

Gadamer's Hermeneutical Notion of Mental Health

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Abstract: Poor mental health is increasingly becoming a socio-economic burden as the number of people affected continues to rise. The effectiveness of dealing with this health issue has been hampered by reliance on traditional explanations for the problem. Religion and supernatural powers have been used to explain the causes of mental illnesses. However, these explanations have not been adequate, considering that other causes do not fall under these two categories. Hard economic times have been identified as the leading cause of mental illnesses as people cannot cope with the high cost of living. Without a proper diagnosis of the problem, it is unlikely that a solution will be found. Mental healthcare providers should shift to Gadamerian Hermeneutics, which advocates for consideration of new causes of the problem.

Keywords: Gadamerian Hermeneutics, mental health, psychiatric disorders, mental disorders, mental healthcare professionals

Poor mental health causes individual suffering and a significant increase in socio-economic burdens, leading to a reduction in per capita real income growth. The adverse implications of mental health issues on the economy and individuals have forced governments to focus on improving health facilities and care. However, the healthcare sector currently lacks a clear understanding of the concept of mental health. The situation could hinder governments' efforts in addressing the increasing cases of costly mental health issues. The article holds that a comprehensive analysis of Gadamer's philosophical work could help healthcare professionals develop new philosophical interpretation dimensions. Gadamer's philosophical work recommends the adoption of reflective metapraxis, which could help to guide significant efforts to interpret human experiences. Notably, the proposed philosophical approach presents insights on hermeneutic reflection, which can guide health care professionals in interpreting mental health situations, mainly when dealing with and interacting with patients. One of the main goals of mental health care pro-

professionals, including psychiatrists and psychologists, is to listen and gain an understanding or make sense of patients' experiences, such as mood and suicidality. By understanding the philosophical groundings and hermeneutic approaches to characteristics of effective mental health practices, psychiatrists and mental health care providers will better understand the patient's issues and develop practical solutions.

Current patterns of mental disorders

Mental disorders are increasingly causing reduced quality of life and suffering for the victims. In addition, the growing cases of mental disorders are associated with significant economic burdens globally. Recent estimates reveal that 20% of the population in industrialized economies is suffering from mental disorders.¹ Current forecasts estimate that the economic burden caused by mental disorders will continue to grow significantly in the coming years. As a result, governments and societies recognize that the reduction of mental distress and disorders are priority health areas of concern. Historically, religious aspects and supernatural powers have been used to explain the causes of mental disorders. However, such interpretations remained unconvincing and were surrounded by controversies. The situation led to continued efforts in research, mainly to provide more alternative ways of examining and addressing psychiatric disorders. Recent developments include technological advancements and the improved neurological position of psychiatric disorders, which has helped to demonstrate a clear link between the human brain, psychiatric disorders, and biological causes. However, the existing data indicates growing cases of mental disorders. Such findings demonstrate that recent technological developments have not helped adequately address the societal challenges of mental disorders. In addition, such findings demonstrate that overreliance on technological and biological interpretations of mental disorders does not produce the desired outcomes. The article proposes that developing a practical philosophical stance on psychiatric disorders could address the current issues

¹ Gerhard Müller et al., "Socio-Economic Consequences of Mental Distress: Quantifying the Impact of Self-Reported Mental Distress on the Days of Incapacity to Work and Medical Costs in Two Years: A Longitudinal Study in Germany," *BMC Public Health* 21, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-10637-8>.

and provide psychiatrists with better psychotherapeutic options in handling patients with mental health disorders.

Traditional frameworks dealing with psychotherapy

The philosophical accounts of Plato, Sigmund Freud, and Alfred Adler provide insights into the development of the human mind and its relationship with mental disorders. Plato held that the mind and the body are separate entities and should be treated as such. Plato proved that the mind and the body operate differently.² However, he noted that the physical body could help reveal vital signs and symptoms of a dysfunctional mind. It was Plato who argued that immorality is to the soul what disease is to the body, thus recommending that individuals maintain a proper balance between a healthy body and a healthy soul. He believed that immoral behaviors were contrary to nature but treatable.

Sigmund Freud believed that psychotherapy sciences are based on the process where causal factors influence human conditions following the cause and effect pattern. Alfred Adler explained inferiority feelings as sources of human striving. An individual who develops or experiences an inferiority complex will likely become helpless and fail to cope with actual life demands. Further analysis of Freud's and Adler's hypotheses demonstrates the recognition of individuals as social beings shaped by their environment. While Freud emphasizes unconscious drives, Adler demonstrates each person's uniqueness as a critical element in establishing and redirecting their experiences. However, a philosophical view different from Plato, Freud, and other traditional frameworks on psychotherapy is needed to enhance understanding of human behaviors and incorporate other unique features of human existence, such as self-relatedness and creativity. The new approach would include, simultaneously, views from various disciplines and fields to analyze the nature of mental illnesses.

Gadamer's Hermeneutics

Gadamer's Hermeneutics presents an alternative and practical dimension

² Marke Ahonen, "Ancient Philosophers on Mental Illness," *History of Psychiatry* 30, no. 1 (September 2018): 3-18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957154x18803508>.

of interpreting mental health. Gadamer's Hermeneutics encourages psychiatrists to take a broader view of life and the causal reasons when examining psychiatric disorders. Gadamer, in the hermeneutics, identifies humans as beings restrained through their vantage points introduced through the horizon concept.³ The concept's importance is that it improves our understanding or interpretation of our world and others' world. Gadamer emphasizes that individuals should have horizons that allow them to open to the larger picture of understanding. Relevant to the provision of mental health care is an observation that the horizon context encourages conversations as part of relentless efforts to understand the situation of others' experiences. For instance, a health care provider can initiate a conversation or session of constant conversations to promote their understanding of others' self-identity or to avoid restricted judgments based on first impressions of others. The horizon is a range of visions, including everything observable from a given vantage point. The horizon is critical and is a first step towards opening up to an individual's more comprehensive picture of understanding.

Gadamer reiterates the idea of transposing oneself to others to maximize the idea of openness to others' horizons. However, this transposing of oneself idea does not imply that individuals leave their horizons to join others'. It encourages a higher form of particularity when dealing with or transposing oneself in regards to others. The idea of openness to others' horizons encourages individuals to put themselves in the shoes of others to help understand their situation and become conscious of others. Gadamer's line of thought recounts how individuals are affected, in hope and fear, by that which is close to them. Gadamer uses hermeneutical grounds to present a philosophy that encourages individuals to make efforts to understand the incomprehensible. In such cases, the proposed philosophical grounds would reduce the overall time required by psychiatrists and psychotherapists to decipher mental health issues facing their clients. More clearly, Gadamer's hermeneutic approach requires mental health care providers to withdraw from the point of view which forces them to diagnose patients as individuals who lack something. Instead, medical practitioners identify mental disorder pa-

³ Tanya Sue D. Barayuga, "Gadamer and Healing," *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)* 10, no. 6 (2021): 78-83, <https://doi.org/10.21275/SR21528134417>.

tients as individuals who view themselves as unwell and that undergoing such conditions is normal and acceptable. The hermeneutic approach encourages medical practitioners to remain open to changing negative images associated with an individual's past to help provide high-quality care and support the mentally ill patient.

Hermeneutics refers to the art of interpretation that presents critical grounds for philosophical thinking relevant to human and social sciences. Hermeneutic studies primarily associate this art of understanding with the interpretation of texts. However, hermeneutics includes the process of interpretation and understanding in the entire life experience process in which aspects of human reality are expressed through written texts as well as spoken and symbolic languages. The Gadamerian hermeneutical ontology considers the being and seeks to understand through experiences.⁴ Therefore, a hermeneutic perspective can enable health care providers dealing with mental health patients to examine the practical meaning of their experiences. As a result, the practitioners would orientate their clinical practices and situations towards helping such patients heal. In addition, practitioners adopting hermeneutic perspectives can evoke and interpret the implied moral experiences necessary in providing mental health care. Notably, applying the hermeneutic approach enables practitioners dealing with mental health patients to consider several contexts, including the patient's social, personal, and political contexts in order to decipher meaning⁵. The ability to bring a patient's situation into various perspectives creates a space where practitioners can establish new views and develop practices that could significantly improve patient outcomes.

Gadamer's hermeneutics emphasizes the concept of ontological presence in dialogue. The philosopher uses the hermeneutic circle to express the ontological underpinnings critical to the interpretation and understanding processes. In addition, Gadamer uses the concepts of his-

⁴ Roya Haghiri-Vijeh and Carol McDonald, "Gadamerian Hermeneutics with Intersectionality as an Analytical Lens," *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*, 2022, 1-19, <https://doi.org/10.11575/jah.v2022i2022.74902>.

⁵ Michael TH Wong. "Values, Meanings, Hermeneutics and Mental Health." In *International Perspectives in Values-Based Mental Health Practice*, (Springer, Cham, 2021), 341-349.

toricity and prejudices to inform his ontological hermeneutics.⁶ Such concepts make significant contributions to the ontological perspective in Gadamerian hermeneutics. As such, practitioners relying on such perspectives are able to develop the capacity to illuminate the currently evolving, changing, and multiple realities that affect patients' and practitioners' performances. Gadamerian hermeneutics identifies the hermeneutic circle as a critical ontological understanding element. The perspective describes the circle's movement as a spiral, which is a practical description of how the practitioners or users of the perspective achieve the necessary understanding. The spiral or circular movement is critical since most factors requiring interpretation cannot be understood at once. As interpreters make significant reflections on workplace prejudices, the hermeneutic circle is set in a perpetual movement. Therefore, these movements allow the interpreters to visit and revisit understandings throughout the hermeneutic project.

The philosophical comprehension of mental illness using Gadamer's hermeneutics

Mental health issues remain a critical area of concern for global healthcare systems. However, most practitioners and mental health care experts rely on brain treatment and external signs and systems since such conditions are treated as brain problems. Notably, the growing cases of mental illness reveal a further need to explore various philosophical dimensions that could improve the interpretation of mental health and improve practitioners' performances. These philosophical approaches would help enhance mental health interpretations and create a new path for dialogue and reasoning. Gadamer's hermeneutics is one such philosophical approach that places greater emphasis on dialogue. The recommended approach is aligned with the philosophy of psychiatric disorders, which encourages engagements that enhance the interpretation of human experiences while at the same time taking a broader view of life. The philosophical approach requires psychiatrists to improve patient dialogue and involvement in health care decisions⁷. Other fundamental tenets of the proposed philosophical approach include empathy, passion, and caring, all of which are

⁶ Roya Haghiri-Vijeh and Carol McDonald, *Ontological Presence in Dialogue*, 5.

⁷ Roya Haghiri-Vijeh and Carol McDonald, *Ontological Presence in Dialogue*, p. 5.

critical for the mentally-ill patient's healing process.

Gadamer's hermeneutics presents an advancement of philosophical and social variants suggested by several scholars on hermeneutic theories. Gadamer held that hermeneutics, as the study of interpretations, should focus on human understanding of the social environment. However, this would require a specific focus on generating meaningful interpretations from such texts. Therefore, the hermeneutic process involves readers encountering texts to construct meaningful explanations and observations. Consequently, the concept of prejudices, critical in understanding mental health issues, unavoidably becomes a central focus point in Gadamer's hermeneutics. Gadamer identifies prejudice as the reader's assumptions concerning the provided texts, truth, and realities.⁸ Gadamer's hermeneutics is based on foundational insights that such prejudices make understanding more possible rather than obstructing it. In addition, prejudice presents a critical precondition that facilitates the achievement of the desired understanding. Importantly, Gadamer argues against an observation commonly held today that prejudice equals animus towards specific groups of people. Instead, the philosopher conceptualized prejudice as an ontological preconception based on an individual's unique situation. Such circumstances could include significant life events, social locations, or even historical situatedness. The interpretation implies that all forms of prejudice highlight critical aspects of texts or social worlds that ultimately facilitate understanding. Such understanding is achieved through the formation of the conceptual lens, identified as horizons that enable the organization of information relating to the social world and the drawing of informative conclusions. Overall, the philosophical perspectives from Gadamer's hermeneutics demonstrate that personal experiences form the basis of preconceived ideas and are necessary for initiating an understanding process.

Apart from prejudice, Gadamer also explains how historicity shapes readers' understanding. He argued that the presence of the hermeneutic circle relies on the rediscovery process; that is, making what has once occurred in the past reappear in a new shape. Although hermeneutics are ontological per se, the philosopher adds that each inter-

⁸ Reed T. DeAngelis, John P. Bartkowski, and Xiaohe Xu, "Scriptural Coping: An Empirical Test of Hermeneutic Theory," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2018, 175-191, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12576>, 176.

preter's historicity, universality, and fluidity play a crucial role in shaping hermeneutics⁹. In dealing with mentally ill patients, such arguments imply that patients are not merely situated in their historical past; rather, their social past influences how they conceive themselves and their future possibilities.

The Importance of Understanding Mental Disorders

A clear understanding of the underlying causes of mental disorders should always be the first step when dealing with mental illnesses¹⁰. Healthcare institutions have invested a lot of time and resources to determine the causes of most mental disorders affecting people. These studies aim to determine the real reasons why people suffer from mental disorders in an attempt to determine the most appropriate solution. Healthcare professionals and researchers have moved from the traditional neurological and biological approaches that explain these illnesses' causes. These researchers are now able to interpret concepts beyond what was previously understood¹¹. Neurological causes relate to the interrupted transmission of important messages to the brain due to malfunctioning neurons responsible for making these communications. Biological causes concern pathogens' role as disease-causing agents. However, healthcare professionals and researchers have realized that the causes of some of these disorders are neither biological nor neurological. The challenging economic times that characterize modern society have also been blamed for this situation. People face problems they had not anticipated, leading to a mental shutdown. Understanding these alternative causes will help healthcare professionals to make an accurate diagnosis and recommend the appropriate treatment. Failing to include these alternative causes will lead to instances of misdiagnosis and, consequently, the wrong treatment.

These efforts, however, are not complemented by equal dedication from authors who write publications related to mental health disorders.

⁹ Kenneth R. Westphal, "Kant, Hegel and the Historicity of Pure Reason." *The Palgrave Hegel Handbook* (2020), 45-64.

¹⁰ Anthony Vincent Fernandez, "From Phenomenological Psychopathology to Neurodiversity and Mad Pride: Reflections on Prejudice," *Journal of Critical Phenomenology* 3, no. 2 (2020): 19-22.

¹¹ Nina Elisabeth Blegen, Katie Eriksson, and Terese Bondas, "Through the Depths and Heights of Darkness; Mothers as Patients in Psychiatric Care." *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences* 28, no. 4 (2014): 852-860.

In most cases, such authors have concentrated on the traditional causes of mental diseases while ignoring emerging knowledge on other possible causes. Migration challenges, for example, have been found to be a major cause of mental illness issues among immigrants¹². Reading such publications can be misleading as they show incomplete and outdated information. Healthcare professionals who rely on such publications limit themselves to the few options provided. As a result, they will not adopt a holistic approach to diagnosing and treating mental disorders. Authors who are unwilling to accept the changes that have taken place in the healthcare sector will continue to be a significant setback to efforts to combat mental disorders.

Mental health diseases rank high amongst the most prevalent healthcare issues globally. The World Health Organization reports that mental health issues are more common than other forms of chronic illnesses. The organization estimates that more than 87% of the global population has at some point suffered from a mental issue caused by pressure and stress. In addition, it shows that mental illnesses have life-long complications, and patients will have to cope with treatment approaches for life. However, despite these statistics showing that mental illness is an issue requiring prompt action, there has been a slow uptake of the emerging trends in managing this health issue.

Although these conditions are highly prevalent, psychiatry has a conflict on the best way to manage health issues. The causative factors of these conditions are numerous but form areas of critical concern¹³. For instance, life has changed, and economic demands have made people strive to earn a living. There has been increased work-related pressure, which has seen the rise of psychotic disorders as people are unable to meet their personal needs and that of their families. Therefore, it has become essential for psychiatry to tighten its grip on the best interventional approaches to limit such conditions. Professional bodies in healthcare should come together and devise ways to integrate new knowledge into medical practice to ensure that patients do not lose out on effective medical treatment of their disorders.

¹² Haghiri-Vijeh, Roya, and Carol McDonald. "Gadamerian Hermeneutics with Intersectionality as an Analytical Lens," 1–19.

¹³ Anton-Hermann Chroust, "The Organization of the Corpus Platonicum in antiquity." *Hermes* 93, no. H. 1 (1965): 34–46.

Several modern theories can be used to enrich the field of medicine concerning the treatment of mental disorders. Gadamer's hermeneutics proposes utilizing the theory of the mind as a strategy to deal with this problem. According to this theory, three critical factors determine mental health issues. The first is a dialogue where the patient and the caregiver engage in a conversation to raise the issues of concern. During this dialogue, the patient is diagnosed based on what they present to the doctor. Through the dialogue, the doctor will be able to tell whether factors such as religion have an influence on their perception towards their mental issues. The patient is required to be truthful in order to enable the healthcare professional to make the right diagnosis. Healthcare professionals, on their part, are required to be highly qualified to be in a position to handle all cases from the patients. They are also required to be open to the possibility of alternative treatment approaches. The second element in this theory is apprehension, where there is a large amount of tension during the diagnosis process. The final component of this theory is an interpretation where the doctor considers all the facts presented by the patient and relates them to known causes.

The relevance of this study cannot be overstated, considering that it came at a time when the world was dealing with the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic brought about a lot of pressure, leading some people to reach their breaking point. Critically, the pandemic resulted in job loss for millions of people who had nothing else to depend on after losing their sole source of livelihood. When such people cannot meet the needs of their families and dependents due to lost income, they can quickly become stressed and eventually develop mental disorders such as depression. Such a situation occurs when the socio-economic burden becomes too much for them to bear¹⁴. The situation has led to an increase in the number of people seeking mental health services in most hospitals. The increased cases of mental health problems have no relationship to the traditional factors that have for a long time been associated with mental health problems. Healthcare experts

¹⁴ Gerhard Müller include all authors., "Socio-Economic Consequences of Mental Distress: Quantifying the Impact of Self-Reported Mental Distress on the Days of Incapacity to Work and Medical Costs in a Two-Year Period: A Longitudinal Study in Germany." *BMC Public Health* 21, no. 1 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-10637-8>.

dealing with these patients must change their approach and consider the circumstances in which these cases arise. This is the only way that they can respond to the emerging healthcare needs for mentally ill patients. They must admit that neurological issues neither cause these cases nor are they a result of biological factors. They must be aware that these cases may also result from changes in the social environment, such as job loss or the breaking apart of families. These new causes should form the basis of any medical intervention if positive outcomes are to be achieved.