Using Hermeneutics as a Qualitative Research Approach in Professional Practice

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This paper is targeted primarily at doctoral students and others considering hermeneutics as a research strategy. Research using hermeneutics was carried out with occupational therapy educators and clinicians in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the UK. A total of 53 participants engaged in focus groups and individual interviews over a one-year. The paper explores hermeneutics as a credible, rigorous and creative strategy to address aspects of professional practice that similarly need to be flexible, adaptable to particular needs, and justifiable in the contexts of evidence-based as well as client-centred practice. The hermeneutic study produced A Model of Professional Practice Judgment Artistry (Paterson, 2003) which is briefly described and the connections Key Words: Hermeneutic Approach, Health Sciences, Occupational Therapy Research, Judgment, and Artistry in Professional Practice

Introduction

This paper explores the value of hermeneutics as a credible, rigorous, and creative strategy to address aspects of professional practice that similarly need to be flexible, adaptable to particular needs, and justifiable in the contexts of evidence-based as well as client-centred practice. Often in research reports the findings and product of the research take centre stage. Here we focus on the methodology and briefly present the product of a hermeneutic study that produced a *Model of Professional Practice Judgment Artistry (PPJA)* (Paterson, 2003) to enable readers to understand the connection between product and process of the research and to view the credibility of the hermeneutic approach in the context of the research findings. In this way, the research process and product serve as the context for the exploration of the research approach, hermeneutics in action. The paper is targeted primarily at doctoral students and others considering hermeneutics as a research strategy. To meet this goal we have addressed aspects of using hermeneutics as a research strategy at various levels: the paradigmatic framework, the nature of hermeneutics and its rationale, the way this research project has fashioned and implemented a particular hermeneutic approach, and the harmonic relationship between the research topic and approach.

The three-part model arising from the research is presented in detail elsewhere (Paterson, 2003) and is the subject of other current writing. To explore the hermeneutic approach we adopted, we will firstly set the scene for the research, and then introduce the hermeneutic strategy and metaphors we utilized, employing them as the vehicles for writing the paper.

Setting the Scene

To set the scene or context for the exploration of the hermeneutic strategy this section introduces the research players, the key question, and the phenomenon investigated as well as briefly presenting the major research product of the PPJA model.

Introducing the players

In this research journey of exploration of judgment artistry, Margo, a doctoral candidate and occupational therapist, set out with a passion for understanding deep relationships between the practice of occupational therapy and its reasoning strategies. Joy, her principal supervisor, acted as a research collaborator in relation to making key research content and method decisions especially the hermeneutical approach. Joy was a mentor by providing support, critical appraisal and feedback, and a facilitator by broadening the context of the study to consider the relationship between reasoning and professional artistry, as well as focusing the research topic on judgment as a vital and often overlooked aspect of professional reasoning and decision making. Another key player was Susan Wilcox who was the Canadian associate supervisor, since Margo was living in Canada and studying as a distance student in Australia. Susan played the role of "critical companion" (assisting in debriefing and review of thesis writing) and has served as a co-author on other publications arising from this thesis.

Internationally recognized educators and researchers served as reference group members (RGMs) for the research. These people came from each of the four countries from which the participants were sought. The informants were selected because they had published in the area of OT clinical reasoning who then assisted in finding participants for the focus group.

The research participants shared both their emerging understanding of judgment artistry and their practice wisdom with us[1]. The participants who were the source of the constructed texts on judgment artistry were 53 occupational therapists, who were invited by the RGMs to express an interest in participating in the study. Those who chose to volunteer contacted Margo and provided contact details so that she could provide further information about the research and obtain their informed consent to contribute to the study. They were either educators or practitioners from four countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK), who, among them, had experience in a wide variety of clinical areas. The participant group was composed of occupational therapists who could knowledgeably explore the topics of clinical reasoning (including professional judgment) and professional artistry either from direct personal experience or observation of others'

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[1] The names of the reference group and participants are withheld due to confidentiality agreements.

professional artistry or judgment in action. The educators had a mean of 23 years of professional work experience and the practitioners had a mean of 15.8 years of experience. Further research exploring the voices of novices in this discussion would be valuable to address matters such as how professional judgment is acquired or evolves and the relationships between experience-based learning and professional artistry.

The research phenomenon and the principal research question

The phenomenon investigated in this research was *professional practice judgment artistry* (PPJA). PPJA was a construct developed by Paterson and Higgs (2001) to explore the cognitive, meta-cognitive, and humanistic aspects of artistry in professional practice decision making. The principal research question in this study was: "How can the term PPJA be understood in relation to OT professional practice?"

As one of the outcomes of the research, our definition of PPJA was further developed: *The capacity of professional practitioners to make highly skilled, micro-, macro- and meta-practice judgments that are optimal for the circumstances of the client and the context*. Such judgments involve bringing practitioners' unique knowledge base, reasoning, and interpersonal skills (e.g., listening, negotiating) to the task of processing and unraveling a set of highly complex clinical needs and data, demanding moral and ethical issues, questions of value, belief, and assumptions, in a professional manner in order to make sound clinical/professional decisions (based on Fish, 1998; Fish & Coles, 1998; Higgs, Titchen, & Neville, 2001). The overall focus of the research was on the cognitive, meta-cognitive, and humanistic aspects of professional decision making, with a specific focus on judgment artistry. The goal of the research was to illuminate the phenomenon of judgment artistry in OT practice and to identify the key factors (both external and internal to the practitioner) that characterize the phenomenon of PPJA in OT practice. The product of this research was the identification of four generic "dimensions" of the PPJA model: professionalism in PPJA; multi-faceted judgment in PPJA; practice artistry in PPJA; and reflexivity in PPJA. In addition a number of occupational therapy specific "elements" were described in the 3-part PPJA model (Paterson, Higgs, & Wilcox, in press).

The research paradigm

This research was conducted in the interpretive paradigm where the central goal is

> to seek to interpret the world, particularly the social world, (and where)
> knowledge … comprises constructions arising from the minds and bodies
> of knowing, conscious and feeling beings ... generated through a search
> for meaning, beliefs, and values, and through looking for wholes and
> relationships with other wholes. (Higgs, 2001, p.49)

The interpretive paradigm was appropriate for addressing the research question and the phenomenon under investigation: professional practice judgment artistry. This phenomenon is deeply embedded in the human world and needs a human sciences

paradigm and research strategy to address it richly and in context. Such opportunity is provided by the interpretive paradigm.

Consideration of the phenomenon of PPJA in this research is based on interpretation of relevant literature and of the perspectives of the research participants. The interpretative paradigm is grounded in the philosophy of idealism where the emphasis is on "embodied knowing as a determinant of social reality, (with recognition of) multiple constructed realities" (Higgs, 1998, p. 146). Within this paradigm researchers are interested in the various ways that people understand human phenomena, acknowledging that there are many ways of viewing these phenomena. Interpretivist thinking is associated with Weber, who suggested that in the human sciences we are concerned with *Verstehen* or understanding of the human world (Schwandt, 1994). Within this approach researchers seek culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world (Crotty, 1998). The choice of the interpretive paradigm for this research allowed a focus on uncovering contextualized, professional craft knowledge, personal experiential knowledge, and understandings about the phenomenon of judgment artistry in OT practice from those who are most likely to know and understand this phenomenon, the practitioners, and educators.

Hermeneutics and the hermeneutic strategies

Hermeneutics was selected as an appropriate research approach since the research goal was to interpret how people understand the construct and practice of judgment artistry. We argue that professional practice entails judgment artistry beyond the simple application of technical knowledge; that judgment artistry in professional practice can be better studied through an interpretive lens compared to an empirical lens; and that hermeneutics is an interpretive approach that is useful for studying judgment artistry of professional practice.

Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation. The name is derived from Hermes, the Greek messenger of legend who bore knowledge and understanding between the gods and mortals. In the 17th century, hermeneutics became associated with the interpretation of text, particularly in the context of biblical studies (Crotty, 1998). Since then, a number of theologians and philosophers (Dilthey, 1988; Gadamer, 1975; Heidegger, 1962; Ricoeur, 1976; Schleiermacher, 1977) have argued for, elaborated on, and developed variations of hermeneutic philosophy and subsequent methodologies. Schleiermacher has been acknowledged as the founder of modern hermeneutics, moving beyond the illumination of biblical text to the illumination of human understanding. Subsequently, Dilthey broadened the field of interest of hermeneutics beyond the individual to include cultural systems and organizations.

Smith and Heshusius (1986) make a distinction between method as technique and method as logic of justification. The former tends to be the conception of method associated with empirical and experimental scientific research. The latter is more congruent with interpretive research. "The point is that method as logic of justification, involving as it does basic philosophical assumptions, informs method as technique" (Smith & Heshusius, p. 8). There are three key philosophical assumptions or constructs that inform hermeneutics as a strategy for knowledge creation: These constructs shaped the research strategy we created for this research.

- Hermeneutics refers to the shared understandings that we already have with each another (Koch, 1999) and this sharing occurs through language. This view is translated into the Gadamerian metaphor of *fusion of horizons* whereby different interpretations of the phenomenon under investigation (in this case professional practice judgment artistry) are brought together through dialogue to produce shared understanding.
- Knowledge is constructed through dialogue: meaning emerges through a dialogue or hermeneutic conversation between the text and the inquirer (Koch, 1999). A "unique characteristic of hermeneutics is its openly dialogical nature: the returning to the object of inquiry again and again, each time with an increased understanding and a more complete interpretive account" (Packer, 1985, p. 1091). Gadamer equated "the metaphor of dialogue with the logic of question and answer" (Koch, 1996, p. 176).
- Gadamer used Heidegger's metaphor of the hermeneutic circle "to describe the experience of moving dialectically between the parts and the whole" (Koch, 1996, p. 176). The researcher becomes part of this circle moving repeatedly between interpretations of parts of the text and interpretations of the whole text, representing an emerging understanding of the phenomenon.

These three metaphors were combined to create a "hermeneutic spiral" (see Figure 1). Each of these elements will be discussed briefly before moving to a discussion of our hermeneutic spiral in action within this research.

Figure 1. A hermeneutic spiral.
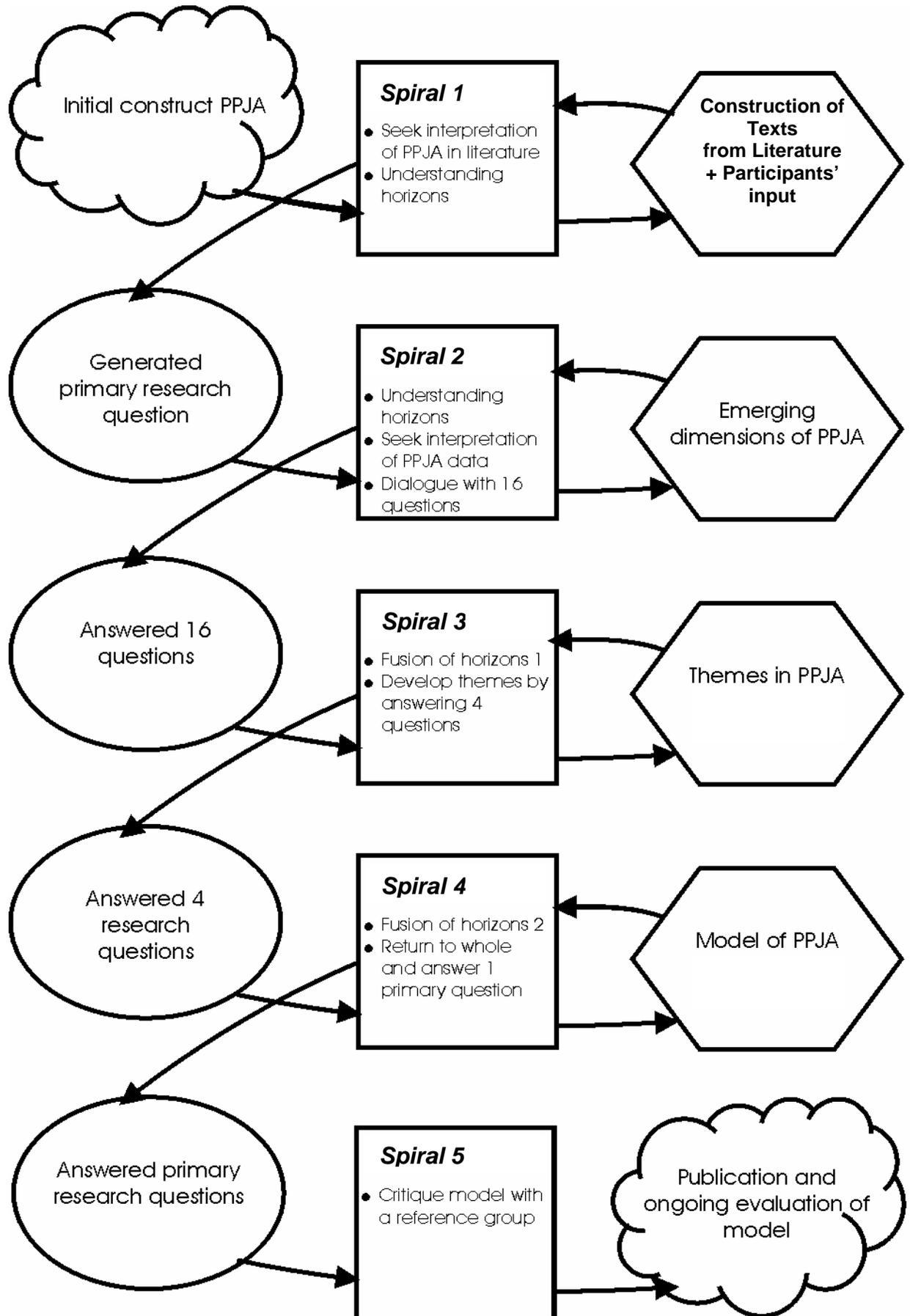
Perhaps the most well known aspect of hermeneutics is the *hermeneutic circle,* whereby the researcher attempts to understand "the whole through grasping its parts, and comprehending the meaning of the parts divining the whole" (Crotty, 1998, p. 92). In practice this involves repeatedly and cyclically moving between the parts or aspects of the phenomenon and the whole, with the objective of gaining a growing understanding of the phenomenon. Figure 2 illustrates the use of the hermeneutic circle in this project. Bontekoe (1996) provided an in-depth review of the evolving interpretation and nature of the hermeneutic circle. Using the concept and practice of the hermeneutic circle, researchers recognize that the phenomenon or object of comprehension is understood as a whole because its parts are integrated in the whole and define it. At the same time researchers recognize how the whole contextualizes each of the parts, seeking to illuminate the phenomenon within its context. The process involves an examination of the parts, defining each component before it is reintegrated into the whole (Bontekoe).

Figure 2. Use of the hermeneutic circle in this project. (adapted from Bontekoe, 1996)
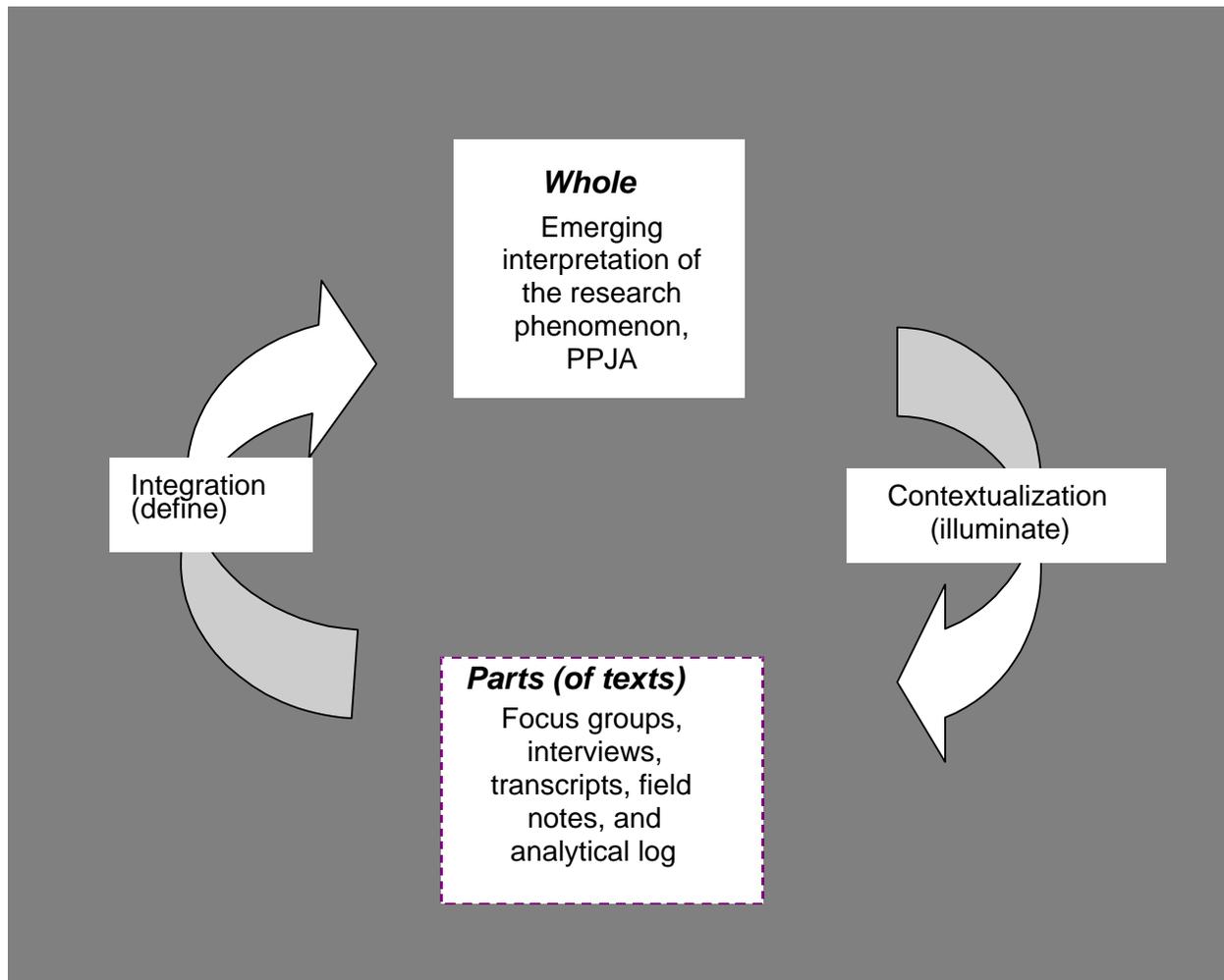
Heidegger (1962) emphasized the ontological perspective of hermeneutics by suggesting that researchers are concerned with an inquiry of the *theory of being,* and he stressed the idea of understanding of being (*Dasein)* that happens prior to reflection. Heidegger advocated a three-fold structure of *Dasein:* attuning to the past, articulating the situation in the present, and pressing forward to the new possibilities of the future (Titchen, 2000). Heidegger's approach was a "return to our Being, which presents itself to us initially in a nebulous and undeveloped fashion, and then seeks to unfold that pre-understanding, make explicit what is implicit, and grasp the meaning of Being itself" (Crotty, 1998, p. 97).

Gadamer (1975, 1981) believed that the hermeneutic circle of interpretation is never closed but is ongoing, with movement of understanding from the whole, to the part, and back to the whole. He emphasized the need for researchers to acknowledge their biases and prejudices (pre-judgments) as part of the interpretive process of hermeneutics. He introduced the concept of understanding research findings through a *fusion of horizons*, by which the historical horizon of the past and the present horizon of the current interpreter bridge the gap between the familiar and the unfamiliar. In this research, the historical horizon was the material found in the literature on topics related to PPJA, and the present horizon was the text in the form of transcribed interviews with the individuals who participated in this study, embedded in the emerging interpretation of the researcher. The task was to bridge and interpret the gap in knowledge of PPJA as well as the gap between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

The goal in hermeneutic research is to fuse the horizons of past, present, and future understanding using the hermeneutic circle, relating "the thing itself to the dialogue between the text and the reader" (Aylesworth, 1991, p. 74). Ricoeur's *appropriation,* whereby the "ideality of the text is the mediating link of this process of horizon fusing" (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 93), relates to Gadamer's (1975, 1981) *fusion of horizons.*

One of the identifying aspects of Gadamer's (1975, 1981) hermeneutic approach is the use of *question and answer* in text analysis.

> The logic of question and answer is special to the hermeneutic sciences …
> they do not build generalizations from particulars in a linear, incremental,
> and inductive manner, but rather begin with the whole, the general, the
> prediction and work toward the part and then return to the whole again.
> (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 22)

This approach was a major aspect of this research and a series of questions was developed to illuminate the phenomenon of judgment artistry.

Ricoeur also explored the theory of metaphor as a "relation between the literal meaning and the figurative meaning which is like an abridged version within a single sentence" (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 46). Gadamer embraced the concept of metaphors as a "linguistic process of concept formation … a reversible, oscillating, circular movement" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 238). The participants in this research frequently used metaphors to enhance their understanding of PPJA and to convey their understanding to others in the group. In fact, the hermeneutic circle is itself a metaphor that facilitates acceptance and understanding of this difficult concept.

Exploring PPJA via a Hermeneutic Spiral

In this section of the paper we will consider the blend of the method as technique and method as logic of justification by spiraling through the hermeneutic process.

Spiral 1 – Creating the texts

Initially we entered the hermeneutic spiral by clarifying our pre-judgments concerning judgment artistry. What did the term and practice mean to us? How had we experienced it? Recognizing that our horizons would evolve through the research, this was the first attempt to understand the phenomenon by seeking to interpret the horizons we had created for ourselves through past learning, research, and experience. We reflected upon potential sources of interpretations from others and constructed two text sets based upon: (a) a review of the literature to produce a text containing existing concepts and ways of understanding the elements of PPJA and (b) texts comprising transcriptions from focus groups and individual interviews with OT educators and practitioners who discussed their concepts of PPJA.

Reading the literature sought an understanding of the way authors were interpreting key concepts related to PPJA. Using the hermeneutic circle, the goal was to understand the phenomenon of judgment artistry from the horizons of other authors and to answer the principal research question. Four key questions were recognized which would become, at a later stage, a means of fusing horizons between the text voices and the researchers.

1. What is PPJA?
2. Why is PPJA needed or valuable?
3. What is the nature of PPJA in OT practice?
4. How is PPJA developed in individual practitioners?

This research sought to explore the notion of professional practice judgment artistry (PPJA), a term we had constructed to examine a specific aspect of clinical reasoning (i.e., making professional judgments and using judgments within clinical/professional decision making) in combination with professional artistry in practice. Since the construct PPJA was unfamiliar to the target group, they were asked to explore the more familiar terms clinical reasoning and professional artistry. Similarly, the concept professional judgment is a difficult phenomenon to access in research because it is an ability which frequently develops and occurs tacitly and automatically, arising from experience; through discussions of clinical reasoning the groups were able to transition into exploration of professional judgment. These participant texts were supplemented by existing sources of such information in the literature to distil published ideas on clinical reasoning and professional artistry in OT.

Focus groups explore or explain social phenomena and access an added dimension beyond individual interviews, yielding interactive verbal and nonverbal information (St. John, 1999). They provide ideal opportunities to hear from a number of people at one time: They are an efficient way to collect information, views and opinions quickly. Focus groups "enable people to ponder, reflect, and listen to experiences and

opinions of others. This interaction helps participants compare their own personal reality to that of others" (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 17). Focus groups have the advantage of allowing participants to brainstorm and build on the ideas of other participants. Groups can also inhibit input from people with minority opinions or shyness. Encouragement of all members to participate and monitoring of dominant group behaviors (with intervention by the facilitator if necessary) can address this issue. Focus groups were held in each of the four countries with the two main groups, educators and practitioners were used to access multiple perspectives on PPJA and the art of judgment within OT practice. Subsequent interviews served to discuss in greater depth the topics and issues raised in the focus groups.

The focus groups proceeded through a series of questions intended to encourage open discussion. Participants were asked to describe how they conceptualized their own reasoning and judgment processes and professional artistry and the way they saw these abilities manifest in, or explored by others. By the end of the session they were asked to discuss the concept of PPJA.

After the focus groups, some participants were invited to take part in an interview to elaborate on the focus group discussion and to consider more fully the phenomenon of PPJA. During the process of conducting the focus groups Margo identified individuals who she thought made particularly interesting or insightful comments, which indicated a prior understanding of the phenomenon of PPJA. She invited them to participate in individual interviews (conducted by Margo, herself) to more deeply explore the topic of PPJA. Of the 53 focus group members, 24 individuals participated in the interview process.

Individual interviews are more than a series of questions and answers. They are powerful tools for understanding human beings and their ideas.

> The interview serves very specific purposes: (1) it may be used as a means of exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon, and (2) the interview may be used as a vehicle to develop a conversational relationship with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience. (van Manen, 1997, p. 66)

According to van Manen, "the art of the researcher in the hermeneutic interview is to keep the question (of the meaning of the phenomenon) open, [and] to keep himself or herself and the interviewee orientated to the substance of the thing being questioned" (p. 98). The interviews involved asking questions to help participants explore the topic and to probe for further thoughts and reflections.

The most common type of interview is verbal face-to-face interchange (Fontana & Frey, 2000) of which there are three main types: structured, unstructured, and semi-structured or conversational approach, with varying degrees of control by the researcher. A conversational interview format (based on a prepared series of broad questions) was chosen for this research, to foster flexibility in exploration of the topic area. Open-ended questions were used to encourage reflection and rich description of ideas and experience, and participants were invited to elaborate on their answers using examples and experiences. They were encouraged to explain or expand on statements they had made in

the focus group session. Several techniques advocated by Minichiello, Sullivan, Greenwood, and Axford (1999) were used to engage the participants, including funneling from broad open questions to narrower topics, probing to elicit further details, and encouraging story-telling.

A researcher's journal was used to record the researcher's observation of events, including reflections on focus group interactions, the general mood and tone of the group, and the level of engagement of participants in the research process. During analysis, journal notes were compared with other texts to identify common themes (as suggested by Owens, Stein, & Chenoweth, 1999). Key points recorded in the journal notes (e.g., interesting ideas, confusion, and challenges), during the focus groups and interviews, assisted in facilitating the discussion. The journal notes kept during the focus groups were also useful for probing in the follow-up individual interviews.

Spiral 2 – Exploring horizons and dialogue with questions and answers

Arising from dialogue with the texts was clarification of the principal research question (as stated above). Essentially, we clarified what the texts were saying in relation to our research goal and phenomenon. A researcher's journal was kept throughout the research to track the emerging ideas and themes. One of the aspects of hermeneutic spiraling was going back to the principal research question to "touch base" with the research phenomenon and goal. From this focus hermeneutic cycling, between data parts and the emerging (whole) picture of the phenomenon, began the process of exploring the horizons of the participants.

To achieve this goal the transcripts from the focus groups and individual interviews were read repeatedly in an attempt to "hear" what the participants had said, without interpretation or altering the meaning. Key concepts were identified after deep immersion in the text. Comparisons with ideas and themes in the literature texts were noted in the researcher's log. Concepts noted in the transcripts were color-coded and entered into a computer-assisted data-management system using QSR NVivo software. NVivo assists in managing large volumes of data and tracking the coding of key concepts. The highlighted phrases were thus easy to locate without shuffling through the many pages of texts.

From deep immersion in the texts, Margo and Joy identified that the data were providing answers to 16 sub-questions related to the four broader process questions (1 to 4 listed above) (see Table 1). That is, through repeatedly reading the data by both authors to attain a deeper understanding of the data and the topics being explored in consideration of the four key research questions, we identified that each of these questions could be sub-divided further and that using these 16 questions we were better able to interpret the interview and focus group texts. NVivo was employed to sort the texts to produce consolidated answers the to 16 analysis questions.

Table 1
Sub-Questions Used in Stage 2 Analysis

16 sub-questions		4 research questions
1	What does artistry mean?	A
2	What does it mean to be a professional?	A
3	What does artistry mean in a professional practice context?	A
4	What do professional practice artists look like in OT?	C
5	What do the participants understand by clinical reasoning?	A
6	What does professional judgment mean?	A
7	What does professional judgment have to do with professional artistry?	A & C
8	How would you conceptualize judgment artistry in professional practice?	C
9	What is the point of judgment artistry?	B
10	How is judgment artistry in professional practice developed?	D
11	Can/should judgment artistry in professional practice be taught?	D
12	What aspects of judgment artistry in professional practice need further research?	A
13	What do experts look like?	A & C
14	How are experts and professional artists similar and different?	A
15	How does client-cantered practice relate to professional artistry?	B & C
16	How do art, craft, science and humanism contribute to OT practice?	C

Spiral 3 – Fusion of horizons

From the 16 consolidated answers, common themes were identified along with supporting quotations from the texts to produce answers to the four key questions. This stage of the analysis involved the first fusion of the participants' and researchers' viewpoints. Individual participants' names were removed as analysis of the texts began to generate a pattern representative of the group of answers to the questions. For example, the first question "What does artistry mean?" dealt with defining the nature of artistry. The participants used analogies, metaphors, etc., which assisted in the identification of dimensions and elements of professional artistry.

Producing answers to the four key questions involved elaboration of the themes developed in Spiral 2. This process resulted in clarifying and testing the bigger picture, using hermeneutic analysis with constant comparison between the parts (text items) and the whole (the emerging interpretation of the phenomenon) by repeatedly reviewing the NVivo analysis documents and then returning to the original transcripts and the researcher's journal.

Spiral 4 – Fusion of horizons – Spiraling back to the whole

This spiral involved the second fusion of viewpoints from all the text sources and spiraling back from the parts to the whole in answering the primary research question.

The goal was to interpret the significance of themes in light of the primary research question. Theme development is the process of capturing the phenomenon the researcher is seeking to understand (van Manen, 1997). According to van Manen, themes are a means of understanding the notion being studied. Themes give shape to the shapeless; they describe the content of the notion; and reduce or clarify the notion. In this research this was achieved by repeatedly using the spiraling hermeneutic process illustrated in Figure 1. A model was constructed to portray the interpretation of PPJA arising from the emergent themes and answers to the research questions.

Spiral 5 – Hermeneutic circle – Returning to the whole, dialoguing

The "final" spiral involved the researchers returning to the whole in a critique of the model produced against existing literature. Secondly, as part of the ongoing review and development of the model, given the concept of the hermeneutic circle as being unclosed, the model was presented for critique to a reference group comprising senior occupational therapists in each of the four countries (who were involved in the study organization and had extensive experience in clinical reasoning/professional judgment research and/or education), the doctoral research supervisors, and key researchers and scholars in the fields of clinical reasoning and professional artistry. The reference group members were asked to engage in a dialogue of question and answer concerning the model:

- What does this model say about professional practice judgment artistry?
- How does the model reflect your experiences of judgment artistry in OT practice?
- Do you see (in this model) images of the artistry of occupational therapists who excel in their professional judgment and of average occupational therapists who experience moments of judgment artistry?

The model was refined on the basis of their reflections and critiques. Since the reference group members were located in different countries this process of reflection and critique was iterative. Each reference group member met with Margo individually and discussed the model, raising questions and offering suggestions for enhancement. These people reviewed the findings of PPJA dimensions, elements as well as the graphic image of the model. They gave their opinions of the findings. For example, one suggestion was to improve the shape of the model to become more visually pleasing. These responses were collated and then Joy and Margo met to respond to the input. The main changes to the model were points of clarification and further detail in describing the key features and dimensions of the model. Although it is possible that this process could have refined the model significantly, that did not happen in this instance as the reference group members were impressed with the findings and indicated that the model "resonated" for them. If there had been major disagreement with the findings the authors would have pursued further member checking and additional hermeneutic analysis. The involvement of the reference group members served to assist in polishing rather than re-inventing the model.

Ensuring Quality in Interpretive Research

Hermeneutic research strategies (as with other approaches) need to demonstrate attention to issues of quality. The three main criteria selected to assess and ensure quality for this interpretive research were credibility, rigor, and ethical behavior. Following are definitions of each of these criteria and examples of the strategies that were used in this research to ensure quality.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the truth, value, or believability of the findings (Leininger, 1994). An important way to achieve credibility is to enact the research philosophy or, in other words, for method as logic of justification to inform method as technique. In this research this goal was sought by structuring research actions through a hermeneutic spiral informed by the underpinning metaphors and philosophical assumptions.

The research methods must also be credible in terms of suitability for the chosen paradigm. There are a number of aspects of credibility (including authenticity, plausibility, and trustworthiness) and a number of strategies (such as peer debriefing) that can enhance and demonstrate credibility. The process of hermeneutic analysis further contributes to the transparency, trustworthiness, and plausibility of the research findings, interpretations, and products of the research. That is, the analytical processes of using the hermeneutic circle, the dialogue of question and answer, and the fusion of horizons, make the analytical processes more visible to the reader.

(a) *Authenticity* "rather than reliability is often an issue in qualitative research. The aim is usually to gather an 'authentic' understanding of people's experiences and it is believed that 'open-ended' questions are the most effective route towards this end" (Silverman, 1999, p. 10). In this research, the semi-structured interviews utilized open-ended questions to pick up the threads from the ideas about PPJA that had been gained from the literature and from comments made earlier in the focus groups, and also to explore more deeply participants' responses to the four key research questions. In addition, the RGMs were involved in a review of the conceptual model. This helped to ensure that the findings were credible by drawing on the RGMs' knowledge of judgment artistry and expert OT practice to critique the model as a credible representation of PPJA and a reasonable answer to the primary research question.

(b) *Plausibility* is concerned with determining whether the findings of the study (description, explanation, or theory) "fit" the data from which they were derived (Sandelowski, 1986). The reader needs to be able to judge the adequacy of the research process and critique the evidence provided to support the researchers' conclusions and interpretations. This goal was addressed by providing transparency of the method and detailed discussion of the findings including many original participant quotes in the primary research report (Paterson, 2003) related to the four research questions, richly grounding these answers in research texts.

(c) *Trustworthiness* is defined as confidence that the information is accurate and reflects reality (DePoy & Gitlin, 1998). There are several important aspects of trustworthiness to address during phases of data collection and analysis. Firstly, the researcher should obtain sound information that adequately captures the experience,

meaning, and events in the field of study; in this case occupational therapy practice. Margo presented the preliminary findings at a number of international conferences in order to obtain feedback from colleagues. This dialogue aided in the fusion of horizons process and testing the clarity of thinking of the researchers. The conference attendees acknowledged that the preliminary findings were congruent with their understanding of PPJA. Joy provided ongoing critique and supervision throughout the research process. Finally, the credibility of the evolving model was critiqued by the reference group members as described above. The RGMs provided a final checkpoint and validated the findings, but they did not alter the findings substantively.

Rigor

The credibility of research is enhanced by the rigor of its conduct. In describing the hermeneutic spiral used in this research, we have portrayed the rigor inherent in hermeneutics including deep immersion in the texts, repeated cycling between the parts, and the whole to make sense of the phenomenon in relation to the texts, repeated exploration of the horizons of participants and researcher, and depth of dialogue between the research, participants, and texts.

Ethical Considerations

Miles and Huberman (1994) have provided an extensive description of ethical issues that need consideration by researchers, with a synopsis of key questions that researchers must ask themselves (see Table 2).

Table 2
Key Research Ethics Questions

• Worthiness of the project: Will the research contribute in some significant way?
• Competence boundaries: Do I have the expertise to carry out the study and am I prepared to study and consult with others?
• Informed consent: Do the participants have full information about the study?
• Benefits, costs and reciprocity: What do the participants gain?
• Harm and risk: What might this study do to hurt people?
• Honesty and trust: Am I telling the truth and do we trust each other?
• Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity: How identifiable are the individuals?
• Integrity and quality: Was the study conducted carefully, thoughtfully, and correctly in terms of some reasonable set of standards?

(adapted from Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 290-297)

All participants consented voluntarily without coercion to contribute to the research, being fully informed of the expectations and purpose. Every effort was made to avoid placing participants at risk or harming them. The participants indicated that they had benefited considerably from the stimulating dialogue of the focus group as well as the in-depth discussion in the individual interviews. They also commented that they appreciated the opportunity to engage in a research process and contribute to the development of ideas about PPJA. Every effort was made to maintain privacy, anonymity, and

confidentiality throughout the research process. At all times we endeavored to represent the material with honesty and trust, avoiding any manipulation of the texts.

Conclusion

In this paper a fusion of horizons has been created between the research topic, judgment artistry, and the research strategy. This fusion is reflected in hermeneutic spiral created for this research through the coalescence of three key hermeneutic processes: the hermeneutic circle, fusion of horizons, and a dialogue of questions and answers. We have illustrated the value and rigor of hermeneutics as a research process within the health sciences. The paper has decentred the research topic, placing it as the context and vehicle for exploration of the research method of hermeneutics. We have found this strategy to be particularly valuable in helping to make this complex and often inaccessible phenomenon (PPJA) more readily open to exploration and interpretation. The multiple texts generated served to examine different aspects of professional judgment and to explore it from different perspectives. By re-conceptualizing the hermeneutic process as a spiral we were able to deeply, repeatedly, and more fully engage with the phenomenon and understand it more fully. In this paper we have discussed quality assurance issues and encourage doctoral students and other researchers to consider the hermeneutic approach in their research. For us, this research has answered many questions, but also posed some more: How is PPJA understood and practiced in other professions? How can the hermeneutic spiral be used to inform other research? We have been encouraged by the flexibility, facility, and depth of the hermeneutic spiral as a research approach. In particular we have found it to be an effective tool for working within the philosophically and experientially complex research approach of hermeneutics and for exploring the equally complex phenomenon of PPJA. We would encourage readers to see hermeneutics as a stimulating and deeply interpretive research approach which can examine complex human phenomena from multiple perspectives to produce rich theoretical and experiential interpretations of these phenomena. We are currently exploring the implementation of the hermeneutical spiral in another research project and we look forward to further exploration of these matters.

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Article Citation

Paterson, M., & Higgs, J. (2005). Using hermeneutics as a qualitative research approach in professional practice. *The Qualitative Report*, *10*(2), 339-357. Retrieved [Insert date], from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR10-2/paterson.pdf