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BECOMING A LEADER: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIFEWORLD OF NELSON MANDELA

Submitted by:

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INTRODUCTION

My research question emerged from my lived experience of Nelson Mandela. I had the privilege of knowing him personally through the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund – a charity that Mandela established during his term of office as President of South Africa. I selected the lifeworld of Nelson Mandela as the subject of my PhD dissertation research because in my experience he demonstrated an unparalleled ability to lead, reconcile, and transform a broken society.

This dissertation study looks at the lived experience of Nelson Mandela and explores how the structures of his lifeworld shaped his choices and actions and ultimately influenced his destiny as a leader. This approach required a broad lens that encompasses the three main concepts underlying the inquiry: leadership, lifeworld phenomenology, and hermeneutics. While the leadership literature is relevant to this study, so too is lifeworld phenomenology, and in particular Alfred

Schutz's theory regarding the structures of the lifeworld and its significance for social action (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973).

THE RESEARCH QUESTION.

How did Mandela's lifeworld construct him as a leader?

RELEVANCE TO THE FIELD OF OD

The leadership literature cites Nelson Mandela's leadership as exemplifying various theoretical constructs, including charismatic, transformational, spiritual, and authentic leadership (Bass, 2008, Pauchant, 2002). However none of these studies include research on Nelson Mandela's lived experience in order to gain an understanding of the role that his lifeworld had in shaping him as a leader. While the leadership literature contains many studies on leadership, there are few studies that recognise the role that the structures of the lifeworld play in influencing the leaders' choices and actions.

CLARIFICATION OF KEY CONCEPTS

Phenomenology is a discipline that endeavours to describe how the world is constituted and experienced through conscious acts, recognising that everything we know, we know through consciousness (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 97).

Phenomenology challenges the researcher to allow phenomena to reveal themselves, rather than predetermining what phenomena are (Rehorick & Bentz, 2009, p. 3).

Hermeneutics is the interpretation of texts, and I have adopted Gadamer's approach to the concept. Gadamer (1975/2012) encourages us to approach hermeneutics in such a way that recognises the interpretation of texts as an experience of truth that not only needs to be justified philosophically, "but which

is itself a way of doing philosophy” (p. xxii). Gadamer retained the term “hermeneutics” not in the sense of a methodology, but “as a theory of the real experience that thinking is” (p. xxxiii).

The Husserlian concept of the **lifeworld** (*Lebenswelt*) refers to the world of lived experience in everyday life (Husserl, 1970, pp. 122 -123). Bentz and Shapiro (1998) contend that our lifeworld is based on lived, embodied relationships located in time, place, space, history, and the natural environment. Each lifeworld presents us with certain structures or styles that, when studied, enrich our understanding of others (p. 97). In order to grow our understanding of one another, we therefore need to study the way events occur in our lifeworlds.

Schutz (1967) argues that everything we know about another’s conscious life is based on our own **lived experience**. Lived experience has a temporal structure in that it can never be grasped as it manifests itself, but only reflectively. Meaning only arises through an act of reflection. All meaning is based on the world of everyday life. Schutz (1967) defined the concept of a “*meaningful lived experience*”, as a turning of attention to an already elapsed experience, “ in the course of which the latter is lifted out of the stream of consciousness and identified as an experience in such and such a way and in no other” (p. 215). Thus meaning does not lie in the experience itself, but rather in experiences which are grasped reflectively (p. 70).

Our understanding of our world is based at any given time on our **stock of knowledge**, which serves as a reference for our future actions. As such, our lifeworld provides very important structural characteristics of how we think and

act (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p.7). **Typifications** are “socially constructed abstractions and simplifications” about a person or thing (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 50). In everyday life, typifications are socially imposed with the language spoken in a community. Our stocks of knowledge are “systems of typifications” that help us communicate, and are one of the primary ways lifeworlds operate and consciousness is constituted (Schutz, 1967). **Relevance** is the element that determines what we choose to experience out of all the things we can experience with intentionality playing a key role in the constitution of our knowledge and understanding (Wagner, 1983, p. 68).

HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH

METHODOLOGY

Schutzian lifeworld phenomenology was applied to uncover the layers of the elementary structures of everyday lived experience which provide the foundations of social action, helping the researcher to understand how leader’s intentions affect his or her experiences and the knowledge that leaders acquire and therefore the choices they make and the actions they take. However, while Schutz (1973) successfully uncovered the layers of the elementary structures of everyday life, I was still left unsure of how to progress with an empirical analysis of the structures of the everyday lifeworld of a leader.

Gadamer’s (1975/2012) hermeneutics provided a promising theoretical basis for researching lived experience, including the interpretation, and understanding of everyday lifeworld phenomenon. However, I was still faced with the problem of deciding *which* lived experiences to research in order to

extract the greatest understanding of Nelson Mandela's lifeworld. Here, Schutz's concept of "*meaningful lived experiences*" provided a useful filter to guide the selection of texts for analysis. The complementary nature of Schutzian lifeworld phenomenology and Gadamerian hermeneutics became increasingly appealing as a means of uncovering the complex structures of Mandela's lifeworld.

The scholarly base for my inquiry is therefore lifeworld phenomenology using Schutzian concepts of the nature of the lifeworld, illuminated by the hermeneutics of Gadamer. The purpose of my study is to understand the everyday lived experience of Nelson Mandela through a systematic exploration of the structures of the lifeworld that helped shape him as a leader. Central to this study is the need to develop a greater understanding of the role that our lifeworlds play in shaping who we become, focusing on the complex structures through which this world and our knowledge of it are constructed in our consciousness, while taking into consideration the sociocultural and historical traditions that give meaning to our world. The research contributes to new knowledge in the field of human development by presenting new ways of understanding how the structures of our lifeworlds influence how we interact and participate in the world of everyday life.

Contrary to the philosophy of science perspective, in which theoretical knowledge is derived from observing the world in such a way that the observer is no longer completely engaged in the world and where the acquisition of knowledge requires a point of view which stands outside the everyday lifeworld, hermeneutic-phenomenology is founded on the belief that the researcher is

embedded in a context of explanation that influences the context of the data (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p.112; Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 202).

Description of research design

By applying the Gadamerian circle of understanding as a framework to guide my analysis, I discovered a different perspective on Mandela's lifeworld and leadership that would not have shown itself simply within my own limited horizon. The Mandela texts are laden with meaning, incorporating stocks of common knowledge or systems of typifications that include Mandela's past understandings, longings, hopes, and fears (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 55).

The nature of hermeneutic inquiry is dialogical in nature. The interpretive methodology that this study entails demanded openness to exploration and a freedom from the need for specific answers. The study process involved a fine-grained hermeneutic scrutiny of Nelson Mandela's lived experience as I searched for coherent patterns of meaning. The process required that I return to the data repeatedly, allowing insights to emerge before extracting themes and patterns for the next round, each time approaching the text with a more complete understanding. At each turn my understanding was refined and corrected as fresh questions came to mind that could only be answered by returning to the events studied and by revising my earlier interpretations. Gadamer (2004) points out that the hermeneutical experience applies its own rigour, which, he says, is that of uninterrupted listening. Gadamer likens conversation to a game in the sense that participants in a game enter into something that has its own logic that includes them while extending beyond them to develop in its own way, saying that "a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct" but rather that it

is more correct to say that a conversation has a spirit of its own (Gadamer, 2004, p. 385). Gadamer encourages an attitude of openness coupled with curiosity, which he characterizes as “playful seriousness” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 113; Gadamer, 2004).

I was conscious that Gadamer (2004) believes that application is “neither a subsequent nor merely occasional part of the phenomena of understanding,” but that it codetermines understanding as a whole (Gadamer, 1975/2004, pp. 314 - 320). The challenge with phenomenology and hermeneutics is that there is no method (Gadamer, 2004; Rorty, 1979; van Manen, 2007, p.30). The researcher has to find his or her own most appropriate way of understanding the text while maintaining scholarly rigour. “There is no such thing as a Gadamerian method of analysis,” states Lawn (2006), adding that “calling anything a Gadamerian method would be against what Gadamer saw his hermeneutics as attempting to accomplish” (Lawn, 2006, p. 61; Giazzoni, 2009, p. 78). Nevertheless my analysis of Mandela’s texts is particularly guided by a Schutzian lifeworld approach complemented by a deep hermeneutic analysis using the Gadamerian Circle of Understanding as a broad framework. The combination of these two cultures of inquiry provides a fresh perspective to the study of the Mandela texts that would not otherwise have been possible.

Ethical considerations

As the study did not require interviews to be conducted, and the material to be analysed is from approved archives, the study entailed minimal risks. I visited the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory to view the original texts held in archive, and was privileged to have been able to view the original exercise books

that Mandela used to write his draft letters during his years in prison. However, I wish to make it clear that I chose not to work directly from the original material for the reason that while I was in South Africa, I discovered that many of these historical texts had been recently transposed into works published by the archive team in an effort to raise funds for the Mandela Centre of Memory and also to bring Mandela's words to a far wider span of people. I have therefore been able to cite each of Mandela's "meaningful lived experiences" by referencing the published works (Mandela, 2010; Mandela, 2011) – even though the original material was available in archive.

Strategy for approaching the selection of texts

I applied the Schutzian concept of "meaningful lived experiences" as a filtering mechanism to select texts for analysis (Schutz, 1967, p. 71). Not all our experiences are meaningful. Consciousness remains a pure stream of duration without any discrete, lived experiences -- unless we stop and reflect. Experiences that are meaningful are those that are grasped reflectively. If not reflected upon, our experiences remain prephenomenal. Only by what Schutz (1967) refers to as an Act of Attention "to one's own stream of duration", can we single out a lapsed lived experience and constitute it as meaningful (Schutz, 1967, pp. 69 - 75). Schutz reminds us, that "the reflective glance is the Act (*Akt*) which raises the content of consciousness from prephenomenal to phenomenal status" (Schutz, 1967, p. 75). My strategy for choosing archival material for hermeneutical analysis has involved searching for and selecting examples of significant life experiences that Mandela has chosen to reflect upon and where his meditations and reflections have been captured in writing or where they have been recorded.

Data Analysis

Gadamer (2012) draws our attention to three levels at which the researcher demonstrates hermeneutic understanding (Rehorick & Bentz, 2009, p. 20; Gadamer, 2012). I applied all three levels of analysis, using the Gadamerian hermeneutic circle of understanding to guide me.

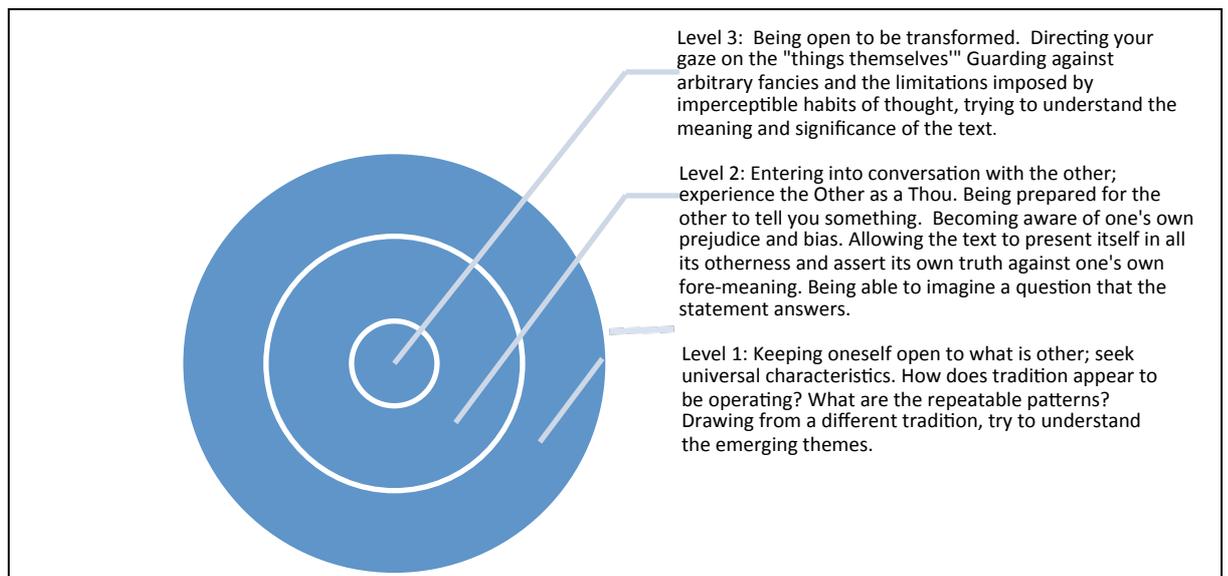


Figure 1. The Gadamerian hermeneutic circle of understanding

Level 1: Seek universal characteristics

Level 2: Enter into conversation with the Other

Level 3: Be open to be influenced and changed by the text

FINDINGS

“How did Mandela’s lifeworld construct him as a leader?” In answering this simple, clearly focused research question I have explored Mandela’s lived experience, immeasurably growing my understanding of Mandela and how he became the kind of leader he was. My findings highlight the structures of Nelson Mandela’s lifeworld, explore how he interpreted his experiences, and the role his

lifeworld played in influencing his choices and actions, and thereby shaping his destiny.

Lifeworld dimensions

From my early analysis (Level 1), I identified seven lifeworld dimensions embedded in the text, providing each with a symbol for ease of reference. These included Mandela's

Social World ●

Cultural World ☀

Historical/Biographical World ■

Political World ▲

Economic World \$

Spiritual World ♥

World of Predecessors/Ancestors ◇

Overarching themes

At Level 1, the hermeneutic task is to ask, "What themes emerge from the text? How does tradition appear to be operating?" At this level I focused my attention on identifying universal characteristics, searching for broad patterns and themes. After multiple readings, I identified the following overarching themes, underpinned by the lifeworld dimensions identified earlier in the analysis:

- Theme 1: Heritage, Traditions, and Ancestral Roots ◇☀●♥
- Theme 2: Duty and Service ●☀■▲◇
- Theme 3: Family – Joy and Grief ●☀■♥
- Theme 4: Friendship – Keeping Spirits High ●♥■▲
- Theme 5: Reflection – Time and Hope ♥●

These are shown in more detail below:

Theme 1: Heritage, Traditions, and Ancestral Roots

- Childhood experiences reinforced a strong identity for Mandela in his indigenous roots and love for his home in Qunu. He learned at a young age from community elders and oral historians, listening to their wealth of wisdom and experience, which provided him with lifelong lessons and insight into his cultural traditions, rituals, and taboos.
- From birth, Mandela grew up to understand that he was destined to be a leader of his people. He saw himself taking his place in the family traditional lineage. This expectation was reinforced from a young age.
- As a child, Mandela developed a strong sense of community and a belief in collective effort and collective values and was given responsibility well in advance of his years.
- Through his father, who died when he was only 9 years old, Mandela was influenced by Xhosa religion/spirituality, which he describes as “characterized by a cosmic wholeness” (Mandela, 2010).

Theme 2: Duty and Service

- Chief and Chieftancy: In his youth, the power and influence of chieftancy pervaded every aspect of Mandela’s life and he viewed this as the pre-eminent means through which one could achieve influence and status.
- Politicization and the liberation struggle: Politics was not a distraction for Mandela. He describes politics as his lifework, perceiving it as an essential and fundamental part of his being.

- Fulfilling the expectations of others: Mandela (2010;2011) believed that to do your duty and live up to the expectations of others is in itself a rewarding experience, describing it as a “magnificent achievement.”

Theme 3: Family – Joy and Grief

- His love for his mother, children, and family-life. Subthemes that emerge are his excitement and anticipation at the prospect of going home and the joy of family reunions. Mandela wondered about the political dimensions of his life that were in conflict with and that had drawn him away from his home and family.
- Guilt for neglecting his family due to the pressures of his political life. Mandela reflected on his choices and actions that caused him to neglect his family.
- Experiencing the natural life-cycle of birth, ageing, and death. Mandela knew the pain of losing loved ones both young and old, experienced the heartache of not being able to care for his mother in her old age, and the joy of children.
- Alternating between joy and grief -- recalling the happy and unforgettable days of his childhood, followed by eternal feelings of guilt about neglecting his mother's and his family's needs, and wondering if politics was an excuse to shirk his duties. Mandela continued to be plagued by an uneasy conscience, aware of the sometimes unbearable tension between his wholehearted commitment to the liberation struggle and the needs of his family and traditions of his childhood.

- Sustained by the knowledge that he was a member of a “tried and tested” family that had triumphed over many difficulties (Mandela, 2010).

Theme 4: Friendship – Keeping Spirits High

- Friends and lifelong comrades provide Mandela with his primary support in his personal growth and development, giving him what he describes as “a mirror through which I can see myself” (Mandela, 2010).
- Befriended during times of distress, Mandela was the recipient of numerous acts of kindness and assistance from friends throughout his life. He acknowledges his indebtedness to his mentors, counsellors and advisors, including Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu, and Kathy Kathandra as well as many other friends from the broader community.
- Developed inner strength and confidence when supported by his friends. Friendship has played an important role throughout Mandela’s life. He sees friendship as key to the development of his inner strength, helping him cope with poverty and loneliness during difficult years.
- Friends whose sympathy and affection were “always a source of strength” during times of grief and pain. Subthemes include poverty, suffering, friendship providing strength and comfort, acts of kindness and assistance from friends, loyalty to people who befriended him during times of distress, and hearing stories about the past from friends that strengthened him.

Theme 5: Reflection – Time and Hope

- Reflecting on his “career of storms,” Mandela wondered about the choices he had made but felt that the part that he had played in the liberation struggle brought him great joy.
- Living in hope and expectation: Describing himself as fundamentally an optimist, the subtheme of hope is a thread throughout his life. He describes this experience as a feeling that hope is woven into his being and that his heart pumps hope steadily to every part of his body.
- Mandela was sustained by his strong belief in the collective wisdom of mankind and the fact that there are good men and women everywhere.
- Broker of peace -- “The best weapon is to sit down and talk.” Mandela was passionate about the peace process, which became an increasingly strong theme later in his life (Mandela, 2010).

Combining a Schutzian lifeworld analysis approach while applying the Gadamerian hermeneutic *Circle of Understanding* to guide the analysis process provides a powerful framework that brings an entirely different perspective to the reading of the Mandela texts. Applying Gadamer’s idea of approaching the hermeneutic circle of understanding framework as leading to a conversation between two persons brought me to a pivotal aspect of my research, captured in the research study as a hermeneutic dialogue. A study of the lifeworld involves the intersecting biographies of the persons in it, as well as of their predecessors and imagined successors. As a researcher entering the lifeworld of others, I was mindful of the impact to the meaning structures that may result from the intervention of my inquiry (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 56). Hermeneutic analysis

seeks to reveal the meaning of human expression within a contextual awareness and perspective. Things are only understood within the context of other things, and the hermeneutic approach assumes the interconnectedness of all aspects of the observer's world with that of the observed. As the researcher, I tried to provide historical context where such content seemed necessary. I was also consciously aware that because I am embedded in the context of the explanation, I may intrude on the context of the data and that this in turn may affect validation and the basis for validation. I used the Gadamerian technique of foregrounding my prejudices and bias to bring these to the surface in the analysis process.

My final step was to distil my findings. I found that Mandela's lifeworld provided clear examples of six key elements that helped shape his destiny:

Six key findings related to the research question

1. Nelson Mandela was a figure embedded in his own lifeworld structures - the historicity of the situation was imposed on him.
2. He was born into a stratified social and cultural world, pregiven to him as a frame of reference.
3. His lifeworld stock of knowledge was related to his situation, and served as his reference schema for explication of the world.
4. Mandela made sense of his world by applying typifications.
5. The process of socialization and correspondingly his relative-natural worldview was transmitted to him by certain people in his life, initially his

parents, the clan elders, and the regent; and later, teachers, friends and comrades.

6. Mandela was guided by a system of relevances, including his memories of past experiences, decisions he had made, and actions that he took which influenced his destiny.

CONCLUSIONS

Gadamer (2012) contends that hermeneutic understanding requires a three-way relationship in which one person comes to an understanding with another about something they both understand. As in play, this process of “coming to an understanding” rests on a mutual willingness on the part of the players to lend themselves to the emergence of something new, which Gadamer describes as the truth that emerges in conversation (Gadamer, 2012, p. xvii). The fundamental condition for truth’s coming to light is not simply the result of a technique or method, something that the interpreter does, but as a result of something that “happens to us over and above our wanting and doing” (Howard, 1982, p. 122).

I experienced this phenomenon when applying the circle of understanding framework to my lifeworld analysis of the lived experience of Nelson Mandela, as a physically internalised shift in my perspective, or what Gadamer describes as a *merging of horizons*, which enabled me to perceive Mandela’s experiences from his own point of view. However, Gadamer would argue that I did not apply a method in my search for truth, but rather that the general characteristic of *Bildung*, or keeping myself open to what is other, led me to a deeper understanding of the lived experience of Nelson Mandela. Nevertheless I see the circle of

understanding as a necessary framework that helps to guide the researcher through the process of interpretation and understanding of another's lived experience.

For this study I adopted a Schutzian lifeworld phenomenological approach applying a Gadamerian hermeneutic framework. This type of analysis provides the following benefits:

- Helps the researcher select the most appropriate texts for analysis by providing a Schutzian definition of the concept of “meaningful lived experiences”
- Provides a more holistic approach to the study of leadership taking into consideration the leader, the context, and the environment within which the leadership takes place
- Recognises that throughout our lives there are potential trigger events that can stimulate growth and development
- Recognises the importance of reflection and that these elements are to some extent dependent on the attention given by the leader to self-reflective activities
- Recognises that our stocks of knowledge are systems of typifications that help us communicate and that every new experience is determined by means of a type constituted in earlier experiences
- Helps us understand that all experiences and actions are grounded on relevance structures

- Helps us see that what we consider to be relevant is informed by our stock of knowledge which in turn is an accumulation of our typifications
- Helps us understand that we only become aware of deficiencies in our stock of knowledge if a novel experience “explodes” the taken-for-granted nature of our experience –causing a “leap” from one finite province of meaning to another
- Recognises the temporality of the lifeworld
- Helps us understand that we cannot approach texts in a value-free context because our search for knowledge will always be influenced by our culture and traditions
- Recognises that prejudices constitute the historical reality of our being (Gadamer, 2012, p. 278)
- Helps us understand the whole in terms of the details and the detail in terms of the whole
- Helps us view the text within this circular relationship as a manifestation of a creative moment belonging to the author’s inner life (Gadamer, 2012, p. 292)
- Recognises that we cannot have experiences without asking questions; the collaborative activity involved in discussing and testing our understanding of a text should resemble the dialogic relation of a conversation

What we encounter in our everyday lifeworld not only widens our horizon, by adding to our existing stock of knowledge, but, by changing our existing

perspective, our everyday lifeworld frequently provides us not only with a broader understanding of human life and culture, but also of our own limitations. This knowledge constitutes what Gadamer (2012) refers to as “a non-dogmatic wisdom” (Gadamer, p. xiii). I suggest that this study provides a practical framework for examining Schutzian (1967) “meaningful lived experiences” captured in reflective mode with a view to understanding the lifeworld of another human being.

The leadership literature is right to refer to Mandela as an example of Charismatic, Transformational, Authentic, and Spiritual leadership. My research shows that he does indeed fit many aspects of these leadership constructs. However, my research study also shows that Nelson Mandela was an ordinary man who made something extraordinary happen in my country of birth. I do not believe that there is any one leadership construct that can encompass all that he stood for, both as a human being and as a leader.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Early on, this study highlights how through reflection and explication, Mandela’s choices and actions became meaningful to him. This study shows how a hermeneutic analysis of meaningful lived experiences can assist in growing our understanding of how another human being makes sense of his world. When we truly want to understand the lived experiences of another human being, this study demonstrates the advantages of applying the Gadamerian Circle of Understanding (Gadamer, 2004) to the analysis of Schutzian “meaningful lived experiences” (Schutz, 1967) which have been captured as texts in moments of meditative

contemplation and deep personal reflection. In the field of the human sciences and in particular human development and lifeworld phenomenology, the importance of reflection on how and why we think and act the way we do should not be underestimated.

Gadamer argues that our search for knowledge will always be influenced by our culture and traditions. We cannot build understanding in a value-free context. Gadamer reminds us that “the path of all knowledge leads through the question” (Gadamer, 1975/2004, p. 357). This study brings renewed focus on two key elements of building understanding of another human being, namely the benefit of reflection and the need for dialogue.

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