The Contest Over Meaning: Hermeneutics as an Interpretive Methodology for Understanding Texts

ANSHUMAN PRASAD
University of New Haven

This article focuses on the methodological and epistemological aspects of hermeneutics, a leading genre of interpretive research. Beginning with a brief overview of the limitations of methodological discussions of hermeneutics in current organizational research, the article first introduces readers to the historical context of hermeneutics and then discusses the major epistemological and methodological concepts and debates that inform contemporary hermeneutics. Next, methodological guidelines for employing hermeneutics in organizational research are proposed. Finally, some conclusions are offered.

This article seeks to analyze the key methodological, epistemological, and philosophical aspects of hermeneutics, a major interpretive approach for understanding texts. With the recent burgeoning of interpretive research in management scholarship, hermeneutics as a methodology has made its appearance in such diverse fields as accounting, marketing, management information systems, organization studies, and so on. Despite this "hermeneutic ferment" within the broad disciplinary domains of management, however, a number of important epistemological issues relating to the use of hermeneutics as an approach for scholarly organizational research remain underexamined. This article proposes to address this lacuna in our current understanding of hermeneutics. The article is structured as follows.

The first section of the article presents a brief overview of hermeneutic research in a range of management subdisciplines. This overview highlights the somewhat limited nature of epistemological and philosophical discussions of hermeneutics in most management and organizational research. Next, an account of the historical evolution of contemporary hermeneutics is offered. Toward that end, this part begins with the emergence of hermeneutics in Greek antiquity and traces the development of present-day hermeneutics through the stages of classical hermeneutic theory, philosophical hermeneutics, and critical hermeneutics. In the third section, the article presents a detailed

analysis of the major concepts and debates that characterize contemporary hermeneutics. Thereafter some methodological guidelines for employing hermeneutics in organizational research are discussed, and a brief example of hermeneutic research is presented. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of implications.

Hermeneutics in Past Organizational Research

The term *hermeneutics* has been used by researchers in a variety of management subdisciplines (e.g., Aredal, 1986; Boland, 1989; Francis, 1994; Gabriel, 1991; Hirschman, 1990; Lee, 1994; Meredith, Raturi, Amoako-Gyampah, & Kaplan, 1989; Parker & Roffey, 1997; Phillips & Brown, 1993; Standing & Standing, 1999; Thompson, 1993; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1990; Wolf, 1996). An examination of this body of research shows that in general, management scholars have tended to employ the term *hermeneutics* in two broad senses. These two senses (representing, in some ways, two poles of a continuum) may be referred to as (a) the "weak" sense and (b) the "strong" sense.

In its "weak" sense, the term *hermeneutics* has been used by management scholars to broadly refer to research that may adopt (or that may be influenced by) any of a number of perspectives and approaches to inquiry, including interpretivism, qualitative or ideographic inquiry, existentialism, phenomenology, postmodernism, and so on. In its "weak" sense, hence, hermeneutics holds a somewhat nebulous meaning and refers to one or more aspects of what organizational scholars commonly understand by the omnibus term "qualitative research" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000; Van Maanen, 1983).

In its "strong" sense, on the other hand, the term *hermeneutics* is used by management scholars in a relatively more precise fashion to refer to research that engages in interpreting texts (and other organizational artifacts and activities) and, for purposes of such interpretation, closely relies on the epistemological and philosophical insights and guidelines offered by classical hermeneutic theory, philosophical hermeneutics, and/or critical hermeneutics (e.g., Aredal, 1986; Boland, 1989; Francis, 1994; Lee, 1994; Phillips & Brown, 1993; etc.). However, for a variety of reasons, this research mostly offers only a partial (and not comprehensive) analysis of the epistemological aspects of hermeneutics. Looking at a sample of such research, for instance, we find that whereas both Boland (1989) and Francis (1994) primarily focus only on Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, Lee (1994) seems to mostly ignore Gadamer's contributions. Similarly, Aredal (1986) and Phillips and Brown (1993) are able to provide only a limited explication of the diverse aspects of contemporary hermeneutics.

Hence, within management scholarship, there seems to be a genuine need for an in-depth analysis of the methodological, epistemological, and philosophical considerations involved in the use of hermeneutics as an interpretive research approach. This article seeks to address that need. We begin with a brief account of the historical development of hermeneutics.

Historical Evolution of
Contemporary Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics—an important contribution of the Western world to the theory and the practice (the science and the art) of understanding and interpreting texts—is said to be as old as ancient Greece (see, e.g., Bleicher, 1980; Palmer, 1969; Mueller-Vollmer, 1985; Ormiston & Schrift, 1990). Etymologically, the term *hermeneutics* can be traced back to Hermes, the Greek messenger god,[1] and Aristotle's *Peri hermeneias* (On Interpretation) is commonly regarded as one of the early treatises on hermeneutics (Palmer, 1969). In the course of its development through the centuries, hermeneutics, accordingly, was employed for such purposes as Homeric interpretations and disputations in ancient Greece, the rabbinical interpretations of the Torah, biblical exegesis and, during the Protestant Reformation in Europe, for addressing theological controversies (Connolly & Keutner, 1988; Palmer, 1969).

As a result of its extended association with biblical exegesis and commentary, hermeneutics, for a long time, became synonymous with biblical interpretation as such. And although scholars now define hermeneutics much more broadly, to some extent the theological meaning of hermeneutics continues to persist in popular imagination to this day; for instance, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) defines hermeneutics as "the art or science of interpretation, *especially of Scripture*" (emphasis added).[2] Despite this popular conflation of hermeneutics and biblical interpretation, however, during most of its history, hermeneutics has been much more than merely a theological enterprise. Hence, in addition to theological hermeneutics, the evolution of hermeneutics has been marked also by the growth of other variants of hermeneutics like juridical hermeneutics, philological hermeneutics, and the like.

One of the key characteristics of this stage of hermeneutics (which saw the emergence of several varieties of hermeneutics) is its particularistic nature. In other words, at this stage in the evolution of hermeneutics, scholars advocate different, specialized hermeneutics suited for aiding interpretation in different fields like history, law, religion, poetry, and so on. This fragmented notion of hermeneutics was to change dramatically with Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)—"the father of modern hermeneutics"—who offered the important view of hermeneutics as a general theory of textual interpretation and understanding.

Beginning with Schleiermacher, the theory, epistemology, and philosophy of hermeneutics has been developed by several thinkers along a number of dimensions. For analytical convenience, however, it is useful to classify the efforts of such thinkers under three categories, namely, (a) classical hermeneutic theory;[3] (b) philosophical hermeneutics, or hermeneutic philosophy; and (c) critical hermeneutics.[4] We now turn our attention toward understanding the broad contours of these three streams of hermeneutics.

Classical hermeneutic theory. Prior to Schleiermacher, hermeneutics was generally understood as providing a set of tools and techniques for understanding those parts or passages of a text that may be difficult to understand. Schleiermacher (1985), however, pointed out that the conception of hermeneutics as a technique for interpreting *only* the difficult passages of a text implicitly assumes that normally, "understanding occurs as a matter of course" (p. 81). Schleiermacher challenged this assumption, insisting that the ever-present differences between the author and the reader-interpreter with

respect to their personal histories, (the use of) language, culture, worldview, and so on imply that misunderstanding, rather than understanding, would be the normal situation in textual interpretation. Hence, argued Schleiermacher, what was needed was not rules and methods of interpretation designed merely for exceptional and episodic use, but a comprehensive theoretical foundation for all textual interpretation.

Schleiermacher, thus, transformed hermeneutics from a technique to a general theory of understanding and interpreting texts. For Schleiermacher, the goal of interpreting a text is to recover the author's originally intended meaning. Toward that end, according to Schleiermacher (1985), interpretation has two, equally important, aspects: grammatical (or objective) and psychological (or subjective). Grammatical interpretation refers not merely to grammar but to the wider "moment of language" (Palmer, 1969, p. 88) in the interpretive act. Arguing that language provides "the structures within which . . . thought operates" (Palmer, 1969, pp. 88-89), Schleiermacher (1985) points out that our "linguistic heritage . . . modifies our mind" such that any text "can be understood only in the context of the totality of the language" (p. 75). For Schleiermacher, accordingly, grammatical interpretation refers to understanding and interpreting a text "in the context of the language with its possibilities [and limits]" (p. 74). As distinct from grammatical interpretation, psychological interpretation seeks to reconstruct or reexperience the author's mental and creative processes with a view to developing an empathetic understanding of the text.

Whereas Schleiermacher transformed hermeneutics from a technique to a general theory, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) raised hermeneutics to the status of a general epistemology for the *Geisteswissenschaften* (the human and social sciences). Dilthey (1976) argued that whereas the *Naturwissenschaften* (the natural sciences) aimed at *Erklaeren* (explanation), the aim of the human and social sciences was *Verstehen* (understanding). He pointed out that similar to texts, all social phenomena arise from human externalization (or objectification) of inner feelings and experiences.

Hence, Dilthey (1976) claimed that the postulates of Schleiermacher's general theory of hermeneutics could be extended to the interpretation of social meaning complexes such as legal or economic systems and the like. Moreover, somewhat similar to Schleiermacher, Dilthey also envisaged the task of interpretation and understanding as an empathetic grasping, reconstructing, and reexperiencing by one human mind (namely, the interpreter's) of the mental objectifications (e.g., texts, legal structures, historical processes, etc.) produced by other human minds. Thus, by focusing on hermeneutics as (a) the general theory of interpretation and (b) as the epistemological foundation of the social sciences, classical hermeneutic theory greatly contributed to the development of hermeneutics. In contrast, philosophical hermeneutics made its contribution by conducting a deep exploration of the philosophical issues surrounding interpretation.

Philosophical hermeneutics. Classical hermeneutic theory and philosophical hermeneutics are markedly different with respect to their conceptualization of the project of hermeneutics. For the former, the purpose of hermeneutics is to guide the practice of correct interpretation and understanding. In the view of philosophical hermeneutics, on the other hand, the major concern of hermeneutics is not with creating prescriptive theories for regulating interpretive practice. Rather, in this view, hermeneutics is concerned with what is constitutively involved (in a deep, philosophical sense) in each and every act of interpretation.

The growth of philosophical hermeneutics is particularly indebted to the intellectual labors of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (b. 1900). Heidegger's principal contribution to hermeneutic philosophy is to be found in his masterpiece (originally published in 1927), *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962), wherein, in the course of formulating his ontology of *Dasein* (literally, "being there"), he offers an existential-ontological conception of hermeneutics and, in so doing, raises "understanding" to the status of a fundamental category of human existence, or an *Existentiale*. Gadamer, in turn, uses Heidegger's reconceptualization of understanding/interpretation for developing a systematic philosophy of hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1975, 1976, 1989). This philosophy, on one hand, rejects the ideas of (a) a separation between the text (i.e., the so-called *object* of interpretation) and the reader (i.e., the putative *subject* engaging in interpretation) and (b) the goal of interpretation as grasping the author's intended meaning and, on the other hand, emphasizes, among other things, (a) the productive role of "tradition" and "prejudices" in the act of interpretation, (b) the nature of interpretation as a dialogue between the text and the interpreter, and (c) interpretation as non-author-intentional.

The hermeneutic philosophy following from Heidegger and Gadamer has been criticized as being subjectivistic and relativistic by some objectivist thinkers (e.g., Betti, 1990). Betti (1990), for example, insists that the text must be regarded as an autonomous object independent of the subjectivity of the interpreter, and maintains that the aim of interpretation must necessarily be to recover the original intention of the text's author. Gadamer's defense of philosophical hermeneutics against such objectivist criticisms consists, in part, of reiterating his rejection of the subject-object dichotomy. The key role played by philosophical hermeneutics in shaping the contours of contemporary hermeneutics will be discussed in detail later during the course of this article. It may be useful to note here that although earlier hermeneutics made a distinction between *understanding* and *interpretation*, that distinction is no longer maintained after the emergence of philosophical hermeneutics. Accordingly, this article uses the two terms interchangeably.

Critical hermeneutics. By insisting that the goal of interpretation is a recovery of the original intention of the text's author, Betti's (1990) above-noted criticism of philosophical hermeneutics seeks to return hermeneutics to a pre-Heideggerian position. In contrast, some critical theorists (e.g., Apel, 1980; Habermas, 1990a, 1990b) have taken issues with certain principles of philosophical hermeneutics, not in order to roll hermeneutics back to a pre-Heideggerian position, but to further build on the insights of philosophical hermeneutics, and in so doing, develop a more comprehensive hermeneutics of critique and emancipation.

According to critical theorists, the task of interpretation includes, among other things, the necessity of providing a critique of the ideological aspects of the text being interpreted. Hence, critical theorists like Habermas, for instance, have carried out an intense debate with philosophical hermeneutics with a view to giving a new, critical orientation to hermeneutics. The major arguments of the Gadamer-Habermas debate and the significance of this debate for the task of interpretation are discussed later in this article.

Notwithstanding the intensity of the hermeneutic debate between Gadamer and Habermas, however, it needs to be recognized that the epistemological and methodological implications of the insights offered by both these thinkers are, broadly speak-

ing, interpretivistic and antipositivistic in nature. Hence, scholars often emphasize that despite the so-called dispute between Gadamer and Habermas, the two have much in common (see, e.g., Brenkman, 1987; Howard, 1982; Hoy, 1978; Outhwaite, 1987). Indeed, Howard (1982, p. 121), for instance, has observed that the debate between Habermas and Gadamer is more like a "family quarrel" between two kinsmen than a polemic between two irreconcilable adversaries. Such being the case, critical hermeneutics may reasonably be viewed as a constructive enterprise directed at developing a more complete form of hermeneutics.

Major Concepts and Debates

While discussing the major concepts and debates that define contemporary hermeneutics, we will primarily focus on the following: (a) the idea of the hermeneutic circle, (b) the historicality of understanding and the hermeneutic "horizon," (c) the dialogical nature of understanding and the attendant concept of "fusion of horizons," (d) the role of authorial intention in interpretation, and (e) the significance of critique in the process of interpretation. Our discussion draws on insights offered by each of the three principal streams of hermeneutics identified above.

The hermeneutic circle. The concept of the hermeneutic circle has long been an important part of the theory and practice of hermeneutics. One of the early mentions of this concept occurs in the works of the German philologist, Friedrich Ast (1778-1841). Ast, under the influence of German Romanticism, believed in the notion of a unitary cultural *Geist* (spirit) and held that the imprint of the same *Geist* was to be found in all the artifacts (including textual productions) of a given culture. Hence, claimed Ast, the cultural and textual productions of a civilization necessarily constituted a unified whole, and he propounded his famous hermeneutic circle by asserting that "the part [can only be] understood from the whole and the whole from the inner harmony of its parts" (Palmer, 1969, p. 77; referring to Ast's *Grundlinien der Grammatik, Hermeneutik und Kritik* [Basic Elements of Grammar, Hermeneutics, and Criticism] published in 1808). In other words, the meaning of the individual texts of a given culture can be fully understood only by understanding the meaning of the overall spirit of that culture, and, in turn, the overall spirit of a culture can be understood only by understanding the meaning of the individual texts and other artifacts produced by that culture.

According to Ast, understanding a text involved a reproduction (or recreation) of the original author's creative process (Palmer, 1969). For Ast, one of the key devices facilitating such reproduction of the author's creative process was the idea of the hermeneutic circle. The importance of the hermeneutic circle was emphasized by Schleiermacher (1985) as well. Similar to Ast, Schleiermacher also insisted that the task of understanding a text required reproducing or reexperiencing the author's creative processes. As already mentioned, for Schleiermacher, this involved two dimensions, "grammatical" and "psychological." Schleiermacher (pp. 84, 94) maintained that both "grammatical" and "psychological" understanding operated through the device of the hermeneutic circle.

It is important to note here that at an analytical level, the notion of the hermeneutic circle suffers from a logical contradiction, for, as Palmer (1969) notes, "If we must grasp the whole before we can understand the parts, then we shall never understand

anything" (p. 87). From a hermeneutic perspective, therefore, understanding cannot be seen merely as a logical and analytical process. Rather, according to hermeneutics, the process of understanding goes beyond logic and analysis and is, in some essential respect, "intuitive and divinatory" (p. 87). The idea of the hermeneutic circle continues to remain an important element of the conceptual architecture of hermeneutics. However, as later parts of this article will explain, the concept has been given a more "temporal" and "historical" character by thinkers like Heidegger and Gadamer.

A brief example may be useful for further clarifying the idea of the hermeneutic circle. Consider, for instance, the task of understanding a paragraph in any piece of writing. The paragraph in question must, of course, be understood by means of understanding the individual sentences that make up that paragraph. On the other hand, it is often the case that the meaning of individual sentences in a paragraph becomes clear only when we already have an understanding of what the paragraph as a whole is trying to convey, or what the paragraph is "driving at," or what is the "direction" of the entire paragraph. Similar part/whole dialectics constituting the hermeneutic circle may be seen to operate between words and sentences, paragraphs and chapters, chapters and the book, individual books written by an author and the author's complete oeuvre, authorial oeuvre and the genre to which a specific oeuvre may belong, and so on.

The historicality of understanding and the hermeneutic horizon. At its broadest and most general, the idea of the hermeneutic circle (as developed in the writings of hermeneuticians such as Ast and Schleiermacher) may be seen as emphasizing the importance of developing an understanding of the context (e.g., in Ast's case, the unified spirit of a culture) for purposes of interpreting a text. These thinkers, however, seem to pay little attention to the creative role of the reader-interpreter's own historico-cultural context in the process of understanding a text that may belong to a relatively different historical and/or cultural milieu. This issue is addressed by Gadamer (1975, 1989), who offers important insights into the "historicality of understanding."

Elaborating earlier explications of the hermeneutic circle, Gadamer (1975, p. 235 ff.; 1989, p. 265 ff.) notes that any act of interpretation must take place within a circular movement between, on one hand, the reader-interpreter's prior understanding of the whole, and on the other hand, an examination of the parts. In the specific context of interpreting a text, this implies that the interpreter approaches the text with certain expectations and a pregiven understanding of the historico-cultural tradition ("the whole") to which the text in question ("the part") belongs. The name that Gadamer (1975, p. 239; 1989, p. 269) gives to such preunderstanding of the whole is, "prejudice" (in a relatively neutral sense of the term), and he points out that it is our prejudices (*Vorurteile*) that "constitute the historical reality of . . . [our] being" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 245).

According to Gadamer (1975, p. 269 ff.; 1989, p. 302 ff.), it is our prejudices that signal our participation in our own historico-cultural tradition, and that define the limits and the potentialities of our horizon of understanding (or our "hermeneutic horizon"). Hence, rather than being viewed as obstacles to understanding, prejudices need to be regarded as the necessary conditions of all understanding. Such defense of prejudice on Gadamer's part, however, does not imply a blanket endorsement of all prejudices. On the contrary, Gadamer (1975) makes a distinction between, on one hand, "legitimate prejudices" (p. 246) or "productive prejudices that make understanding possible" (p. 263), and on the other hand, "prejudices that hinder understanding and

lead to misunderstanding" (p. 263). In which case, the logical question that arises is, How do we distinguish the legitimate or productive prejudices from those prejudices that may not be productive? With a view to addressing this question, Gadamer investigates the hermeneutic significance of the temporal distance separating the text from the reader-interpreter.

Gadamer (1975, p. 264) notes that early hermeneutics, with its notion of understanding as placing oneself "within the spirit of the age," viewed time as "a gulf to be bridged," and temporal distance as "something that must be overcome." In contrast, philosophical hermeneutics regards temporal distance as a condition of understanding. Moreover, by making possible a confrontation between our prejudices and a historically distant text, temporal distance provides us the space in which productive prejudices can be distinguished from the unproductive ones.

Elaborating on the importance of temporal distance in the "filtering" of prejudices, Gadamer points out that we can become conscious of our prejudices only when we encounter a text whose meaning challenges the truth of our prejudices. As Gadamer (1975, p. 266) put it, "It is impossible to make ourselves aware of . . . [one of our prejudices] while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, stimulated. The encounter with the text . . . can provide this stimulus." In such an encounter, in which the meaning of a text confronts our own prejudices, it is possible for us to clearly distinguish between those prejudices that facilitate understanding and those that hinder understanding. True understanding of a text, therefore, "requires . . . the . . . suspension of our [unproductive] prejudices" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 266).

It is important to point out here that in calling for the suspension of our unproductive prejudices, Gadamer is not merely echoing earlier methodological prescriptions (e.g., those of Descartes, 1931, 1968) that hoped to purify human subjectivity and thereby allow guaranteed access to truth and certainty. As this article next points out, Gadamer's discussion of the hermeneutic role of prejudices is linked, in important ways, to his conceptualization of understanding/interpretation as dialogue.

Understanding as dialogue and the fusion of horizons. For Gadamer (1975, 1989), one of the major limitations of early hermeneutics is its reliance on the notion of subject-object dichotomy, with the text being treated as an "object" and the reader-interpreter serving as the so-called "subject" (see also, Bauman, 1978; Bleicher, 1980; Palmer, 1969). Building on the philosophy of Heidegger (1962), however, Gadamer (1975, p. 225 ff.; 1989, p. 254 ff.) rejects this subject-object dichotomy as philosophically unacceptable and conceptualizes interpretation not as a mere acquisition of our mind (i.e., not as something produced by remaining "outside" the text) but as participation in the "tradition" to which the text belongs.

According to Gadamer (1975), such a participation implies that understanding/interpretation has the nature of a dialogue in which the meaning of a text emerges through a conversation between the interpreter and the text (p. 331; see also Palmer, 1969; Tracy, 1998; Warnke, 1987). Moreover, given that "the necessary structure of [a conversation] is that of question and answer" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 330), the hermeneutic conversation between the interpreter and the text is a dialogue in which the interpreter puts questions to the text, and the text, in turn, puts questions to the interpreter. The questions put by the text challenge the truth of the interpreter's prejudices. The goal of this dialogue between the interpreter and the text (i.e., the goal of interpretation) is to find those questions to which the text constitutes the answers (Bleicher,

1980, p. 114; Palmer, 1969, p. 200), for as Gadamer (1975, p. 333) points out, "the meaning of a sentence is relative to the question to which it is a reply." Indeed, it is only by finding out such questions that we can genuinely understand a text (as "logical," "reasonable," etc.), and not dismiss it as nonsense.

However, finding out the questions to which the text constitutes the answers requires that we suspend those of our prejudices that (in whatever way) may militate against our articulating such questions; that is, we suspend those prejudices that may lead us into treating the text as nonsense. Hence, Gadamer's call to suspend our unproductive prejudices is not Cartesian; rather it is meant to highlight the conditions of genuine understanding.

According to Gadamer, such a hermeneutic dialogue, in which the interpreter suspends her or his unproductive prejudices and successfully arrives at an authentic understanding of the text, constitutes a "fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*)" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 273; 1989, p. 306). In this "fusion" that is understanding, the interpreter expands her or his own horizon of prejudices to integrate the horizon of the text. Such a fusion of horizons requires an awareness of effective-history, or an "historically effected consciousness" (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*; Gadamer, 1989), which makes the interpreter conscious of "the effective historical continuum" to which he or she belongs (Mueller-Vollmer, 1985, p. 39). Such a consciousness requires an awareness, on the interpreter's part, of her or his own hermeneutic horizon, a recognition of interpretation as dialogue, and an openness for tradition (Bleicher, 1980, p. 111).

The fusion of horizons (and, hence, all understanding/interpretation) takes place through the medium of language. However, for Gadamer's philosophy of hermeneutics, language is not merely instrumental; rather, language has an ontological significance. In other words, according to hermeneutic philosophy, language should not be viewed merely as "an instrument or a tool" (Gadamer, 1976, p. 62) that we use for pointing to the objects of the world. Rather, our world gets constituted in and through our language: "The appearance of particular objects of our concern depends on a world already having been disclosed to us in the language we use" (Linge, 1976, p. xxix). "Language," asserts Gadamer (1989, p. 443), "is not just one of man's possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a world at all." Language having turned ontological, "Being that can be understood is language" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 474), with the result that hermeneutics and interpretation/understanding assume universal significance.

Interpretation and authorial intention. For both Schleiermacher and Dilthey, broadly speaking, the goal of understanding a text (and hence the goal of the process of hermeneutics) was to reproduce and reexperience the original author's creative process.[5] For these theorists, therefore, the project of hermeneutics was inseparably tied to the notion of authorial intention. In other words, according to these early hermeneutic theorists, the purpose of textual interpretation is to understand the intended meaning of the text's author (Bleicher, 1980; DiCenso, 1990; Gadamer, 1989; Hoy, 1978; Ormiston & Schrift, 1990; Palmer, 1969; Warnke, 1987). This view of hermeneutics is radically disturbed in Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy.

As we will recall from this article's previous discussions, according to Gadamer (1975, 1989), *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*, that is, an "historically effected consciousness" (or an "authentically-historical consciousness," see Mueller-Vollmer, 1985, p. 39) enables the reader-interpreter to suspend her or his unproductive preju-

dices in the course of interpreting a text, leading to the fusion of horizons that is understanding. Notwithstanding such fusion of horizons, however, as Gadamer points out, the fact remains that interpretation/understanding is always rooted in the present and can take place only in and through the interpreter's own horizon of prejudices. Therefore, although interpretation does not mean a forcing of the text to fit into the straitjacket of the interpreter's own prejudices, categories, and constructs, neither does interpretation imply that the interpreter empathetically places herself or himself in the shoes of the text's author: the former does violence to the integrity of the text; the latter, given the interpreter's inevitable historicality and hermeneutic situatedness, is impossible to achieve (Gadamer, 1975, p. 272; Howard, 1982, p. 152).

In view of the above, the process of interpretation always brings to bear on the text "the totality of the objective course of history" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 263) as manifested in the historical situation (and hermeneutic "situatedness") of the interpreter. Hence, asserts Gadamer (1975, p. 264), "the meaning of a text [always] goes beyond its author" and "the text at all times represent(s) more than the author intended" (Bleicher, 1980, p. 111). In consequence, "the interpreter . . . must . . . understand more than [the author]," and interpretation, accordingly, "is not merely a reproductive [activity], but always a productive [one]" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 264).

The rejection of authorial intention in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is found troubling by objectivist theorists (e.g., Betti, 1990; Hirsch, 1965, 1967), who conceptualize the text as possessing a fixed meaning (generally speaking, the intended meaning of the text's author) and define the task of understanding as seeking to objectively decipher such meaning by relying on method-governed analysis. However, to the extent that methods themselves are historically produced and contingent, and inasmuch as no method can ever be successful in completely removing all traces of history, culture, and context from the interpreter, there would seem to be considerable merit in Gadamer's philosophical conclusion that the meaning of a text is always emergent through the "conversation" between the text and interpreter, and that such meaning is not delimited by authorial intentions. Gadamer's non-author-intentional view of textual meaning is widely accepted among contemporary hermeneutic scholars (e.g., Ricoeur, 1981).

The moment of critique in interpretation. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics was given a new orientation by critical theorists like Apel and Habermas, who sought to transform hermeneutics into a vehicle for emancipatory critique (i.e., into critical hermeneutics). This transformational project was primarily carried out through the famous Habermas-Gadamer debate, which took place via four key pieces of writing published during the late 1960s and the early 1970s (see Gadamer, 1985, 1990; Habermas, 1990a, 1990b). The overall debate is full of complex arguments (see, e.g., Brenkman, 1987; Colburn, 1986; DiCenso, 1990; Hoy, 1978; McCarthy, 1978, 1982; Mendelson, 1979; Misgeld, 1976; Outhwaite, 1987; Ricoeur, 1973; Thompson, 1981), and considerations of space prevent us from engaging in an in-depth analysis of the same. In what follows, we will take a brief look at this debate with a view to understanding some of the major issues raised therein.

In the course of this debate, Habermas (1990b) acknowledges the strength of Gadamer's insight that interpretation can proceed only on the basis of a hermeneutic horizon constituted through the interpreter's "prejudices" (which signal the interpreter's participation in her or his own historico-cultural "tradition"). However, he is

troubled by, what he regards as, Gadamer's conflation of the unavoidability of preju-
dices with an acceptance of the legitimacy of all such prejudices. According to
Habermas (1990b), the mere fact of the existence of hermeneutic "prejudices" does
not necessarily mean that all such "prejudices" must be regarded as legitimate. In
essence, Habermas argues that tradition is not something simply "lying out there" that
we passively pick up and make our own. Rather, our tradition is what we actively con-
struct through critical self-reflection. This self-reflection, although confirming many
received "prejudices," also rejects and destroys several others. This implies that
although "prejudices" may indeed be inevitable and unavoidable, not all "prejudices"
are necessarily legitimate. Habermas (1990b, p. 237), hence, is critical of Gadamer for
not recognizing "the power of reflection," and for the latter's "prejudice for the rights
of [unexamined] prejudices."

In a similar vein, Habermas (1990b) recognizes the importance of Gadamer's view
of the linguisticality of understanding/interpretation, and accepts Gadamer's claim
that language is a "metainstitution on which all social institutions are dependent"
(p. 239). However, he rejects Gadamer's view of language as ontological. He asserts
that far from language "determin(ing) the material practices of life" (Habermas,
1990b, p. 240), it is the "metainstitution of language" that gets altered by the social
practices of labor and power relations.

Habermas observes that as a result of empirical conditions of social labor and domi-
nation, linguistic structures continually get altered. As a consequence of such changes
in linguistic structures, language inevitably becomes a medium not only for the mani-
festation of a benevolently-understood tradition, but also a medium of "domination,
deception, and social power" (Habermas, 1990b, p. 239), and of "sedimented vio-
lence" (Weinsheimer, 1989, p. 128). In short, with language getting worked over by
history and historical processes, language as such becomes an ideological vehicle for
"legitimat(ing) relations of organized force" (Habermas, 1990b, p. 239). For Haber-
mas (1990a, 1990b), therefore, an adequate interpretive act must demonstrate a con-
sciousness of this fissured nature of language that makes linguistic tradition a reposi-
tory of both truth and untruth, of authentic beauty as well as violence.

Habermas, accordingly, seeks to transform Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics
into critical hermeneutics. Habermas's project of developing a critical hermeneutics
needs to be viewed in the context of his overall social theory (see, e.g., Habermas 1971,
1984, 1987). Without getting into the details of his extensive oeuvre, however,
Habermas may be understood as arguing that language as tradition (which is mostly
seen by Gadamer as above reproach) also includes those ideological elements that
legitimate and perpetuate the conditions responsible for "systematically distorted
communication" (i.e., conditions that prevent the emergence of a language/tradition
that would represent an authentic social consensus) and hence militate against the
establishment of that "ideal speech situation" in which human beings may arrive at
genuine consensus by means of engaging in rational discourse totally free of domina-
tion and coercion.

According to critical hermeneutics, therefore, the task of interpretation is to offer a
critique of the above-mentioned ideological elements. Concomitantly, for critical her-
meneutics, the task of interpretation is to offer a critique also of the ideological "tech-
nocratic consciousness" that translates political/ethical issues into technical ones and
fails to realize the negative consequences of the increasing "colonization" of the
lifeworld processes (involving shared meanings, community and intersubjectivity) by

system processes (e.g., those of the formal economy and the state) in contemporary industrialism (see Bleicher, 1980; McCarthy, 1978; Thompson, 1981, 1990).

Gadamer's (1985, 1990) principal defense against the preceding critique consists of asserting that (a) critique of tradition is itself subsumed in, and dependent on, the very tradition or language that serves as the focus of critique and (b) that the primary goal of philosophical hermeneutics is not to provide a narrow method of interpretation (which, in Gadamer's view, is what critical hermeneutics is offering) but to explicate the conditions for the possibility of understanding as such. Habermas's (1990a) rejoinder to this consists, in part, of observing that "hermeneutic consciousness remains incomplete as long as it does not include a reflection on the limits of hermeneutic understanding" (p. 253), and pointing out that the limits of philosophical hermeneutics are emphatically underscored in cases of "systematically distorted communication."

A way out of this seeming impasse between Habermas and Gadamer is sought to be provided by Ricoeur (1973, 1981, 1990), who argues, among other things, that both Gadamerian and Habermasian approaches to interpretation are necessary. Ricoeur notes, moreover, that (a) Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics already includes the moment of critique (e.g., in its insistence on the role of critically filtering out "unproductive" prejudices in the task of interpretation) and (b) that the *Ideologiekritik* advocated by Habermas's critical hermeneutics is, in turn, part of a tradition, and is further linked to tradition by its project of regenerating and reinterpreting that tradition itself (see also, Bleicher, 1980; Thompson, 1981, 1990). In this way, Ricoeur seeks to reconcile two distinct moments (or aspects) of hermeneutic interpretation, namely, those of faith and of doubt. The hermeneutics of faith interprets a text primarily with a trusting disposition; the hermeneutics of doubt, in contrast, adopts a critical and skeptical stance toward the text. Hence, these two approaches to interpretation are often seen as opposites. Ricoeur, however, seeks to embed each of these two approaches within the other. Indeed, going even further, he posits critique to be an integral part of hermeneutic interpretation and asserts: "We can no longer oppose hermeneutics and the critique of ideology. The critique of ideology is the necessary detour that self-understanding must take" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 144). The next section of the article discusses some guidelines for employing hermeneutics as a methodology in organizational research.

Methodological Guidelines for Organizational Research

Early approaches to hermeneutics were driven by the goal of formulating rigid rules, methods, and techniques for textual interpretation. Under the influence of the philosophical insights of Heidegger and Gadamer, however, such a restrictive view of hermeneutics has now mostly been given up. Hence, hermeneutics is no longer seen as a narrowly defined method but as a broad epistemology and philosophy of understanding/interpretation. Implicit in such a philosophy of interpretation, however, are a number of important method-related guidelines for organizational researchers.

We may begin by noting here that the scope of hermeneutics is no longer seen as being confined merely to interpreting texts (narrowly defined as written documents and the like). Following, in part, from Ricoeur (1971), who argued that human action in general could be considered as "text," contemporary hermeneutic thought has expanded the meaning of the term *text* to include organizational practices and institutions, economic and social structures, culture and cultural artifacts, and so on. The

point to grasp here, of course, is that organizational and social/cultural practices and institutions are "texts" not in any physical sense, but in a metaphorical sense; they are texts because they may be "read," understood and interpreted in a manner that is similar to our reading/understanding/interpretation of written texts (Francis, 1994). As a result of this metaphorical transformation of the word, "text," the methodological applicability of hermeneutics in organizational research stands considerably expanded.

Another important methodological consideration for organizational research follows from the principle of the hermeneutic circle, which, as we noted earlier, emphasizes the significance of the context for purposes of interpreting a text. Methodologically, two points need to be kept in mind: (a) that in any research situation, the context is not a simple given, but needs to be actively defined by the researcher, and (b) that the context can usually be defined at different levels of comprehensiveness. Let us imagine, for instance, that a management researcher is trying to understand the recent Exxon-Mobil merger (the "text"). The context of this text may be defined, with increasing comprehensiveness, at a number of levels, including (a) the U.S. and/or global petroleum industry, (b) the U.S. and/or global economic system, (c) the U.S. and/or global political economy as a system, (d) the U.S. and/or global totality (representing a social, cultural, political, and economic gestalt), and so on.

In general, the higher the level at which we define the context, the more comprehensive is our understanding of the "text." A broad methodological guideline for organizational researchers employing hermeneutics, hence, is to begin the process of interpretation with a relatively narrowly defined context (i.e., at a lower level) and gradually move in the direction of higher level definitions of the context. Hermeneutic interpretation, thus, is an iterative process, which goes through a number of iterations corresponding to the different levels at which the overall context is progressively defined. Sometimes, however, for a variety of reasons, the researcher may not have the flexibility of moving through multiple levels of the context and may need to choose one out of the several possible levels that may be available for this purpose. In part, such a choice of levels will be influenced by the precise nature of the research questions being asked. In addition, however, it is important to recognize that the management researcher's choice of levels has a value-laden dimension as well, because how the researcher chooses to define the context will have an important bearing as to which aspects and facets of the "text" will receive attention, what kinds of questions will eventually get raised, and so on.

For hermeneutic research, history serves as an important part of context. In other words, hermeneutic research conceptualizes context both synchronically as well as diachronically. In methodological terms, therefore, hermeneutic inquiry requires the organizational researcher to develop a thorough familiarity with the historical aspects of the phenomenon of interest. For instance (to go back to the example of Exxon-Mobil merger), in order to adequately understand this "text," the researcher may need to become familiar with various aspects of the history of the modern global petroleum sector since its emergence in the 19th century.

Methodologically, hermeneutics is also a deeply self-reflexive and self-critical process. As we saw earlier, we can approach a "text" only from within our own finitude (i.e., from within our hermeneutic horizon constituted through our "prejudices"). However, unless we become conscious of these "prejudices," we may not be able to suspend our "unproductive prejudices" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 263) when the need for

such suspension arises during the course of interpretation. Imagine, for instance, that an international management researcher is trying to understand the organizational arrangements and practices of an "esoteric" culture. Unless this researcher is actively conscious of his or her own fundamental assumptions, "prejudices" and "common-sense," he or she may run the risk of dismissing that "other" culture's practices as irrational, superstitious, and the like. Hence, the organizational researcher who is using hermeneutics as a methodology needs to continually question and test her or his own prejudices.

This form of critical self-reflexivity is necessary not only when we are trying to understand a "text" from an alien culture, but also when we are dealing with "texts" belonging to what we may regard as our "own" culture. Consider, for instance, the case of a management researcher from the northeastern United States who may be trying to understand a worker strike in an Appalachian mine, or who may be studying the stakeholder policies and practices of a grassroots nongovernmental organization in rural Mississippi. It is easy enough to see that unless this researcher is willing and able to suspend some of his or her "prejudices," he or she may not succeed in developing a comprehensive understanding of these organizational phenomena. Similarly, critical suspension of unproductive prejudices may sometimes be necessary when researchers seek to understand organizational practices across different workplace subcultures.

The above focus on the critical dimension achieves a new salience in critical hermeneutics that conceptualizing interpretation as a critical-emancipatory project views the very process of interpretation as fundamentally motivated by the goal of critique. Methodologically, this requires the organizational researcher to go beyond the "surface" (or obvious) meaning of the text and to "dig beneath" the surface language of the "text" with a view to unveiling and retrieving those meanings that often lie buried beneath the surface.

It is important to recognize here that such an act of critical unveiling is always informed by one or more theoretical perspectives. Given his own location in neo-Marxist critical theory, Habermas advocates the *Ideologiekritik* perspective for guiding the process of critical hermeneutics (also known as "depth hermeneutics"). However, in addition to critical theory, depth hermeneutics can also rely on other theoretical perspectives, such as feminism, materialist Marxism, postcolonialism and many more. Once again, the management researcher's choice of one or more of these theoretical perspectives is a value-laden activity, which is mediated by a number of interrelated factors including the researcher's ethical/political posture, the researcher's personal history and hermeneutic situation, the nature of the "text" being interpreted, and so on. Methodologically speaking, however, the organizational researcher needs to make a conscious and well-reasoned decision as to the theory (or theories) that will inform the process of depth hermeneutics.

This article has previously noted that contemporary hermeneutics does not subscribe to an author-intentional view of interpretation. Methodologically, this implies that the goal of interpretation is not to retrieve the author's intended meaning, but to focus on the text (i.e., the data) instead. This approach to interpretation makes hermeneutics an eminently suitable methodology also for interpreting texts having corporate authorship. In the case of texts with corporate authorship (where the actual authorship may be unknown, and/or where there may be several authors for any given text), any author-intentional approach to interpretation would soon find itself in a methodologi-

cal dead end. In addition, the non-author-intentional view of interpretation is consistent with the requirements of critical hermeneutics as well.

Finally, one of the strengths of contemporary hermeneutics lies in that it does not fetishize method. Simply stated, adopting the hermeneutic perspective does not imply that the organizational researcher may not employ quantitative or statistical techniques of analysis (see, e.g., Bernstein, 1983; Bleicher, 1982; Habermas, 1971). In methodological terms, therefore, the hermeneutic approach offers management researchers considerable flexibility for combining qualitative and quantitative methods. We will next provide a brief illustration of critical hermeneutic textual interpretation in organizational research.

An Illustrative Example of Hermeneutic Interpretation

The example that follows looks at a macrolevel event in the international petroleum industry. Conventionally, such events are often interpreted from a narrowly economic perspective that tends to rely on notions of rational economic decision making. Hermeneutic interpretation, however, helps us develop a more holistic understanding of such macro-industry-level events.

In October 1973, a group of large Western oil companies (the so-called international petroleum cartel, to use the terminology employed by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, see Prasad, 1994, p. 57, n. 11) entered into negotiations with OPEC (the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) to discuss the price of crude oil. The negotiations broke down soon after they had begun, and on October 16, 1973, OPEC made a major decision, significantly raising the price of crude petroleum. This decision is commonly regarded as a watershed event in the evolving institutional dynamics of the international petroleum sector, because this was the first time in its history that OPEC was resorting to a unilateral increase in the price of crude oil. How do we understand/interpret this event or decision (i.e., the "text"). In what follows, we will briefly illustrate how the various methodological principles and concepts discussed earlier come together to facilitate a critical hermeneutic interpretation of this text. In our subsequent discussions, this text will be referred to as OPEC-1973.

Let us begin by looking at the importance of suspending unproductive prejudices in hermeneutic interpretation. We need to note here that any attempt to interpret OPEC-1973 in terms of the Arab's presumed mastery of "the arts of the bazaar—trading . . . dealing, intrigue" (Yergin, 1990, p. 186), or the Arab's supposed immersion in the "values of desert survival—suspicion, stealth, surprise" (Yergin, 1990, p. 708), is not likely to be particularly productive.[6] Here, we are referring to certain common prejudices or presuppositions often held in the West about the Arabs/Orient. On the basis of these Orientalist (Said, 1979) prejudices, one may conceivably try to interpret OPEC-1973 as a sinister Arab plot. Such an interpretation of OPEC-1973, however, is not particularly insightful because of the unproductive nature of the Orientalist prejudices. In brief, the Orientalist prejudices are unproductive because they fail to recognize that "trading, dealing, intrigue, suspicion, and surprise" are not unique to the Orient and are likely to be found as much on the Wall Street, for instance, as in any Arab bazaar. And because these characteristics or practices are not unique to the Orient (or the OPEC), no useful purpose is served by invoking them while attempting to understand/interpret the OPEC decision. Here, then, we have a clear example of an unproductive prejudice

(in Gadamer's terms), which the interpreter must suspend or filter out during the process of interpreting the text in question.

Let us now turn toward the operation of the hermeneutic circle in the process of interpretation. As noted earlier, while interpreting a text, it is possible to define the context at increasingly higher levels, with each higher level offering increasingly comprehensive understanding of the text being interpreted. In the process of interpreting OPEC-1973, therefore, we may, as an example, begin by initially defining the context at the more proximate level of the dynamics of international demand and supply of oil, and the October 1973 War (the Yom Kippur War) between Egypt and Israel. The opening years of the 1970s were characterized by galloping increases in the demand for oil in the United States, Europe, and Japan, which put the OPEC in a very strong bargaining position. And the support extended by the United States and its Western allies to Israel in the Yom Kippur War (which began on October 6, 1973) angered many Arab nations. Hence the more immediate economic and political context of the October 1973 negotiations does help us develop an understanding of the breakdown of the October 1973 negotiations between OPEC and the cartel of Western oil companies, and of the OPEC decision to unilaterally effect a massive hike in oil prices.

It is possible, however, to define the context of OPEC-1973 at a higher level than above and, in so doing, develop a more comprehensive hermeneutic understanding of the text in question. We may, for instance, define this higher level context to be constituted by the system of petroleum concessions existing during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the major oil producing regions of the world. Under the concession system, major Western oil companies (mostly belonging to the petroleum cartel) enjoyed exclusive long-term rights (with durations of 45 to 75 years) for the exploration, extraction, and export of crude oil in the leading oil producing countries. In return, the host countries either received a fixed royalty per ton of crude oil produced or, as became the case during later years, entered into profit sharing arrangements with the cartel companies. The concessions made the cartel the sole arbiter of whether it would undertake any exploration and production of crude oil, and of the nature and extent of investment in the concession-granting country. Thus, having won a concession, a company belonging to the Western cartel was completely free if it so desired not to produce any crude at all in a specific country.

By its very nature, therefore, the concession system made the concession-granting country extremely dependent on the Western cartel. Indeed, in the course of time, such concessions came to be seen as a forfeiture of the concession-granting country's sovereignty itself. In addition, after the World War II, for a variety of reasons, the oil companies kept continually reducing the price of crude oil. The result was the establishment of OPEC in 1960 with a view to safeguarding the oil producing countries' interests. One of the most important objectives of OPEC was to put an end to the inequitable system of oil concessions and to attain control over the pricing of crude oil. With the context thus defined, OPEC-1973 may be understood as a culmination of the historical process that began in 1960 with the establishment of OPEC, and which was marked by a series of agreements (each arrived at after highly protracted negotiations) between the oil companies and the oil producing countries. Each of these agreements contributed in important ways toward weakening the overall edifice of the concession system, with OPEC-1973 finally signaling the demise of this system (and of the attendant control over the pricing of crude oil that had hitherto been exercised by the Western oil

companies). This higher level context, thus, allows us to develop a relatively more comprehensive interpretation of OPEC-1973.

In the present case, it is possible to define the context at an even higher level, namely, the global dynamics of colonization and decolonization. History informs us that the ascendancy of the Western oil companies in the oil producing regions of the world during the 19th and 20th centuries was achieved only as a result of the active intervention of these companies' parent governments. In other words, the international dominance of the Western oil companies during these years was a function of the military, political, and economic power wielded by their parent governments. In a deep sense, therefore, the process of establishing the global mastery of these oil companies went hand in hand with the projection, establishment, and consolidation of European and American political and military power over the rest of the world during the colonial era. Hence, the structural features of the international petroleum order (e.g., the system of petroleum concessions) constituted powerful economic sinews of imperialism. It was inevitable, therefore, that the decolonization movement, which successfully ended the formal political aspects of Western imperialism during the middle of the 20th century, would continue to wage a struggle to overthrow the economic features of imperialism as well. With the context thus defined, we can offer an even more comprehensive interpretation of OPEC-1973, understanding this event as a further extension of the decolonization movement into the economic sphere (specifically, into the international petroleum sector).

The preceding interpretation of OPEC-1973 has been carried out by employing some important methodological precepts integral to hermeneutics, including (a) the significance of recognizing our own historical situatedness, and suspending those unproductive prejudices that hinder adequate understanding (e.g., the Orientalist presuppositions), and (b) utilizing the operations of the hermeneutic circle. By way of illustrating the latter, we iteratively defined the context of OPEC-1973 at increasingly higher levels. The result of following these two methodological steps is that fusion between the respective horizons of the text and the interpreter's that Gadamer calls hermeneutic understanding. Moreover, by gradually moving in the direction of higher level definitions of the context, we have outlined the process whereby our understanding of the text becomes more and more comprehensive.

Notice further the non-author-intentional approach to interpretation adopted above. At no point does the preceding hermeneutic endeavor seek to retrieve authorial intention. In other words, the focus of our interpretation is the event itself (namely, OPEC-1973), and not what the actors involved with this event (e.g., representatives of OPEC and the oil companies) might have intended. Notice also that by thematizing oppressive and inequitable politico-economic arrangements (e.g., the grossly unfair system of petroleum concessions, and the tyrannical reign of colonialism), our specific choices regarding higher level definitions of the context open the door for the preceding hermeneutic interpretation to eventually take a more critical-emancipatory turn.

Conclusion and Implications

This article has sought to provide organizational researchers with a comprehensive grounding in the methodological, epistemological, and philosophical aspects of hermeneutics, a major interpretive approach for understanding "texts." Toward that end, the article has (a) surveyed the historical evolution of hermeneutics, (b) presented an

in-depth analysis of the key concepts and debates that inform contemporary herme-neutics, and (c) offered important methodological guidelines for hermeneutic research in management and organization studies.

With Greek antiquity as its origin, the evolution of hermeneutics has been marked by the emergence, at different historical periods, of relatively distinct forms of herme-neutics. During early periods, hermeneutics was primarily characterized by two distin-guishing features: (a) the self-defined project of hermeneutics mainly consisted of for-mulating precise rules, techniques, and procedures for understanding the meaning of difficult passages in written texts; and (b) the process of hermeneutic understanding and interpretation was governed by an author-intentional theory of meaning. During the course of its evolution, hermeneutics has discarded both of these early features. Following major theoretical innovations by Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Habermas, and so on, contemporary hermeneutics no longer defines itself as a method (narrowly understood), but as a comprehensive epistemology and philoso-phy of interpretation, which is informed by such important concepts as the hermeneu-tic circle, the hermeneutic horizon, understanding as dialogue and fusion of horizons, the non-author-intentional view of meaning, and interpretation as critique. To fully appreciate the epistemological and methodological space occupied by hermeneutics, we need also to compare hermeneutics with, on one hand, poststructuralist deconstruc-tion (see, e.g., Derrida, 1976, 1978) and, on the other hand, with different approaches to interpretation developed in other (i.e., non-Western) philosophical traditions (as, for example, in the various schools of Indian philosophy, see, e.g., Raju, 1992). Mostly for reasons of space, however, this article has been prevented from engaging in these dis-cussions.

As an epistemology and philosophy of interpretation, contemporary hermeneutics has expanded the scope of the term *text* to include not only documents in the conven-tional sense but also organizational practices and structures, social and economic activities, cultural artifacts, and the rest. In methodological terms, this implies that management scholars may legitimately adopt hermeneutics as a research approach not only for interpreting the usual corporate documents (e.g., annual reports, internal memoranda, policy documents, etc.) but for investigating a whole host of microlevel and macrolevel organizational phenomena such as technological change, leadership, motivation, empowerment, corporate strategy, and many more.

Methodologically, hermeneutics as an approach for management research requires the investigator to pay great attention to the context and history of the organizational phenomenon being studied. Moreover, hermeneutics as a methodology makes impor-tant demands on the organizational researcher's capability for self-reflection and auto-critique. In addition, contemporary hermeneutics emphasizes the value of adopting an ethically informed critical perspective in organizational research. Several of these methodological prescriptions and guidelines are of immense value to organizational researchers working within other interpretive genres as well. We may, therefore, con-clude this article with the observation that developing a genuinely hermeneutic imagi-nation may well be regarded as the overall goal of organizational scholarship as such.

Notes

1. It may be useful to note here that in the Greek cosmos Hermes was not only an interpreter and messenger, he was also a liar and a contriver of tales. Could it be the case that in choosing to

name the act of interpretation after their duplicitous god, Hermes, the ancient Greeks were trying to convey something meaningful about the complex nature of the interpretive act? An interesting question for all management researchers to ponder.

2. Similarly, *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2nd college edition, 1985) defines hermeneutics as "the science and methodology of interpretation, especially of the Bible."

3. Classical hermeneutic theory is also referred to as romantic hermeneutics (see, e.g., Gadamer, 1989; Warnke, 1987).

4. This tripartite classificatory scheme reflects, to some extent, Bleicher's (1980) identification of three forms of hermeneutics, namely, (a) hermeneutical theory, (b) hermeneutic philosophy, and (c) critical hermeneutics. It is worth pointing out here that scholars often use different (sometimes conflicting) labels while referring to the hermeneutic contributions of specific thinkers. Bleicher, for instance, uses such terms as *existential-ontological hermeneutics*, *philosophical hermeneutics*, and *dialectical* (or critical) *hermeneutics* for referring to the works, respectively, of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Habermas. Palmer (1969, p. 94 ff.), on the other hand, employs the term *dialectical hermeneutics* for Gadamer's hermeneutic contributions, whereas Thompson (1981) uses the expression *hermeneutic phenomenology* as an umbrella term that subsumes the hermeneutic thoughts of Heidegger and Gadamer, as well as, Ricoeur. In contrast, Bleicher (1980) employs the expression, phenomenological hermeneutics, only in connection with Ricoeur, although Ricoeur (1980, p. 238) himself has rightly observed that it was actually Martin Heidegger who first sought to ground hermeneutics in phenomenology. Also note, in this connection, Bleicher's (1980, p. 4) remark that Ricoeur's thoughts, while "(bringing) into sharp relief the other three [forms of hermeneutics]," do not "(represent) a clearly separable strand" of hermeneutics and Ormiston and Schrift's (1990, p. 22) related observation that Ricoeur's principal hermeneutic contribution seems to be his attempted reconciliation of the hermeneutic differences between Gadamer and Habermas. However, Arnold and Fischer (1994, p. 56) regard Ricoeur's hermeneutic contributions as constituting a new "version" of hermeneutics. See also, in this context, Bleicher's (1980, p. 3 ff.) discussion of his own distinction between the terms *hermeneutical* and *hermeneutic*, a distinction not considered crucial for purposes of the present article, and Palmer's (1969, p. 33, n. 1) extended note on his dissatisfaction with the different adjectives used for characterizing the hermeneutic contributions of different thinkers.

5. For some subtle differences between Schleiermacher and Dilthey, see, for example, Palmer (1969, p. 104 ff.) and Ormiston and Schrift (1990, p. 14 ff.).

6. Yergin's (1990) recitation of these supposedly Arab characteristics does not take place during the course of his analysis of OPEC-1973. His book mentions these characteristics while discussing other issues.

References

Apel, K.-O. (1980). *Towards a transformation of philosophy* (G. Adey & D. Frisby, Trans.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Aredal, A. (1986). Procrustes: A modern management pattern found in classical myth. *Journal of Management*, *12*(3), 403-414.

Arnold, S., & Fischer, E. (1994). Hermeneutics and consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *21*, 55-70.

Bauman, Z. (1978). *Hermeneutics and social science*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bernstein, R. J. (1983). *Beyond objectivism and relativism: Science, hermeneutics, and praxis*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Betti, E. (1990). Hermeneutics as the general methodology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. In G. Ormiston & A. Schrift (Eds.), *The hermeneutic tradition* (pp. 159-197). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Bleicher, J. (1980). *Contemporary hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as method, philosophy and critique*. London: Routledge.

Bleicher, J. (1982). *The hermeneutic imagination*. London: Routledge.

Boland, R. (1989). Beyond the objectivist and the subjectivist: Learning to read accounting as text. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, *14*, 591-604.

Brenkman, J. (1987). *Culture and domination*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Colburn, K. (1986). Critical theory and the hermeneutical circle. *Sociological Inquiry*, *56*(3), 367-380.

Connolly, J., & Keutner, T. (1988). *Hermeneutics versus science? Three German views*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Derrida, J. (1976). *Of grammatology* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Derrida, J. (1978). *Writing and difference* (A. Bass, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Descartes, R. (1931). *Philosophical works of Descartes* (2 vols.). New York: Dover.

Descartes, R. (1968). *Discourse on method and other writings* (introduction by F. E. Sutcliffe, Trans). Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.

DiCenso, J. (1990). *Hermeneutics and the disclosure of truth: A study in the work of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Dilthey, W. (1976). *Selected writings* (introduction by H. P. Rickman, Ed. & Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Francis, J. R. (1994). Auditing, hermeneutics, and subjectivity. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, *19*, 235-269.

Gabriel, Y. (1991). Turning facts into stories and stories into facts: A hermeneutic exploration of organizational folklore. *Human Relations*, *44*(8), 857-875.

Gadamer, H.-G. (1975). *Truth and method* (G. Barden & J. Cumming, Trans.). New York: Seabury.

Gadamer, H.-G. (1976). *Philosophical hermeneutics* (D. E. Linge, Ed. & Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gadamer, H.-G. (1985). Rhetoric, hermeneutics, and the critique of ideology: Metacritical comments on *Truth and Method*. In K. Mueller-Vollmer (Ed.), *The hermeneutic reader* (pp. 274-292). New York: Continuum.

Gadamer, H.-G. (1989). *Truth and method* (2nd Rev. ed.; J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans. of Rev.). New York: Continuum.

Gadamer, H.-G. (1990). Reply to my critics. In G. L. Ormiston & A. D. Schrift (Eds.), *The hermeneutic tradition* (pp. 273-297). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Habermas, J. (1971). *Knowledge and human interet.* (J. J. Shapiro, Trans.). Boston: Beacon.

Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action* (Vol. 1; T. McCarthy, Trans.). Boston: Beacon.

Habermas, J. (1987). *The theory of communicative action* (Vol. 2; T. McCarthy, Trans.). Boston: Beacon.

Habermas, J. (1990a). The hermeneutic claim to universality (J. Bleicher, Trans.). In G. L. Ormiston & A. D. Schrift (Eds.), *The hermeneutic tradition* (pp. 245-272). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Habermas, J. (1990b). A review of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (F. R. Dallmayr & T. McCarthy, Trans.). In G. L. Ormiston & A. D. Schrift (Eds.), *The hermeneutic tradition* (pp. 213-244). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.

Hirsch, E. D., Jr. (1965). Gadamer's theory of interpretation. *Review of Metaphysics*, *XVIII*, 488-507.

Hirsch, E. D., Jr. (1967). *Validity in interpretation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Hirschman, E. C. (1990). Secular immortality and the American ideology of affluence. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *17*, 31-42.

Howard, R. J. (1982). *Three faces of hermeneutics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hoy, D. C. (1978). *The critical circle: Literature, history and philosophical hermeneutics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lee, A. S. (1994). Electronic mail as a medium for rich communication: An empirical investigation using hermeneutic interpretation. *MIS Quarterly*, *18*, 143-157.

Linge, D. E. (1976). Editor's introduction. In H.-G. Gadamer (Ed.), *Philosophical hermeneutics* (pp. xi-lviii). Berkeley: University of California.

McCarthy, T. (1978). *The critical theory of Juergen Habermas*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

McCarthy, T. (1982). Rationality and relativism: Habermas's "overcoming" of hermeneutics. In J. B. Thompson & D. Held (Eds.), *Habermas: Critical debates* (pp. 57-78). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Mendelson, J. (1979). The Habermas-Gadamer debate. *New German Critique*, *18*, 44-73.

Meredith, J., Raturi, A., Amoako-Gyampah, K., & Kaplan, B. (1989). Alternative research paradigms in operations. *Journal of Operations Management*, *8*(4), 297-327.

Misgeld, D. (1976). Critical theory and hermeneutics: The debate between Habermas and Gadamer. In J. O'Neill (Ed.), *On critical theory* (pp. 164-183). New York: Seabury.

Mueller-Vollmer, K. (1985). Introduction: Language, mind, and artifact: An outline of hermeneutic theory since the enlightenment. In K. Mueller-Vollmer (Ed.), *The hermeneutic reader* (pp. 1-53). New York: Continuum.

Ormiston, G., & Schrift, A. (1990). Editor's introduction. In G. Ormiston & A. Schrift (Eds.), *The hermeneutic tradition* (pp. 1-35). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Outhwaite, W. (1987). *New philosophies of science: Realism, hermeneutics and critical theory*. New York: St. Martin's.

Palmer, R. E. (1969). *Hermeneutics: Interpretation theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Parker, L., & Roffey, B. (1997). Back to the drawing board. *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, *10*, 212-247.

Phillips, N., & Brown, J. (1993). Analyzing communication in and around organizations: A critical hermeneutic approach. *Academy of Management Journal*, *36*(6), 1547-1576.

Prasad, A. (1994). *Institutional ideology and industry-level action: A macro analysis of corporate legitimation in the United States petroleum industry*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, School of Management.

Raju, P. T. (1992). *The philosophical traditions of India*. Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass.

Ricoeur, P. (1971). The model of the text: Meaningful action considered as a text. *Social Research*, *38*, 529-562.

Ricoeur, P. (1973). Ethics and culture: Habermas and Gadamer in dialogue. *Philosophy Today*, *17*, 129-141.

Ricoeur, P. (1980). Existence and hermeneutics. In J. Bleicher (Ed.), *Contemporary hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as method, philosophy and critique* (pp. 236-256). London: Routledge.

Ricoeur, P. (1981). *Hermeneutics and the human sciences* (J. B. Thompson, Ed. & Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1990). Hermeneutics and the critique of ideology (J. B. Thompson, Trans.). In G. L. Ormiston & A. D. Schrift (Eds.), *The hermeneutic tradition* (pp. 298-334). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Schleiermacher, F.D.E. (1985). Selections from hermeneutics: The handwritten manuscripts of F.D.E. Schleiermacher (H. Kimmerle, Ed; J. Duke & J. Forstman, Trans.). In K. Mueller-Vollmer (Ed.), *The hermeneutic reader* (pp. 73-97). New York: Continuum.

Standing, C., & Standing, S. (1999). The role of politics in IS career progression. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, *16*, 519-531.

Thompson, C. J. (1993). Modern truth and postmodern incredulity: A hermeneutic deconstruction of the metanarrative of "scientific truth" in marketing research. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, *10*, 325-338.

Thompson, C. J., Locander, W. B., & Pollio, H. R. (1990). The lived meaning of free choice: An existential-phenomenological description of everyday consumer experiences of contemporary married women. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *17*, 346-361.

Thompson, J. B. (1981). *Critical hermeneutics: A study in the thought of Paul Ricoeur and Juergen Habermas*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Thompson, J. B. (1990). *Ideology and modern culture*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Tracy, D. (1998). Is there hope for the public realm? Conversation as interpretation. *Social Research*, *65*(3), 597-609.

Van Maanen, J. (Ed.). (1983). *Qualitative methodology*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Warnke, G. (1987). *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, tradition and reason*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Weinsheimer, J. (1989). Hermeneutics. In G. D. Atkins & L. Morrow (Eds.), *Contemporary literary theory* (pp. 117-136). Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.

Wolf, W. (1996). Reflections on the history of management thought. *Journal of Management History*, *2*, 4-10.

Yergin, D. (1990). *The prize: The epic quest for oil, money and power*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Anshuman Prasad (Ph.D., University of Massachusetts at Amherst) is associate professor of management and director of the doctoral program at the School of Business, University of New Haven, Connecticut. His research interests include institutional-theoretic analyses of strategic action in the petroleum industry, postcolonialism, diversity and multiculturalism, employee empowerment, and workplace resistance.