

Effectiveness of Gadamer's Hermeneutic Notion of Mental Health

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Abstract: The study examines the potential effectiveness of Gadamer's hermeneutics in treating mental illnesses and disorders. Gadamerian hermeneutics presents philosophical foundations with core values for psychology and mental well-being practitioners. The core concepts in Gadamerian hermeneutics are much needed to provide a new and infinite understanding of mental health conditions. It can help to interpret and understand critical issues surrounding professional practice. By analyzing Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, the study demonstrates the importance of dialogue and communication, which are crucial for treating mental illnesses. Notably, the hermeneutic view helps us understand the more profound importance of, for instance, interacting with a patient suffering from emotional pain. The two important words, "conversation" and "dialogue," are central to Hans-Georg Gadamer's explanation of understanding. On the beneficial outcomes of philosophical understanding of mental disorders, practitioners can use the Gadamerian perspective to create more effective strategies for treating certain conditions. It highlights the value of dialogue, which is a fundamental tool for fostering human interaction and comprehension.

Keywords: Gadamer's hermeneutics, mental health, dialogue, depression

Introduction

One of the practical methods of examining the effectiveness of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic notion of mental health is to examine its perspective on dialogue and the impact of such dialogue on depression. Gadamer contends that dialogues are essential to human comprehension and our way of living. The hermeneutical issue is universal and existential because of how ingrained and limited humans are. The role of others in dialogic interpretations and the process of understanding is one of the main themes of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. The intersubjec-

tive character of transcending human situations results from this.¹ People engage in dialogue as they try to understand one another through the interaction of the viewpoints they bring to a conversation, which are formed by historical consciousness, traditions, and cultural settings. Gadamer contends that dialogic and, subsequently, intersubjective understanding encompasses the interaction between the actor and the outside world as well as one's self and others.² The critical role of the other and otherness in conversation and human existence is encapsulated in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, which provides an entirely comprehensive theory relevant to mental health therapies.

Notably, the hermeneutic method entails a contemplative approach to being and behaving to lay the groundwork for transformation and advancements in mental health therapy. Acquiring hermeneutic knowledge is necessary for grasping the more profound significance of, say, coming into contact with a patient experiencing emotional suffering. The hermeneutic perspective can assist mental health professionals in comprehending how intuitiveness and empathy can benefit patients, offering them hope and future opportunities. In order to give the suffering patient high-quality treatment and support, it is essential for those involved in the profession of mental health to be willing to shift some of the negative perceptions from earlier conversations. The foundation of mental health treatment is the existential principle comprising dialogues to comprehend those with mental health issues. However, this requires conversations to reach an understanding through the sustained interplay of questions and solutions.

Gadamer's Perspectives on Dialogue and Impact on Depression

At the heart of Hans-Georg Gadamer's explanation of understanding lies the two critical terms: 'conversation' and 'dialogue.' Gadamer argued that understanding a text and anything in a conversation are very different. In addition, Gadamer promoted an understanding that the role of hermeneutics is to help individuals enter into dialogue with the text. As a result, it

¹ Kitty Maria Suddick et al., "The Work of Hermeneutic Phenomenology," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19 (2020): 1–14, 3.

² Scherto Gill, "'Holding Oneself Open in a Conversation' – Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Ethics of Dialogue," *Journal of Dialogue Studies* 3: 1 (2015): 9–28, 10.

becomes critical to establish and sustain the conversation through the interplay of questions and answers to help understand one thing by reaching an understanding of something else about it.³ Based on the dialogue, it will be possible for the person suffering from mental illness to be understood. It will also be possible for mental healthcare practitioners to make the right diagnosis when the patient engages them in dialogue. In this way, it will be possible for healthcare providers to prevent simple mental issues such as stress from developing into serious problems such as depression. Gadamer's theory of understanding helps to analogously understand his conception of dialogue. The comparison entails viewing understanding as participating in a dialogue with the text one is attempting to comprehend. Gadamer's hermeneutics is a philosophical strategy that urges practitioners to give dialogues top priority during the therapeutic process. The method can assist mental health professionals in reducing the incidence of psychiatric diseases by recognizing such health concerns as mental health problems, in which previous experiences rather than physical symptoms are addressed as a crucial element of the therapy.

Gadamer was only interested in meaningful dialogue. Parties in the dialogue must then share three elements comprising two horizons and a subject matter. The three components were critical in the dialogue's structure: aiming to establish a meaningful dialogue. Parties in a dialogue may not simultaneously capture reality's same object in a speech. As a result, they commonly describe the subject matter as something. The dialogue's meaning is to help them agree on the meaning of the subject and what it signifies. The dialogue, therefore, occurs in a situation similar to when parties try to work out the concept's definitions before applying them in a dialogue.⁴ Therefore, Gadamer understood the role of conversation in understanding the text, which must happen between the interpreter and the text to determine what such text signifies in a question-and-answer form.

Gadamer's understanding of dialogue is based on the hermeneutic perspective that describes it as a constant conversation, discussion, and communication among involved parties. The dialogue can then take place

³ Iñaki Xavier Larrauri Perterra, "On Gadamerian Hermeneutics: Fusions of Horizons, Dialogue, and Evolution(s) within Culture as Dynamic System of Meaning," *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 4: 4 (2021): 45-62, 49.

⁴ Erdal Yılmaz, "The Fusion of Horizons: The Possibility of a Genuine Ethical Dialogue," *South African Journal of Philosophy* (2022): 1-11, 4.

within and outside the given text. Obtaining complete understanding during dialogue would require the involved parties to approach it with openness, equality, and sincerity. The patients should not in any way feel that they are being coerced into the dialogue. They must accept the fact that the dialogue is designed to help them get professional help. The most important thing about the dialogue is its process rather than a conclusion, and it should not be rushed in an attempt to obtain faster results. Therefore, it is established in a way in which the outcomes and conclusion would help the parties improve their understanding of self and the world. According to Gadamer, the premise of any dialogue is the willingness to participate and engage in a discussion where each participant freely provides their thoughts and opinions about the subject matter.⁵ Parties must provide all participants equal rights to speak and share their opinions and ensure no hegemony in such dialogues. Participants must remain open to ideas and solutions, which enables them to enjoy the benefits of dialogues that enable them to improve their opinions about a given subject matter. Openness, equality, and sincerity are crucial aspects that enable the full participation of all parties during dialogues and can have a positive and significant impact on mental health therapies.

The logical idea of dialogue in Gadamer's Hermeneutics is that the involved parties must suspend their judgments to allow themselves to convert such judgment into question and initiate a dialogue that will solve such a question. Therefore, Gadamer develops the absolute supremacy of questioning within the dialogue. Gadamer makes considerable efforts to explain the meaning of the open and inexhaustible text in his experience account. According to Gadamer, hermeneutics' primary task is to question things. Importantly, parties to dialogue only achieve proper understanding by answering the questions posed by texts. Parties are likely to approach texts with an opinion that requires clarification or further knowledge.⁶ Therefore, parties also pose questions to the text. The dialogue then becomes a process that involves parties resolving things put into question by the text and finding solutions in the text to the questions posed by such parties. Therefore, Gadamer held that the text's meaning was relative to the question posed to or by it. As a result,

⁵ Michael A. Peters and Tina Besley, "Models of Dialogue," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53: 7 (2019): 669–676, 672.

⁶ Adi Barak, "Fusing Horizons in Qualitative Research: Gadamer and Cultural Resonances," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 19: 3 (2020): 768–783, 774.

one text can be associated with multiple meanings that largely depend on the application's circumstances. The question-and-answer logic enables parties to extract maximum knowledge from the text. Therefore, this approach allows individuals in health professional fields to go beyond the limited scientific understanding of issues surrounding mental health and another health phenomenon.

Analyzing Gadamer's concepts of knowledge through the fusion of perspectives in a dialogue approach has led to establishing an intersubjectivity narrative. Intersubjectivity, in this case, refers to the acknowledgment that the social arena in which all human actors are important parts comprises all critical meanings. It describes existing challenges that face humans when they try to separate other people's experiences, behaviors, actions, and intentions prevalent in the life world.⁷ For instance, schizophrenic patients may denote intersubjectivity characteristics such as self-alienation, where patients feel detached from others and lose contact with one's experience of self. Psychiatric patients are more likely to express degraded intersubjectivity patterns during interactions. Characteristics of depressed individuals may jeopardize any meaningful interaction. As such, the Gadamerian perspective is needed to help professionals commit to such situations, challenge their conceptions and establish an atmosphere that allows for restoring openness, consensual trust, and a healing atmosphere. Typical dyadic interaction settings provide an opportunity for dialogue and understanding between involved parties. The Gadamerian perspective in the mental health area is relatively in its early stages. However, findings on its analysis and review can help to identify and discuss the divergent discourse forms associated with depressive symptoms in the phenomenology of distress. Consequently, such findings indicate the transformational potential linked to Gadamerian's idea of dialogue.

Beneficial Outcomes of Philosophical Understanding of Mental Disorders

Gadamer's philosophy can help mental health providers obtain better and new perspectives on depression and other forms of mental disorders. Consequently, it is possible to use the Gadamerian perspective to de-

⁷ Adi Barak, "Fusing Horizons in Qualitative Research: Gadamer and Cultural Resonances," p.775 Barak, *Fusing Horizons*, 775.

velop improved approaches to treat those disorders. It emphasizes the importance of dialogue, which is an overarching medium of human existence and understanding.⁸ The Gadamerian philosophy introduces the phenomenon of interpretation, which includes individuals approaching symbolic expressions or texts to understand and make sense of such texts and expressions. The philosophical models encourage professionals to establish opportunities for structured discussions of experiences, mental health backgrounds, and enhanced self-understanding.

Additionally, philosophical approaches can help us treat and prevent these diseases in more productive ways. The foundation of intellectual comprehension is the notion of the human being as a mechanism in which truth constantly becomes more accurate. This interpretation is founded on an ongoing conversation between consciousness and practical experience, considering how frequently our worldviews change. According to Gadamer, human perceptions are a fusion of tradition as passed on with yet to be fully appropriated history. Accordingly, the objective world does not avail the truth, and instead, the intersubjectivity process gives rise to such truth as humans subjectively relate to their world. Gadamer's perspective provides crucial insights into the phenomenon by allowing a dual process where they encounter and are confronted with such truth. The perspective's viewpoint is that humans can only learn after such truth and experiences affect them leading to inner transformation. In this sense, humans view understanding as being aware of or receiving knowledge of something from outside. The intersubjective settings have demonstrated that human beings as subjects are open to the realities and objects in which they engage. Human apprehension can be described as cognitive, conscious, emotional, and intuitive. In addition, values, emotions, and moral judgments play a crucial role in helping humans develop a greater understanding of the world around them.

Notably, the primary aim in adopting philosophical issues when dealing with mental illnesses is to enhance the understanding of critical concepts that individuals are likely to take for granted daily. The study, interpretation, and subsequent expansion of the philosophical canon's work can help to achieve such goals. Philosophical perspectives provide a shared and communicative practice that can facilitate understanding by

⁸ Janne Brammer Damsgaard and Ann Phoenix, "World of Change: Reflections within an Educational and Health Care Perspective in a Time with Covid-19," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 68: 1 (2020): 177-182, 178.

promoting dialectic unfolding between people. The most practical form of philosophy supports a form approach involving dialogues and group activities.⁹ The philosophical approaches, particularly in groups, provide opportunities for expressing live experiences, sharing, and reflecting on mental health. Mental health patients can benefit from philosophical theorizing, group dialogue, and model-supported approaches within the more comprehensive philosophical model. The model-supported philosophical approaches enable practitioners to recognize common experiences and beliefs.

In addition, the philosophical model could help identify opportunities to challenge traditional models based on the previous labeling of cognitions, such as pathological, irrational, or mad. The approach can help to determine the meaning of an irrational belief or to respond to questions of whether irrationality is an indication of mental illness or disorders. As a result, the conversation might shift from individual instances to more general inquiries about what traits are required and sufficient for a label to be attached to those specific occurrences. The approach relieves the strain that might develop when focusing on one person's experience as the main topic of debate. It also enables us to recharacterize our experiences following a philosophical model that best accounts for their specific characteristics.

Therefore, the philosophical approach improves the capacity to understand and classify mental disorders. Such benefits extend to establishing better dimensional approaches to such classification. However, philosophers like Gadamer held a fundamental premise that the current medical and psychotherapy treatment for mental health problems was insufficient since they only focused on the biological or psychological aspects of human experience and disregarded the social and cultural dimensions of human experience.¹⁰ Other philosophers like Gillett highlighted the need for differentiation between the mind and brain when treating mental disorders. He identified the brain as a biological organ that is the material content of the mind. On the other hand, Gillett described the mind as non-biological and non-tangible, presenting non-

⁹ Sophie Stammers and Rosalind Pulvermacher, "The Value of Doing Philosophy in Mental Health Contexts," *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 23: 4 (2020): 743-752, 747.

¹⁰ Josef Bleicher. "Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics," *Contemporary Hermeneutics* (2017): 108-116.

material and narrative elements, including values, beliefs, fears, and assumptions. All living things have some form of brain, but because each organism thinks for itself, it develops different mental characteristics that are unique to it. Each person is made distinct from others by these propositional mental components. They transform a person's biological components into that person and determine how that person interprets information from others and their environment.

Practitioners can use surgery, electric shock, psychotropic drugs, and other methods to repair a physically sick brain, but strategies are quite different for a troubled or "disordered" mind. Arguably, physical therapies like surgery, electric shock, and biological chemical treatments like drugs cannot cure the problematic ideas, values, anxieties, assumptions, and other factors that make up the troubled or "disordered" mind. The process of cognition must be used to alter problematic mental information. The mind is changed by thought. Moreover, dialogue can aid with productive thinking. Additionally, a discussion partner who has received training in the art and skill of discussion can boost the therapeutic effects of conversation. At this point, counselors and psychotherapists with training are engaged. Numerous treatment outcome studies conducted over the past few decades have demonstrated that talking in counseling and psychotherapy sessions, sometimes known as "talk therapies," is the most successful treatment for both short- and long-term effects. Similar to this, Edward Erwin, in his 1997 book *Philosophy and Psychotherapy*, illustrated how and why talk therapies like counseling and psychotherapy are longer-lasting treatments for alleged mental diseases than any of the psychotropic drugs that are currently so frequently administered.¹¹ Overall, such findings describe the potential benefits of adopting philosophical approaches to treating the mind and mental illnesses or disorders.

Critical analysis of Gadamer's Hermeneutic notion of mental health

Mental health care providers have predominantly relied on conventional methods as primary strategies to unearth and treat mental illnesses. However, the high prevalence rates currently of such conditions imply that such methods remain less successful as therapeutic approaches.

¹¹ Peter Bruno Raabe, "Philosophy Revalued in Mental Healthcare," *Synthesis Philosophica* 35: 2 (2020): 379-392, 382.

Gadamer argued that introducing philosophical approaches could be crucial in addressing high prevalence rates and treating mental illness. More specifically, Gadamer's hermeneutics is the philosophical approach that encourages practitioners to prioritize dialogues in the treatment process. The approach can help mental health care providers curb psychiatric disorders by identifying such health problems as issues with the mind where past experiences, rather than the body, are identified as a significant part of the treatment. Adopting the Gadamerian approach would help the practitioners identify the importance of dialogue, communication, and understanding of the text and symbolic text. Ultimately, this would improve effectiveness in treating and curbing mental health illnesses and disorders.

First, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics raises an important question about whether scientific frameworks and methodologies can handle complex human or patient experiences and meanings given their epistemological perspectives and methodological approaches. Second, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is helpful because it provides a dialogical framework that promotes an interpretative viewpoint on different kinds of existence in which "otherness" and alterity are viewed as critical foils to develop and conceptually supplement or enrich morally.¹² Gadamer challenges these prevalent models in human affairs through his work in *Truth and Method*. He seems worried about the scientific models utilized in mental illnesses.¹³ In addition, hermeneutics inherently raises questions about the epistemological viewpoint. As a result, it draws attention to the fact that the interpretative component is the only basis for understanding the sophistication of human affairs and knowledge. Gadamer emphasizes the influence of language and culture on how people see the world. Since "the dialogue in which people are" guarantees that participants are expected to interact with present and previous realities, continuing discussions are necessary for humans to understand the world and themselves.

Inducing a shift in preconceptions and understanding phenomena or others without distortions requires parties to participate in a dialogue on various levels. First, it is important to accept or understand the conceptual

¹² Beata Piecychna, "Hans-Georg Gadamer's Philosophy of Understanding and Its Implications for a Model of Hermeneutical Translation Competence," *Perspectives* (2022): 1-14, 6.

¹³ Peter Bruno Raabe, *Philosophy Revalued*, 383.

schemas and biases that shape intellectual perspectives. Doing this will make it easier to identify conceptual taxonomies or practices under challenging situations. Second, encounters with "alterity" or otherness are a necessary catalyst for conceptual or ethical growth; the outcome is the contingency of what may be considered true in conceptual schemas and biases. Embracing diversity increases awareness of barriers and a range of distorted viewpoints which limit other true ideas.¹⁴ As soon as these boundaries are questioned, mental schemas develop spontaneously and shift due to interaction with what may seem alien to people. This is what Gadamer called a "fusion of horizons," where the horizons expand to make them more understandable by accepting the potential reality of different human life forms. Gadamer's philosophical approach promotes the dialogical method that enhances one's understanding of others to attain less distortion and more truthfulness - combining many perspectives on the world and those that are important to people. In other words, via dialogic interaction, one's perspectives evolve to eventually take into account the potential present in what seemed at first foreign or alien.

As it broadens its conceptual construct and scope by thinking on and creating meaningful awareness of biases, the hermeneutic concept of therapeutic mental intervention has also extended its reach into mental nursing health (MHN). Practitioners may find Gadamer's hermeneutics helpful in examining the signals of lethality, inadequacy, and fragility that human experience conveys. Hermeneutics encourages compassion and assistance for persons going through emotional frontiers to understand people's finite selves, which reveals perplexity and worry in a person. It supports the production of ethical and philosophical theoretical notions based on logical and conceptual reasoning, and analysis results from entering the hermeneutic circle through interpretational processes. The desire to change and acquire new intellectual abilities, as well as information, emotional intelligence, and personal maturity, are prerequisites for development. Gadamer effectively highlights/reveals bias in the traditional attitudes towards mental therapies, nevertheless. The inability to think about one's preconceptions is the most damning since admitting them may be very difficult, according to Gadamer, who contends that prejudices are unimportant as long as they are detected and acknowledged.

¹⁴ Tanya Sue D. Barayuga, "Gadamer and Healing," *International Journal of Science and Research* 10: 6 (2021): 78-83.