new interpretations emerge and contexts change, the dialogue between the text, the reader, and the participant is renewed, leading to fresh insights and perspectives. This process reflects the inherently dynamic nature of hermeneutics as a discipline and naturalistic inquiry as an interpretive way of knowing. These concepts frame hermeneutics as a profoundly interactive and continually evolving discipline that emphasizes the active role of the text, the reader, and the participant in the interpretive process. By engaging with texts through this hermeneutic dialogue, readers and participants in the qualitative research are encouraged to explore beyond the surface and to consider broader, more complex interpretations based on the dialogue they develop with texts (e.g., generated by the utterances of a participant in qualitative research) across different contexts and times.

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