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# The Hermeneutical Aesthetics of Thick Description

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## Abstract

Thick description is often invoked by qualitative researchers as a form of representation after analysis such as coding has been completed. I argue that thick description can be more productively considered as an aesthetic encounter guiding the research process from beginning to end. Drawing on the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, I demonstrate that thick description is more than an analytical consideration of context but is rather an articulation of how we see and understand. According to Gadamer, there is an aesthetic quality to our experiencing that is never completely rendered visible in our accounts. This is because we do not draw on context to make sense of the evidence presented; we see and understand *in* contexts—physical, historical, cultural, linguistic, moral, experiential, affective—that we *venture in*, as Clifford Geertz put it, as we conjure our interpretations of what is going on. It is only by allowing ourselves to be guided by the entity of study and critically questioning the complexity of our contextualized responses that we can gain a better grasp of this complex architecture that is analysis.

## Keywords

thick description, philosophical hermeneutics, hermeneutic analysis, understanding, aesthetic encounter

> Understanding does not occur when we try to intercept what someone wants to say to us by claiming we already know it.
>
> —Gadamer (1977, p. 102)

Qualitative research has multiple aims, but one of its most popular is to understand some phenomenon of interest. Furthermore, it is generally agreed that some form of interpretive process enables this understanding to occur. Less discussed, however, is what is meant by "understanding" and "interpretation," often leaving these concepts misconstrued and under-theorized. The purpose of this article is to reinvigorate the hermeneutic intent espoused when anthropologist Clifford Geertz popularized philosopher Gilbert Ryle's concept of "thick" description and to examine the interpretive qualities thick description offers the analytic process aimed at understanding. More specifically, I will show the role aesthetic experience plays in the process of coming to an understanding and how interpretation is not the end-point of the analytic process but is an "intellectual effort . . . *an* elaborate venture in . . . 'thick description'" (Geertz, 1973, p. 6). After describing how thick description has been conceptualized by qualitative researchers and its relation to the hermeneutic movement of understanding, I present one researcher's hermeneutic analysis or aesthetic journey into thick description.

## Thick Description

What is thick description? In some qualitative research texts, it is described primarily from a level of detail: the ability to create a rich, contextualized description of an event to increase verisimilitude and transferability of the findings (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). The problem with this portrayal is that it leaves unclear the interpretive qualities these details are intended to convey in a thick description. Schwandt (2007) explained this well:

> To thickly describe social action is actually to begin to interpret it by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode. It is the interpretive characteristic of description rather than detail per se that makes it thick. (p. 296)

Adding to its complexity, theorists depict this interpretive process differently. Some favor the ability of thick description to capture the interpretive complexities of social life

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from an emic perspective. For example, Denzin (2001) stated that thick description "presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another" (p. 100). Generally, he felt that thick description "involves capturing and representing the meanings a particular action or sequence of actions has for the individuals in question" (p. 116). Others see thick description as being closely tied to analysis. For example, Holliday (2007) stated,

> What makes the thick description of social phenomenon possible is not its exhaustiveness of coverage, but the way in which it scans the different facets of the social matrix or culture within which it is found, and comes up with good analysis. (p. 75)

Similarly, Stake (2010) explained, "A description is rich if it provides abundant, interconnected details, and possibly cultural complexity, but it becomes *thick* description if it offers direct connection to cultural theory and scientific knowledge" (p. 49).

One reason for the variation in how thick description is conceptualized is that Ryle (1968) used the term *thick* as opposed to *thin* philosophically to help illustrate the complexities of describing human action, whereas Geertz and others went on to consider how to account for these difficulties within the practices and aims of diverse human sciences (Descombes, 2002). Ryle's most famous example is that of two boys who appear to be doing the same thing (i.e., quickly closing and opening their right eyes), but in fact while one is unconsciously twitching, the other is intentionally winking at another boy for communicative purposes. Ryle wrote at length to show that even the wink, although quickly understood as a wink in this specific context, relies on many possible conditions (e.g., the winker has to know how to wink, the wink is understood as a mode of communication, the wink is seen by the intended recipient, and so forth) to determine a real wink from a fake wink or some other possible action characterized by the twitching of an eye. Greenblatt (1997) explained, "For Ryle, thick description is manifestly a quality of the explication rather than of the action or text that is explicated: it is not the object that is thick or thin, but only the description of it" (p. 17). In other words, a thin description can be quite detailed but still leave the action empty of significance. Similarly, Ryle's point was that the meaning of an action, no matter how complex, did not reside in or alter the action, but neither was it separate from it. What differentiated a wink from a fake wink was not the action but the way thick description placed each in its own "network of framing intentions and cultural meanings" (Greenblatt, 1997). Although Geertz has been criticized for his interpretation of Ryle's work (Descombes, 2002), the focus of this article is to reaffirm Geertz's commitment to hermeneutics and the centrality of meaning for anthropology (Geertz, 1995), where meaning can be understood as "the way experience is construed rather than with some unmediated notions of experience itself" (Dirks, 1996, p. 17) or as thick description. Furthermore, an often overlooked point is that thick description designates both the discrete data available for interpretation and a strategy to interpret and represent that data, but the two are not necessarily one and the same. Geertz (1973) explained,

> Ethnography is thick description. What the ethnographer is in fact faced with . . . is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render. (pp. 9-10)

As Geertz's quote suggests, this is not a simple matter of gaining enough detail, but requires interpretation and translation into a language or means of representing an event. In other words, it requires hermeneutics. "According to its original definition, hermeneutics is the art of clarifying and mediating by our own effort of interpretation what is said by persons we encounter in tradition. Hermeneutics operates wherever what is said is not immediately intelligible" (Gadamer, 1977, p. 98). The task of research, therefore, is to offer an interpretation of a phenomenon, not, as Geertz (1973) explained, by collecting disconnected facts, or "arranging abstracted entities into unified patterns" (p. 17) but by penetrating "into the very body of the object" (p. 15) and imagining what these events, behaviors, relationships, might mean to the participants we "converse with" (p. 13) in ways that help us imagine "*what our informants are up to, or think they are up to, and then systematize those*" (p. 15).

Geertz has often been misunderstood as, on the one hand, prioritizing first person, emic accounts and, on the other, suggesting that cultural interpretations are only those of the researcher. But consistent with a hermeneutic approach, what Geertz demonstrates is that the work of an anthropologist is one of mediating between an unending maze of contextual, historical, semiotic, and affective accounts that he or she must make sense of. The point of departure for hermeneutic analysis is not the interpreter's private musings or the unearthing of participants' personal perspectives; it is the topic itself, the phenomenon of interest that brings both together to seek fresh ways to help it say something new. Hermeneutics mediates these multiple perspectives, not to reconstruct some existing understanding by recording preconceived biases we or they hold on the matter, but to "clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place" (Gadamer, 1975/1989, p. 295). In brief, understanding is a process in which we bring to our awareness the hold tradition has on us. It does not do this, for example, by using a constant comparative approach where

similar instances or accounts are given a code or label "to segments of data that depict what each segment is about" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3), thereby constructing a theoretical account of how these instances might relate abstracted from the distinct particularities of each instance. It is unfortunate that Geertz used terms such as *systematize* to discuss this process. Just as Ryle showed that the meaning of an action is not separate from the unique circumstances that gave it meaning, a hermeneutic analysis would not proceed by coding to construct an overall meaning frame. Rather, the multiple particularities along with their multiple competing meaning frames are reconsidered and examined in light of the human problem under investigation. Hermeneutics suggests that it is by contemplating and questioning the way these particularities cause us pause that new conceptions of meanings the topic holds for us are put into play. Because we already understand the world in certain prejudiced ways (i.e., in tradition), understanding is not a state that we arrive at after accruing the right amount of knowledge; it is an event we are already, always participating in. Therefore, any interpretive engagement that seeks new understanding needs to account for how we make use of this "event." An example will help illustrate what I mean.

## Understanding as an Aesthetic Experience in Thick Description

We often say we have come to an understanding when something that was not clear before has become clear. When we see and understand a wink without question, then there was nothing in the behavior that drew us out of ourselves into seeking something new. On the contrary, if a wink raises questions for us, the something caused us to pause and wonder. This invitation to engage hermeneutically is also an invitation to venture in thick description. But what does this venturing look like or entail? How do we move from confusion to clarity? Costantino (2002-2003) explained, "Gadamer uses the experience of understanding a work of art—aesthetic experience—as an exemplar of the ontological nature of understanding because aesthetic experience, according to Gadamer, requires that the interpreter enter into a dialogue with the work" (p. 80).

Thinking about this interpretive process of understanding aesthetically turns our attention to the interpretive process itself, the creative act of clarifying our understanding and recirculating that understanding back into the world. Unlike other philosophers of aesthetics who look at art as timeless, abstracted works separate from their history, creator, and geographical location,

> Gadamer is emphasizing the need to stay connected to the history of our experiences, to be present and aware instead of experiencing an artwork as some kind of transcendent and finite ideal abstracted from the history of its making and the present situation of its viewing . . . This kind of aesthetic experience . . . is situated in the continuity of life instead of held apart. It builds upon prior experience—the history of the artwork as well as that of the viewer—while staying open to new experience. (Costantino, 2002-2003, p. 86)

This describes the process Marjorie Mayers went through in her study of street kids in a large city in Canada. Approaching the work hermeneutically, Mayers (2001) explained, "This process has enabled me to understand something about street kids, about myself, and about the world in which we live that I did not understand in the same way before" (p. 3). Understanding that hermeneutic interpretation is about "follow[ing] the threads of conversations" (p. 4) and dialogically mediating between various traditions (our own as well as those of our participants and present in the discourses of the world), Mayers acknowledged "that there are multiple perspectives about street kids and . . . [she] cogently offer[s] one here" (p. 5).

Mayers (2001) started off with an open-ended question: "What is it like being a street kid?" (p. 8), knowing full well that the topic itself—as evidenced in the kids' responses, in her observations of their lived experiences, in listening attentively to the discourses flowing through the kids' existence, and in the fact that such a thing as a "street kid" exists—will take her beyond any preconceived directions or findings she might have had, the end-point limited only by lack of imagination, time, and other constraints. Hermeneutics helps us understand that the value of a certain line of questioning can only be assessed in regard to where it leads or does not lead. Reminding ourselves that the hermeneutic task is to help the topic of our interest say something new, the process needs to be one where we are flexible and able to switch approaches when needed.

Mayers was well situated for conducting this study hermeneutically. She had several years of experience working with homeless/runaway youth in a variety of capacities, but most importantly, she was already thinking differently about her work as a youth worker and questioning the role the youth organization (YO), and others like it, might be playing in society.

> At the YO drop-in center, youth could spend up to 12 hours a day doing virtually nothing. They were having their basic needs met in terms of shelter, food, clothing, hygiene, and so on, but there was no expectation that the kids would or should contribute to the services of which they were making use. . . I wondered about the perceptions of these youth when they were expected to do nothing, to contribute nothing, to be nothing. (Mayers, 2001, pp. 20-21)

Gadamer explained that every encounter with understanding is an encounter with tradition, that is, the "webs of signification" that pre-exist us and from which we weave new configurations for ourselves. The hermeneutic task is

not to take these for granted but to put them into play and, as Geertz (1973) put it, "to plunge into the midst of them" (p. 30). And so this is where Mayers' journey began but not as you might imagine by meeting street kids. Another 8 months would pass before that happened. First, she needed Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and then she had to gain access. When the university IRB rejected her application because her participants might be below 18 and would need parental permission, a flood of questions, such as these, flowed through her: *"How arbitrary do we think the age of eighteen is?" "How reasonable is it to believe that kids living on their own (i.e., without their parents) are unable to make informed-consent decisions?" "How sensible is it to use the same criteria for street kids as for kids living at home?*" (p. 23).

The point of hermeneutic analysis is not whether these are the right questions to ask, but how these questions enable the opening-up of the thick description inherent in their being expressed in the first place. What interconnected webs of signification, contexts, cultural norms, ethical codes of conduct are put into motion because of this event? How are these contextual and historical factors implicated in the research topic itself and where will they lead the researcher next? How will they enlarge the topic and help it say something new? As with many things, the ability or desire to say something new may be seen as threatening to the status quo. There is risk in constructing meaning through meaningful questions rather than societal conventions. Mayers felt these pressures well. She felt alienated as she confronted the IRB and sought alternative ways to gain access to the participants she wanted to hear from. But after presenting a compelling case backed by research and literature on the topic, she won the approval of the university to conduct her research.

Perhaps it is because she felt that she had already antagonized the university that she spent an inordinate amount of time negotiating access to young people through youth service providers, hoping "to develop community partner relationships with some or any of them to facilitate my work" (Mayers, 2001, p. 27). Each move became a question, an unpeeling of the conditions of our social structures. What lurked behind this desire? How was it that Mayers could simultaneously be critical of these agencies, while also wanting their collaboration? Was she suddenly apprehensive about approaching young people on the street without the usual name tag of a professional role? This kind of questioning continued the hermeneutic engagement revealing points of intersection and contradiction for Mayers (2001) to reflect with.

> *To my mind, there are multiple texts converging on the terrain that street kids inhabit and they emanate from diverse backgrounds and have divergent intents. Street kids' lives and all the various connections to that phenomenon are so intensely intertwined in the territoriality that street kids stake out for themselves and that which is also modelled for them by the agencies consigned to oversee them. And oversee they do.* (p. 31)

As Mayers found out, the agencies would only cooperate under certain conditions (such as knowing the names of her interviewees, adding information to the consent documents, etc.), and in the end, she had to reject their partnership to carry out the research in the way she wanted.

So Mayers took to the street, months after beginning the study and began "data collection." I put these words in quotation marks because I hope it is obvious that Mayers had not only been collecting data all along but had also been analyzing it.

> And so it goes that hermeneutics is pushed and propelled by the questions that we ask and the understandings that throw into question what we thought we already understood. This is where interpretation resides, oscillating amid what we understand and what we don't, what is familiar to us and what is not. (Mayers, 2001, p. 6)

Finally on the street, but not without its own challenges, Mayers (2001) interviewed the kids while sitting with them as they talked about and carried out "their work, that is, the task of asking passersby for change" (p. 46).

> During this particular conversation there was a constant starting and stopping of discussion. In conversations dotted with a continual "Spare any change, sir, so I can get home?" these kids spoke to me about what it means to panhandle. "Why don't you give *me* some?" a passerby snippily jibes when asked for change. "I would if I could but I can't. That's why I'm asking you," Jar boldly responds. I ask them, "So do you think that lots of people, like a guy like that for example, does he understand your predicament or is he . . ." and the chorus of voices races to fill in the gaps of my understanding. "The guy that just walked by (pointing to a nicely dressed businessman) . . . Some people understand, some people don't. That guy, I doubt if he does," Bobby says. Neil muses, "He might have a little idea of what it's about," and again Bobby answers "He might even know but he doesn't care." (Mayers, 2001, p. 46)

And later on, when a woman angrily mutters, "No, you're not my kids, I have two" (p. 47), Mayers was stunned by the woman's anger, her verbal attack, and began to construct a different reality than perhaps she had imagined about the kinds of negotiations of being the kids underwent daily. Perhaps because of her own insecurities when approaching the kids, perhaps because of earlier questions raised about services meant to assist street kids, one direction Mayers's (2001) questioning took was to better understand the reactions street kids engendered in passersby. *"Why do street kids engender such vehemence? What makes*

*the existence of street kids and people's interactions with them so complicated? . . . Why aren't things different for street kids?"* (p. 52). Witnessing how they were targets of anger, pity, disgust, and abuse, Mayers wrote about how they were constantly forced to renarrate a sense of self-worth for themselves. They did this emotionally by telling stories that valued the having of friends as more important than the having of money. They did this behaviorally by acting politely to passersby even when they were mean and rude. They did this politically by paying attention to the sharing of resources (i.e., the street) and explaining that they never left garbage on their street spot. "We clean our stuff up all of the time. And then I see people walk out of McDonald's, rich guys, you know they're rich, they're wearing a Rolex and a thousand-dollar suit . . .and they just throw their stuff on the ground" (Mayers, 2001, pp. 49-50).

Not only did Mayers not take these as answers to a question, but she understood how the particularities of these kids' experience opened for her new lines of thought. Hermeneutic analysis does not seek to use variations of experience to find what's typical. The variations in lived experience help foster new questions, questions that hopefully loosen the grip tradition has on us and enable us to see the webs of significance in new ways. This line of inquiry opened for Mayers questions about how the kids express their values. And what the kids' accounts helped her see is that those values were continuously changing because of their experiences in the street. One street kid, Nicole, explained,

> I used to look at things like smoking crack and prostitution as being really, really bad, that I would never, ever do it, but now, I kinda think that some things are okay…. My beliefs are changing the longer I'm out here. (Mayers, 2001, p. 67)

Other lines of inquiry opened new connections. For example, Mayers's (2001) own values shaped how she interacted with the kids and she described feeling "like an idiot" (p. 80) when she found herself standing outside a public space the kids had entered waiting to be invited. In contrast, the kids told her many stories of being evicted from parks and under bridges as the city "cleaned" up these areas. Continuously reflecting on what kind of story those various pieces might be telling, she saw how they all "*kept calling into question the greater values that undergird the ways in which we live together*" (Mayers, 2001, p. 74), or don't. Analysis is not about finding the truth, the one meaning that holds all together, but of sharing a truth, or many truths as they manifest themselves as the topic of inquiry. Gadamer (1986) explained, "To perceive something is not to collect together utterly separate sensory impressions, but is rather . . . 'to take something as true.' But that means that what is presented to the senses is seen and taken as something" (p. 29).

This "as something" propels us to learn more, to let the topic lead the dialogue of understanding that we are participating in. This dialogue connects the interpreter and those participating in the conversation with the topic itself in a way that pushes the topic to be in dialogue with itself as it unfolds in this participative exchange. The researcher makes the dialogue happen, but it is not necessary to separate what is researcher versus what is other as both are part of the fabric of humanity and have the potential to lead us astray or somewhere new. What is important to the research process is attending to these threads, seeking ways to understand why these perspectives are being expressed in this way. This act of constructing is "ceaselessly mediated by a constant revisioning of what has been previously understood" (Mayers, 2001, p. 10). And it is exactly this practice of coming back and dialoguing with the topic anew that brings out its "thick description."

Gadamer (1986) explained that while we exist in a multiplicity of interrelated traditions, the aim of hermeneutics is not to conserve these, but to learn "how to grasp and express the past anew" (p. 49). And Mayers was surprised, surprised with the direction her inquiry was taking her, surprised with the way the topic itself took on a unique shape in this complex context. For example, she explained,

> I originally imagined that the data I would collect would be replete with particularities about street kids' home life experiences. To my surprise, the greatest proportion of (and what had the greatest impact on me) what kids talked about had much less to do with the homes they had come from than the lives they were currently living on the street. (Mayers, 2001, pp. 12-13)

The hermeneutic journey is not simply about following the way of questions. As we construct an understanding of a complex topic, we are also actively engaging in a reconstruction, a possible configuration of how things could be, or of how this understanding could change the world. This movement between understanding what is and imagining what could be is not simply the idea, for example, of taking our research results and applying them somewhere to improve the conditions of street kids or to improve the services they receive. Because of the embeddedness of the topic with its context, this kind of work must turn back on itself and attend to the assumptions that not only shaped the inquiry endeavor but lurk behind the reasons, "the conditions," for why this topic has become what it is.

While Mayers wanted to believe that the street kids had crafted an alternative version of themselves that fostered prudent, considerate, and communitarian values, she began to see more deeply how the whole social structure is complicit in both the construction of these alternate visions and in our inability to change things.

> Like little sparks extinguishing one by one, street kids have limited options because "we" have not conceived of making change for them that doesn't involve joining the mainstream. And, although they have visioned a different world with different values, they are equally disempowered to make these changes because they lack the resources to "buy themselves out." (Mayers, 2001, p. 125)

Although her understanding led her to see the way the kids' lives had been shaped as a response to mainstream values, activities, and aspirations—in other words, their existence gained meaning within the contexts that give it meaning—she was left stymied by how to use this information to change society or the kids' conditions. She left us on a hopeful, yet pensive note, pointing out that "no superficial implications can be uttered, because we must, in the still, quiet moments of our reflection, live with street kids' words and allow them to penetrate our undeniable resistances" (p. 132).

Her understanding, the particular understanding narrated in her book, however, would not have occurred this way if she had turned these particular instances into decontextualized categories. This is because it is in the intricacies of detail, the interconnected interpretations conceived "on the street" so to speak, that meaning is brought forward. Thinking aesthetically and hermeneutically requires the thickness of descriptions offered by the specificities and particularities of different individuals and cultural groups. Although tradition, and its hold on us, is the focus of our inquiry, understanding the traditions we share cannot occur outside the unique stories that help us see where tradition and meaning intersect. Geertz (1973) explained,

> If anthropological interpretation is constructing a reading of what happens, then to divorce it from what happens—from what, in this time or that place, specific people say, what they do, what is done to them, from the whole vast business of the world—is to divorce it from its applications and render it vacant. (p. 18)

The hermeneutic task is not to reconstruct those conditions with our personal conditions, but to understand that the traditions that bind us all can be found in the dialogue we use to understand our shared, but different, worlds. To understand our being, we need to understand understanding, to understand understanding we need to begin to understand these conditions across contexts and time, not because we can reconstruct any true existence, but because the truth of what matters to us is found in these shared effects of tradition.

## The Hermeneutical Aesthetics of Thick Description

Thick description is a hermeneutical encounter that guides the research process from beginning to end. It draws on a "thick" sense of aesthetics, which "involves not merely the physical appearance of the object but also certain qualities and values which the object expresses or conveys to the viewer" (Carlson, 1976, p. 75). When we venture in the multiple aesthetic manifestations of meaning, we cannot separate out the meaning from the lived experience of the journey. Interpretation, like the experience of viewing one of Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*, requires our full and continuous attention, and even then we will have barely scratched the surface of meaning. Hermeneutics offers a philosophical, aesthetic, and experiential process that highlights the way tradition intersects meaning and keeps us as participants in life's webs of signification. There is no guide to follow, only "the informal logic of actual life" (Geertz, 1973, p. 17) that presents itself to us interpretively for us to venture in and attend to. The researcher's or hermeneut's task is to understand that we see, and understand, *in* contexts—physical, emotional, geographical, political, personal, social, cultural, and historical. We do not employ contextual features to organize our seeing, rather we see within the multiple spaces that come alive and are brought forth in the complexity of existence. And it is by seeking new ways to see that interpretive research helps mediate new configurations for this boundless web of meanings we inhabit.

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