Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Psychotherapy

Bertha Mook, Ph.D.
University of Ottawa
Canada

Abstract

The field of psychotherapy has recently seen many technical advances. Yet it remains fragmented on a theoretical level and its philosophical foundations tend to be overlooked. Today, most of psychotherapy is founded on a natural science paradigm or alternatively, on social constructionism. In this chapter, I have critiqued these dominant paradigms and proposed instead a hermeneutic phenomenological foundation for psychotherapy as a human science. I explored the interface between hermeneutic phenomenology and psychotherapy in general. This is followed by Gadamer’s concepts of play and its relevance for play therapy with children. Ricoeur’s theory of narrative structure is applied to narratives in psychotherapy and in particular, to family therapy. The key concepts of understanding and of interpretation are also addressed from a philosophical point of view and in turn applied to the theory and practice of psychotherapy. The role and meaning of play in child psychotherapy was illustrated by means of a brief clinical case vignette.

Today, the field of psychotherapy is characterized by a multiplicity of diverse theoretical approaches and mini-theories. Above all, it is dominated by an ever-growing array of techniques to be used for specific therapeutic interventions. With their eyes focused on practice, modern day therapists show little interest in the theories of psychotherapy and even less in their philosophical foundations. Yet these very philosophical grounds determine how we view reality and the human being. They implicitly underlie our theories of psychotherapy and even our formulation of techniques. It is of vital importance that the philosophical foundations, which underlie various therapeutic theories be made explicit.

Introduction

In the theory of science, Kuhn (1962) pointed out that most scientists accept a specific viewpoint or paradigm regarding their subject matter which guides their research and determines what will be studied and how. In the course of its development, psychotherapy drew on different philosophical viewpoints including empiricism, rationalism and existential phenomenology which all contributed to the main schools of therapeutic theory and practice. Although a diversity
of viewpoints continue to be embraced in psychotherapy today, we find that the empirical natural science paradigm has the greatest influence and remains the most dominant one. This is exemplified in the widespread appeal and application of cognitive behavioral therapy in individual therapy with children and with adults. It has produced successful evidence-based research and rightly pressures other models of therapeutic theory and practice to demonstrate their effectiveness as well.

Giorgi (1970) argued that psychology should not be conceived as a natural science but as a human science in order to do justice to its subject matter, i.e., the experiencing and behaving person. This is particularly true for the field of psychotherapy, which deals with the understanding, interpretation and healing of human suffering. We could say that psychotherapy is a human science par excellence. Within a human science paradigm, Giorgi (1985) found that the phenomenological method is the most suitable for the description and the analysis of the meaning of human phenomena as experienced by its subjects. In his innovative and productive career, he became the leading expert in the phenomenological method and its applications to psychological phenomena in various fields, including psychotherapy. I am indebted to him for his inspiration in my own phenomenological research in psychotherapy (Mook, 1985, 1987, 2003).

In the mid-twentieth century, existential phenomenology was the dominant philosophy in Western Europe and became a leading force in the field of psychotherapy with adults, children and families. For example, the existential phenomenology of Heidegger inspired both Binswanger (1963) and Boss (1963) to develop a new form of individual adult therapy called Daseinsanalysis although each one established his own following. In child psychotherapy, Langeveld (1955) and his co-workers initiated a phenomenological approach called imagery-communication specifically for work with children where they could express themselves through play, art and other creative media. Existential phenomenology was also used as a philosophical foundation for Laing and Esterson (1964) in their development of a new phenomenological school of family therapy. Although no longer so extensively a force, existential phenomenological approaches to psychotherapy continue to be practiced today.

Besides phenomenology, which seeks to understand and explicate the meaning structures of lived phenomena, psychotherapy as a human science also calls for hermeneutics. Hermeneutics deals with language and meaning and focuses on the understanding and the interpretation of spoken and written texts. Ricoeur (1981) defined hermeneutics succinctly as the science of the interpretation of texts. Gadamer (1982) extended the object of hermeneutic understanding to the broader field of human communication including play, art and verbal communication. In psychotherapy, we encounter complex narratives, dreams, art, play and other texts of patients, which need to be deciphered and interpreted.

The door to a philosophically grounded hermeneutic approach to psychotherapy was opened by Ricoeur’s (1970) critical reading of Freud’s psychoanalysis. He recommended that we replace Freud's mechanistic meta-psychology by a narrativist approach based on human agency. Schafer (1981) was the first to initiate a narrative approach to psychoanalysis, which he called hermeneutic and formulated as the telling and retelling of patients’ stories. However, by rejecting any philosophical foundation and holding that every person must choose his own narrative version, he fell into a radical form of relativism (Guignon, 1998). In the late eighties, Lubbers (1988) initiated a hermeneutic approach to child psychotherapy based on the philosophy of Gadamer (1982) in which he incorporated the phenomenologically based imagery.
communication. The work of Langeveld and Lubbers had a major influence on my own development of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to child psychotherapy. Despite the obvious relevance of hermeneutics and the hermeneutic method for psychotherapy, its influence has remained sporadic and limited.

In the late eighties and early nineties, a challenging new paradigm emerged in the form of social constructionism, which brought about a significant shift in mainstream therapeutic thought. It was open to hermeneutics and placed a new emphasis on the importance of language and meaning in psychotherapy. This in turn led to the birth of narrative therapy in work with families (White and Epston, 1990). Narrative therapy was enthusiastically embraced by a wide range of family therapists and found to be particularly suitable to the practice of working with the troubled lives of postmodern families. It was also applied to work with individual adults and to a lesser extent with children.

In this chapter, I propose that psychotherapy is a human science which can be philosophically grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology as introduced by Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1962), and developed further by Gadamer (1982) and Ricoeur (1981). I will first briefly address and critique the leading natural science and social constructionist paradigms in psychotherapy before elaborating on a hermeneutic phenomenological approach as a possible philosophical foundation.

**The Natural Science Paradigm in Psychotherapy**

The modernist natural science paradigm, which is based on a Cartesian epistemology, continues to dominate the contemporary field of psychotherapy in theory, practice and research. It posits a dualistic relationship between person and world and adheres to a linear explanatory model of causality. A natural science approach assumes that there are causal mechanisms below surface phenomena and aims at providing causal explanations of human intentions and actions. In this viewpoint, the person is seen as an object amongst objects in the world whose characteristics can be analyzed, measured and explained by applying the leading methodological principles of the natural sciences. It is well known to phenomenologist and has been widely criticized in phenomenological circles (Giorgi, 1970, 1985). The natural science viewpoint is critiqued for not doing justice to human agency and for overlooking the uniquely human traits of freedom, transcendence, creativity, relatedness to self and others and attributing meaning to one’s lived experience. In therapeutic practice, it is of vital importance that the therapist, who aims to alleviate his client’s suffering, sees his client as a whole person with unique human characteristics and as an agent in his own right.

When family therapy was born in the mid fifties, it rejected the Cartesian natural science paradigm with its linear model of causality as unsuitable for conceptualizing family structures and functioning. Family therapists instead turned to the relatively new system and cybernetic theories, which reflected a different natural science approach based on an epistemology of pattern. Systems theory and cybernetic theory with their regulatory homeostatic principles and their orderly notions of boundaries were found to be suitable and fruitful for thinking about and working with families. The leading structural and strategic family therapy models were problem-focused and called for objective descriptions of family behaviors and processes. Therapeutic
change was brought about by specific techniques of breaking dysfunctional structures or repetitive interactive cycles of behavior within the family system.

The application of systems theory to family therapy was initially found to be liberating and made a unique contribution to the study of human communication and interaction. However, by the late eighties, some leaders in family therapy began to see the limitations of system theory and felt it had outlived its usefulness (Goolishian & Anderson, 1987). It had also been criticized from a phenomenological point of view for overlooking subjective and inter-subjective experience and the uniquely human dimension of meaning in family systems (Mook, 1985, 1987).

The social constructionist paradigm in family therapy

Under the influence of postmodernist writings, feminist studies, the philosophies of constructionism and hermeneutics, some family therapists aimed to develop a broader view of family functioning. They began to focus on larger cultural systems and became aware of the power of history, the present social cultural context and the importance of language and meaning in the shaping of peoples’ lives. Together these influences led to a paradigmatic shift from the earlier system theory to a narrative therapeutic approach based on social constructionism.

Proponents of constructionism argue that objective descriptions of family processes are impossible as reality itself is a social construction. They hold that the beliefs, values, institutions, customs and laws, which are reflected in our social realities, are constructed by the members of a specific culture as they interact with each other on a daily basis. Society in turn constructs the "lenses" through which their members interpret their world (Hoffman, 1990). A new family therapy approach based on social constructionism led to an emphasis on the importance of language, dialogue and narratives. In a constructionist viewpoint, narratives are seen as free creations, free of any factual accounts and not concerned with the discovery of the truth of a person’s story (Guignon, 1998). The aim of psychotherapy is to come up with a good, coherent and useful narrative. A singular advantage of this narrative approach was that it liberated family therapy from the narrow confines of system theory as therapists moved away from being behavioral engineers and became "conversational artists" (McNamee, S. & Gergen, K. J., 1992).

In a narrative approach, the therapist joins the family as a partner in dialogue. The focus on narrative discourse frees both the therapist and the family members from adhering to fixed categories of health and illness as they together generate and construct stories that are more relevant to the family’s reality. The family therapist needs to stimulate the members’ imagination by asking questions that spark curiosity and lead to alternative ideas in their joint effort towards a re-authoring of the family’s life and relationships. At the heart of a narrative approach to psychotherapy lies the belief in the profound effects of language, conversation and stories for both the client(s) and the therapist (White and Epston, 1990).

The Influence of Hermeneutics

Anderson and Goolishian (1992) were the first family therapists to express dissatisfaction with a sole emphasis on a constructionist paradigm in family therapy. With their interest in the role of language and meaning, they moved instead towards a more interpretative and hermeneutic position. Influenced by both social constructionism and hermeneutics, Goolishian and Anderson
(1987) pointed out that human beings are language-generating and meaning-generating systems and that the therapeutic system itself is linguistic in nature.

The authors’ hermeneutic leaning was also present in their novel concept of therapeutic "not-knowing", by which they meant that the therapist should not let himself be influenced by his previous knowledge and experience. When the therapist joins the family, he should remain open-minded, create space and facilitate dialogue through therapeutic questioning (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992). The therapist becomes part of a linguistic system and a therapeutic conversation wherein the therapist and the family together explore the family’s problems through dialogue. Anderson and Goolishian's constructionist stance remained evident in their assertion, that individuals in conversation with each other socially construct narratives.

In general, narrative therapists share with hermeneuticists an emphasis on the importance of language, meaning and narrative. Yet their adherence to social constructionism offers a questionable philosophical ground. From a phenomenological hermeneutic point of view, constructionism is a relativist philosophy, which holds that every person creates his own truth and his own reality based on his individual perceptions and thoughts. Constructionism overemphasizes cognition and language and neglects the person’s relationship to the world in which he lives. Merleau-Ponty (1962) emphasized that the person and his world are intimately interrelated and that truth and reality does not reside in the mind. In his words: “Man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” (p. XI). Hermeneutic phenomenology critiques social constructionism for its one-sided focus on individual perception and cognition and its neglect of the person in his world-relatedness.

**Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Psychotherapy**

In contrast to the natural science and the social constructionist paradigms, Heidegger (1962), Merleau-Ponty (1962), Gadamer (1982) and Ricoeur (1981) claimed that hermeneutic phenomenology is an ideal philosophical foundation for the human sciences. Starting with Heidegger (1962), hermeneutic phenomenology aimed to move beyond both the natural science and social constructionist paradigms by presenting a different ontological account of human existence. Rather than assuming separation of person and world, this viewpoint held that the human being is an embodied subject-in-the-world who is conscious, engaged in his relationships to self and others, linguistic, meaning-giving and always seeking to understand and interpret himself and his world. Heidegger pointed out that human action has a dynamic temporal structure in which future direction gives shape to the past, and undertakings in the past gives sense to actions in the present. Life as a whole has a distinctive temporal structure and action gains it’s meaning from the agent’s entire life story (Guignon, 1998).

Hermeneutic phenomenology and psychotherapy are of course distinctly different disciplines with different origins, goals and applications. Yet beyond the surface they reveal some striking commonalities. As a philosophy, hermeneutic phenomenology aims to understand and interpret the meanings of lived experience as revealed and expressed in spoken or written texts (Gadamer 1982, Ricoeur 1981). In comparison, psychotherapy is concerned with the understanding and interpretation of the problematic life experiences of clients as expressed in their incomplete and often incoherent and obscure narratives. As a practical discipline, its goal is problem-solving and healing in the context of a therapeutic relationship. At heart, both disciplines are language-based.
and share a common and central interest in understanding and interpreting the meanings of complex texts or narratives as expressions of lived experience (Mook, 1991).

Hermeneutic phenomenology has provided some foundational contributions, which are of great significance to the field of psychotherapy. In his ground-breaking work, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1982) explicated the fundamental historicity of human existence and the pervasive nature of tradition and prejudices which needs to be taken into account in our attempts to understand a person’s life. He helped us to see that people's life stories are always pre-shaped by the traditions of a shared life-world and emphasized that, whether we realize it or not, the effects of history are involved in all understanding. Gadamer threw a new light on the nature of understanding, dialogue and conversation, all of which are directly relevant to the work of psychotherapy. His hermeneutic philosophy also offered a new insight into the foundational nature of play and art, which in turn has implications for imagery-communication and play therapy with children.

In his oeuvre, Ricoeur recognized anew the importance of language and illuminated the meaning of metaphor and symbolism in human life. He offered us a complex theory of the interpretation of written or spoken texts, which can also be applied to psychotherapy (1976). Ricoeur is further known for his novel explication of the nature of narratives and its relationship to the temporality of lived experience (1984). In psychotherapy, the individual client or the family’s expressions of their lived experiences can be viewed as narratives or texts, which the therapist and the client aim to understand and interpret within the context of a therapeutic relationship. In narrative terms, therapists together with the client or family aim to identify pathological narratives and work towards a re-writing of their lives in ways that are more congruent with their lived reality.

Despite the central role of play, narrative, understanding and interpretation in psychotherapy, little attention has been paid in mainstream therapeutic literature to the foundational meaning of these basic concepts. Hermeneutic phenomenology’s explication of their basic character contributes indirectly to a philosophical foundation and a deeper understanding of the theory and practice of psychotherapy. In this chapter, we will address Gadamer’s concept of play and its implications for the imaginative play in therapy with children. This will be followed by a brief outline of Ricoeur’s theory of narrative and its significance for child and particularly for family therapy. We will then turn to the therapeutic relevance of their hermeneutic theories of understanding and of interpretation.

**Gadamer’s Concept of Play**

The imaginative play of children is a fascinating yet elusive concept, which has been reflected upon in philosophy, psychology, education, and in other human science disciplines. Various authors have pointed out that play is a primary and foundational phenomenon which underlies all expressions of art, language and culture. In this light, Gadamer (1982) began his *Truth and Method* with a description of the hermeneutic experience of art and the ontological significance of play. Children’s play has a function of exhibition and presentation, which precedes language and calls it forth. Phenomenological studies of imaginative play have revealed that the child typically surrenders to the appeal of its play objects and becomes immersed in a different world with its own space and time, its own inner tensions, surprises and excitements, its
own scenes, configurations and emerging themes. Referring to tragedy as a proto-typical form of play, Gadamer went further by asserting that play is an autonomous phenomenon with its own structure, a meaningful whole, which moves beyond the subjective world of the player and is revelatory in its own right. He posits the primacy of play over the player and holds that the true subject of play is not the subjectivity of the player but play itself. It is play that draws the player into its spell and its sole purpose is to represent itself. He wrote: “In the representation of play, what is emerges. In it is produced and brought to light what otherwise is constantly hidden and withdrawn” (p.101). The player in turn appropriates the meaning of his play to himself, which heightens his self-awareness and self-presentation.

Gadamer’s novel concept of play reveals its power and its foundational character in human life. In psychotherapy, it throws a new light on the role and the meaning of play in play therapy with children. In view of the primacy of the play over the player, Gadamer has effected a figure-ground reversal with far reaching implications. Most of all, the meanings revealed in the child’s imaginative play in therapy should not be reduced to subjective interpretations of the child’s unconscious or his self as is typically done in play therapy. Play is an autonomous phenomenon in its own right which purpose is to represent itself. The therapist and the child should therefore first of all look and listen to what the play itself reveals and only subsequently appropriate these possible meanings to the child's life-world (Mook, 1999).

A Case Illustration in Play Therapy

The following case presents a relatively simple illustration of the role, the meaning and the healing power of play and creative expressions in imagery-communication therapy with children.

Mark was a soft and affectionate eight years old boy who suffered from overwhelming fears. He was afraid to be alone, afraid of the dark and above all, afraid of monsters who threatened him at night. These fears emerged after a traumatizing experience a few months earlier during which he witnessed a violent physical attack on his parents by outside intruders. On a verbal level, he forcefully refused to talk about these painful experiences.

Mark was drawn to a large sandbox with small toys, and created a village populated with human and animal figures whom he described as either all good or all bad. Set apart from the others was a monster family consisting of a father, a mother and a small child. Mark conveyed that they were the powerful rulers of the village but that they were unaware of their monster status and believed themselves to be good creatures. Mark was intensely drawn to these complex monsters. As this play image seemed central to his own problems, the therapist led him to make a monster family out of clay in order to concretize them, which in turn deepened his emotional involvement and participation. The child was eager to do this and, with the help of his therapist, he became deeply involved in the process of molding and shaping the figures of a monster family. They were immediately introduced in his play and became the central figures in his story, which unfolded over a few sessions. At first the monsters terrorized both the good and the bad people and animals in the village every single night. Gradually, their rage focused on targeting only the bad people. When Mark was ready and his feelings and thoughts became more differentiated in his play, he made another figure out of raw materials. He identified strongly with his new creation and called him Mr. Unique. This figure was given the important mission to unmask the monster family and to reveal their true identity to villagers and to themselves.
Protected by Mr. Unique, the villagers rose up against the monster family and defeated them. Once this was accomplished in the play, Mark discarded them. As his fears of monsters were expressed and conquered through play, they gradually dissipated in reality.

This brief clinical example illustrates how Mark surrendered to the appeal of his play objects and how he became immersed in his play-world. In the light of Gadamer, we could say that the play rose above Mark’s inner subjective world and represented its own meaning and its own truth. It exhibited and represented his view of a divided world and his overwhelming fear of monsters which even in play needed to be masked as benevolent before an exceptional and stronger figure emerged to reveal their true identity. His imaginative play provided him with a protective shield to face his fears indirectly and to master them through playing them out.

In subsequent plays, Mark became increasingly able through play figures to express and to face up to aggressive and hostile feelings and actions. Soon afterwards, he started to talk directly to his therapist about his frightening experiences and could express his rage at the intruders, who had violently attacked his beloved parents, first through painting and subsequently through words. Communicating through play and art in the context of play therapy gradually enabled Mark to solve his problems in more realistic ways.

The imaginative play of a child in play therapy can be very complex with multiple levels of meaning which demands therapeutic understanding and interpretation. It always involves a narrative dimension, which unfolds in time and reveals its own narrative structure. As we have seen, narratives are typically encountered in family therapy. This brings us first to Ricoeur’s theory of narrative and its implications for the field of child and family therapy before turning to the problem of understanding and interpretation.

**Ricoeur’s Theory of Narrative and Psychotherapy**

In his hermeneutic analysis of narrative, Ricoeur took the literary model of tragedy as his point of departure. In *Time and Narrative* (1984) he explored his basic hypothesis, i.e., that the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience are interrelated. In his analysis, he demonstrated that temporality and narrativity form a reciprocal relationship that reinforces each other in a dialectical fashion. He captured the integral interrelatedness of time, narrative and experience as follows: “Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience” (p. 3). By drawing on the Aristotelian concepts of mimesis or the active process of imitating, and mythos or emplotment, Ricoeur studied the mediating operations between lived human experience and narrative discourse. His detailed analysis led him to the important conclusion that in real life, our temporal experiences and actions do not yet have a narrative character but are instead structured in a pre-narrative fashion. Narrative itself goes beyond everyday concrete life experience as it calls for a semantic innovation and the invention of a plot. In his theory of narrative structure, Ricoeur explicated convincingly how a narrative text is pre-figured in the practical field of human actions and experience, how events and themes are configured through imaginative variations and emplotment and how the plot is in turn received and re-figured by the reader.

From a hermeneutic phenomenological point of view, Ricoeur’s theory of narrative structure can be seen as foundational to narrative therapy in work with families and also to play narratives
in therapy with children. Ricoeur revealed that our life experiences as lived are not random but have already a temporal pre-narrative character and they wait to be narrated. Applied to families, narrative structures are not formal or external nor are they cognitively constructed as held by constructionist theory. Narrative structures are instead seen as rooted and pre-figured in the everyday experiences and actions of people who in turn take up the pre-narrative structures in configuring and narrating their stories to each other. The act of linguistically narrating our real life experiences brings order, coherence and intelligibility to our lives.

In the practice of family therapy, the dysfunctional story of the family needs to be dismantled and rewritten by the joint effort of the therapist and the family members in the process of psychotherapy. The family usually presents a problematic surface story in which one member is seen as the identified patient. This presented narrative has a defensive and a protective function in which one member is victimized and seen as in need of treatment. The family therapist needs to break into this problematic surface structure to reveal the deeper lying problems, which need to be brought to the surface in the course of treatment. For example, in the Smith family with two parents and two elementary school children, John and Hanna, John was the identified patient. He was described as hyperactive, attention-seeking, destructive and always disrupting the family’s activities. He was seen as the source of their constant sense of frustration and unhappiness. As the therapist listened carefully to the stories and the perspective of each family member and raised new questions, the presenting problem was diffused and other family problems were brought to the surface. The couple acknowledged that they had become estranged from each other and Hanna revealed that she had her own difficulties, which had been totally overlooked. Gradually, the family members came to see another reality and created together with the therapist a new narrative which was more in tune with their lives as lived.

In play therapy, the child’s imaginative play stories also reveal a narrative structure. They are rooted and pre-figured in the child’s life-world and creatively configured as the child in his play carries out imaginative variations on his own perceived reality. In the process, he becomes indirectly more aware of his problems and seeks alternative solutions through play, which are re-figured by both the child and his therapist. In the process of play therapy, these play stories need to be expressed, understood, questioned and challenged to enable the child to move forward towards healing and transformation.

The concept of narrative structure as developed by Ricoeur belongs to the human order (Merleau-Ponty, 1963a) as it is profoundly human, creative, evolving and transforming in nature. Only the human order has the unique power of transcendence, which allows us to create images and symbols. Merleau-Ponty saw this act of transcendence, that is, orienting ourselves by means of the possible and moving beyond existing structures to create new ones, as the essence of being human. In psychotherapy, narrative structures are created by the child or by the family members themselves and are in principle transformed by new experiences, actions and narrations. In revealing the pre-narrative character of lived experience and the integral interrelationship between narration, temporality and human experience, Ricoeur contributed in principle to a philosophical foundation for a narrative hermeneutic approach to family, adult or child psychotherapy.

In Oneself as Another, Ricoeur (1992) went a step further and applied his narrative theory to the concept of personal identity or the constitution of self. He came to the conclusion that personal identity has a narrative dimension which needs to be taken into account. His analysis
showed that personal identity is characterized by the dialectic of sameness or \textit{idem} and selfhood or \textit{ipse}. Identity as sameness has been recognized in the literature and reflects permanence in time. However, identity as selfhood, which is variable in its manifestations, has been mostly overlooked. This dialectic between sameness and selfhood is seen as the major contribution of narrative theory to the constitution of self.

A narrative theory of personal identity reflects the connections between plot and character and between action and agent. In following Aristotle, action is seen as a connection of incident and facts, which reflect an initial narrative configuration. The identity of the person or character in the plot is submitted to imaginative variations and the interconnectedness of these variations, as events are constituted by emplotment. This in turn allows us to integrate the dialectic of sameness and selfhood where sameness is reflected in permanence in time and selfhood in diversity, variability, disconnectedness, etc.

Applied to psychotherapy, we can think of the client as a character in the plot of his personal narratives, which constitute his personal identity. The client’s personal identity as sameness and selfhood is reflected in his personal narratives, which are problematic and often incoherent and unintelligible. Especially in psychotherapy, the troubled client’s selfhood may reflect his fragility, vulnerability, brokenness and disconnection. We can also conceive of both therapist and client as characters in the plot of an unfolding therapeutic narrative where both are agents who perform actions. In the work of therapy, the client and the therapist work towards a revealing and a clarification of the client’s troubled self and towards a re-authoring of his life.

The family or the individual client's new emerging narrative involves a new temporal order as selected problematic past experiences are relived and reintegrated in the present and shaped into a new future. Here Ricoeur’s (1984) statement is relevant to the therapeutic process: “By reading the end in the beginning and the beginning in the end, we learn also to read time itself backward, as the recapitulation of the initial conditions of a course of action in its temporal consequences” (p.154). In therapy, this temporal re-ordering of the family or client’s troubled experiences in a new narrative is called for in order to provide coherence and intelligibility.

In revealing not only the temporal pre-narrative structure of experience but also the structure of narratives and of personal identity, Ricoeur made a unique contribution to a hermeneutic phenomenological foundation for a narrative conception of self and of psychotherapy which can in principle be applied to family, adult and play therapy with children. Through therapeutic reflections and interventions, the therapist and the client can draw upon pre-narrative structures of past and present experiences and work together towards a narrative which endows events with a new temporal order and a new meaning in view of an overarching goal towards well-being.

The meanings revealed in the narratives of families, adults and children call for therapeutic understanding and interpretation. In psychotherapy, the processes of understanding and interpreting meanings expressed by clients through play, art, dreams, narratives and other forms of expression are poorly understood yet lie at the heart of therapy itself. In practice, a child’s imaginative play story, for example, can be very complex with multiple levels of meaning (Mook, 1999, 2003). The same is true for other problematic client or family’s narratives or texts in the multiple forms of stories, dreams, art or play. In their hermeneutic phenomenology, Gadamer’s concept of understanding and Ricoeur’s theory of interpretation are relevant to the theory of psychotherapy and throw a new light on these central therapeutic interventions.
Gadamer’s Concept of Understanding

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer’s (1982) explicated his philosophical hermeneutic concept of understanding. Following Heidegger, he asserted that an immediate understanding of other people is impossible as all understanding is based on a pre-understanding, which is rooted in history, tradition and prejudice. Through his detailed analysis, he showed us that understanding is a profoundly historical, linguistic and dialogical process. From a position of pre-understanding, partners in dialogue listen to each other in an attempt to grasp what the other is saying. Their dialogue takes the form of a conversation in which both partners offer their perspective on a topic or theme. Understanding is born when an agreement is reached during which the horizon of the one fuses with the horizon of the other. In this fusion of horizons the perspectives of the individual partners are transcended into a broader and new perspective.

Communicating understanding plays a central role in psychotherapy and is seen as the main therapeutic intervention in humanistic, client-centered and existential approaches. In the light of Gadamer’s contribution, understanding in psychotherapy is not a just an intervention of the therapist during which he empathically reflect the client’s thoughts and feelings, as claimed for instance in client-centered therapy. To the contrary, understanding is always dialogical and circular in character and involves both the therapist and the client. It is furthermore rooted in the pre-understanding of both therapist and client and reflects their respective history, tradition and prejudices. In order to understand the client, the therapist has to be open-minded and listen with wide attention to the client who in turn aims to grasp what the therapist is communicating. Both therapist and client’s need to let their respective viewpoints of the problematic world of the client be shaped and modified by what they learn from each other. When they reach an agreement in their therapeutic dialogue, their horizons will fuse and a new understanding will be born. Understanding therefore is not reproductive but productive in character as it leads to a broader and new perspective of the client’s world (Mook, 2003). For most of psychotherapy, this type of active understanding is sufficient to move the therapeutic process forward.

For Gadamer, the processes of understanding and interpretation are interwoven and inseparable from each other. Interpretation is not seen as the application of an abstract theory as is often done in psychotherapy. Rather, the process of interpretation constitutes a concrete application of understanding to the specific circumstances of an individual case. In the context of psychotherapy, a good interpretation is attuned to the concrete specific circumstances of a particular client. Its validity lies not in theory but with the client for only he can endorse it as congruent with his lived experiential reality (Mook, 1991).

Ricoeur’s Theory of Interpretation

Ricoeur (1976) endorsed Gadamer’s theory of understanding and incorporated it into his novel theory of interpretation, which also includes the concept of explanation. Ricoeur reminded us that in Dilthey’s hermeneutics, understanding and explanation were seen as dichotomous and irreducible modes of intelligibility. This conviction led Dilthey (1977) to make a fundamental epistemological distinction between the natural sciences and the human sciences with two opposing methodologies in which explanation belonged to the natural sciences and understanding
to the human sciences. This distinction had far reaching consequences and is still upheld by most scientists today.

Ricoeur argued that a dichotomy between understanding and explanation is untenable as both processes are present in any dialogical situation. We explain something to someone so that he can understand. In Ricoeur’s (1976) words: “[…] in explanation we explicate or unfold the range of propositions and meanings, whereas in understanding we comprehend or grasp as a whole the chain of partial meanings in one act of synthesis” (p.72). For him, the concept of interpretation applies to the whole dialectical process, which encompasses both understanding and explanation. As such, the processes of understanding, explanation and interpretation are inseparably interrelated.

In describing the process of interpretation, Ricoeur used the metaphor of the reader and the text. The reader enters into a hermeneutic circular dialogue with the text and lets himself be grasped by its possible meanings. Within the hermeneutic circle, repeated readings of the text lead to a first level of interpretation, which he referred to as a naïve understanding. This level of interpretation is sufficient to grasp the meaning of most texts. When the text is multi-layered and complex, a more comprehensive understanding is called for. This is particularly true for the interpretation of dreams, imaginative play or other symbolic texts. Here the reader may need to draw on an explanatory theory such as psychoanalysis in order to raise tentative hypotheses for interpretation, which may open up new horizons of understanding. A hypothesis needs in turn to be submitted to the hermeneutic circle to verify if it does justice to the meaning of the text as a whole. In the process of interpretation, the interpreter must differentiate between the presented meaning of the text itself and its possible reference to the reality of the person’s life. This is an important dialectical distinction, which is often overlooked.

In the practice of psychotherapy, the application of Ricoeur’s first phase of interpretation referred to as naïve understanding is sufficient in most cases. However, in complex therapeutic texts, a comprehensive or second phase of interpretation is called for. Here the interpreter needs to take the dialectic of sense and reference into account, which is especially relevant to symbolic texts like dreams or imaginative play. For example, an adult client may have a dream in which a person unknown to him is attacked and dies. Who does the dream refer to and what does the attack and death mean to the client? The multiple possible meanings of such a dream fragment poses a question of interpretation. Alternatively, in the imaginative play narrative of an emotionally disturbed child, the family house may catch fire and the father figure may be kidnapped or imprisoned. What does this reveal about the child's real life? It is a work of interpretation for both the therapist and the client, in which the possible meanings of the fragment need to be contextualized in and verified with the text as a whole by applying the method of the hermeneutic circle. A hermeneutic reading searches for the most probable interpretation, which will be consistent with and do justice to the text as a whole.

In general, a hermeneutic phenomenological interpretation needs to abide by the text-in-context principle where partial and single narratives are seen in the context of the larger narrative, which unfolds in the process of psychotherapy and in the context of the client’s history and present life-world.
Conclusion

In the context of the continuing dominance of the natural science paradigm in psychotherapy and the leading role of social constructionism in narrative family therapy, I have argued in this paper that psychotherapy is a human science and that hermeneutic phenomenology can serve as an alternative philosophical foundation for it. Hermeneutic phenomenology offers a perspective on what it means to be a human being in a world steeped in language, history and tradition. It shares vital domains of interest with psychotherapy in its philosophical explication of basic concepts such as play, narrative, understanding and interpretation.

Despite many phenomenological studies on therapeutic phenomena, much work remains to be done in exploring and demonstrating the relevance of hermeneutic phenomenology for psychotherapy. For example, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to personality and to psychopathology which takes the role and the meaning of language, history and culture into account will be needed in order to bridge the gap between philosophical foundations and therapeutic theory and practice. An application of the phenomenological and hermeneutic methods to a systematic analysis of therapeutic narratives in child, adult and family therapy will contribute empirical evidence for the effectiveness of psychotherapy as a human science.

References