

# Hermeneutic Constructivism: One ontology for authentic understanding

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## Abstract

Nursing and nurses rely upon qualitative research to understand the intricacies of the human condition. Acknowledging the subjective nature of reality and commonly founded in a constructivist epistemology, qualitative approaches offer opportunities for uncovering insights from the perspective of the individual participants, the insider's view, and the construction of representations that maintain an intimacy with the subject's realities. Debate continues, however, about what is needed for a qualitative construction to be considered an authentic understanding of a subject's realities. Authenticity in the context of qualitative research has been described as entailing consideration of a number of well-trodden dimensions: fairness, ontological, educative, catalytic and tactical. Taking these dimensional requirements as key, this paper argues that authenticity may not always be as well-developed through some of the standard practices in qualitative research as perhaps expected. In particular, qualitative understandings of authenticity stress that participants should not be merely reported on but instead should be dynamically involved in and changed by the constructions and interpretations of data developed throughout the research process. As this paper illustrates, such engagements appear problematic for qualitative research approaches that are beholden to designative commitments in the context of language and meaning-making and which tend to prioritise commonality and generality at the expense of individual authenticity. An alternative qualitative approach, Hermeneutic Constructivism, is proposed as better able to achieve the requirements of the dimensions of authenticity. As outlined, this approach is well-placed to present an understanding of human experience through a genuinely expressivist approach and transcends the stress upon the common or the general that can be pervasive and problematic.

## KEYWORDS

authenticity, Gadamer, Hermeneutic Constructivism, Hermeneutics, radical critique, thematic analysis

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

It is the prospect of exploring and representing human experience that makes the adoption of qualitative research practices compelling for nurses and nursing. Holloway and Galvin (2016) suggest qualitative approaches are 'linked to the subjective nature of social reality, they provide insights from the perspective of participants, enabling researchers to see events as their informants do, they explore "the insiders' view" (p. 6). Qualitative researchers thus focus on unpacking and representing the everyday, *what is it like* characteristics or qualities of experience and meaning-making (i.e., *qualia*). It is this individualised perception that is considered the basis for understanding collective experience. Qualitative constructions are thus sought that maintain an intimacy with their subjects' realities to unravel some of the intricacies of the human condition and address 'our curiosities with respect to those aspects that seem as yet incomplete or puzzling' (Thorne, 2020, p. 1).

There is, however, ongoing debate about what is needed for qualitative constructions to be considered authentic understandings of human experience. Given that the purpose of much qualitative research is to achieve deep understandings of particular phenomena through the unravelling of experiences, qualitative researchers need their own research contexts and approaches to be authentic (Milne, 2005). Referring to the degree to which researchers capture the multiple perspectives and values of participants in their study during their analysis, as well as the potential of the project to benefit society (James, 2008), authenticity involves an assessment of both the utility and meaningfulness of the interactive inquiry processes of qualitative research. In striving for authenticity, then, qualitative researchers 'seek reassurance that both the conduct and evaluation of research are genuine and credible not only in terms of participants' lived experiences but also with respect to the wider political and social implications of research' (James, 2008, p. 118). While the literature in qualitative research is replete with examples of ways to understand and improve authenticity (Cope, 2014; Dyar, 2022; Johnson & Rasulova, 2017), the five dimensions outlined through the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985): fairness, ontological, educative, catalytic and tactical, are particularly productive as a reminder of the different aspects of participant experience that should be considered through the inquiry process when striving for authenticity.<sup>1</sup>

Taking these dimensional requirements as a useful indicator of the reach of authenticity with regard to considering participant experience, this paper argues that authenticity is not always as well-developed through some of the standard practices in qualitative research as perhaps expected. It also introduces an alternative qualitative approach, Hermeneutic Constructivism, that is considered better able than some of these standard practices to achieve the requirements of these five dimensions of authenticity with regard to developing an understanding of human experience. This paper is hence comprised of three main sections. First, the five dimensions of authenticity for qualitative research as set out by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are outlined, along with their requirements, and

shown to be difficult to reconcile with the tendency towards thematisation common to many qualitative approaches. Second, Hermeneutic Constructivism is introduced as an alternative theoretical approach for developing—for the purposes of qualitative research (and, hence, for fields such as nursing that rely on such research)—authentic understandings of people going about the everyday business of being human. The third section details how this approach is able to meet the various requirements of the dimensions of authenticity as set out by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The paper finally concludes with consideration of how Hermeneutic Constructivism might offer a valuable contribution to the shared goal of developing nuanced and authentic qualitative understandings of the individuals engaged with through research.

## 2 | THE PRACTICE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND THE ISSUE OF AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity has been considered a 'crucial component' of qualitative research although it has also been considered 'elusive' in its attainment (Shannon & Hambacher, 2014, p. 1). Lincoln and Guba (1985) have suggested that authenticity encompasses five dimensions: fairness, ontological, educative, catalytic and tactical authenticity. Each of these is considered significant for qualitative research and its capacity to not only explore and represent "the insiders' view' of human experience (Holloway & Galvin, 2016, p. 6), but they also help ensure that research findings are sufficiently robust so as to support action being taken on their implications (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend, the dimension of *fairness* refers to the extent to which the participants' different constructions and underlying values and viewpoints are solicited and represented in a balanced, even-handed way by the researcher. *Ontological authenticity* concerns the way in which participants' own constructions are enhanced or made more informed through their participation in the research. *Educative authenticity* refers to how participants develop understanding and appreciation of—and empathy for—others' constructions through the research process. Ontological and educative authenticity can thus be understood as requiring the inquiry process to develop as a hermeneutic circle informed by properly dialogical conversations among all participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). *Catalytic authenticity* refers to how the research process stimulates and facilitates participants' behaviour, providing participants with insight into possible actions that might eliminate or ameliorate problems. Finally, *tactical authenticity* refers to the extent to which all participants feel empowered to act within the context of the research process, not just the researchers (Schwandt, 1997, p. 7).

What stands out across these various dimensions of authenticity is that participants in qualitative research should not just be reported on but should be dynamically involved in—and changed by—the constructions and interpretations of data developed throughout the research process. Such engagements of research participants clearly align with the constructivist assumptions that commonly underpin qualitative research, specifically that there are 'multiple constructed realities' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 294) and that knowledge is 'contingent upon human practices

<sup>1</sup>Given that the audience for this study is likely to be those interested in research informed by a hermeneutic tradition, clarification that we are not using the word 'authentic' as Heidegger ascribes its meaning is an important distinction to make.

constructed through interaction between human beings and their world' (Crotty, 2020, p. 42).<sup>2</sup> These points place strong emphasis on the need to recognise and accommodate the perspectives of different stakeholders (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), and challenge the notion that any one group can hold the whole truth about a situation (Kelly & Kilby, 1996). The dynamism of meaning-making presupposed by Lincoln and Guba's five dimensions of authenticity is, however, problematic for qualitative research approaches that maintain separation between the researched and researchers, and that remain committed to what has been called the researcher's 'monopoly of interpretation' (Kvale, 2006, p. 485). Commitments to *designative* views in the contexts of language and meaning-making have also been shown to disrupt the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Peck & Mummery, 2018, 2019a). Problematically, these various commitments can be discerned through consideration of four main, interrelated common practices in qualitative research: (i) the stress on thematisation, (ii) the idea that language simply designates things and can therefore carry unambiguous meaning, (iii) the pervasive practice of *zooming out* from the idiosyncrasies of individuals to broad thematic representations, and (iv) the idea that the presentation of a compelling *tale* from the research process somehow represents authenticity. The section concludes with outlining some of the problems caused by these issues for meeting the various requirements of authenticity.

## 2.1 | Thematisation and authenticity

It is well known that the approaches to qualitative research that are common in the health sciences have been borrowed from the social sciences and continue to be adapted for a better fit with the knowledge needs of the practice-based disciplines (Offenberger, 2020). Despite the deep theoretical heritage that underpins qualitative research, there is concern about some of the 'somewhat dumbed-down' (Thorne, 2020, p. 1) approaches to qualitative analysis that have taken hold in spaces outside of the social sciences. Thorne (2020), a leading figure in the field of qualitative research and its theoretical development for and in the practice-based disciplines, notably nursing, suggests the worst of these are exemplified in models of thematic analysis, specifically with the identification of *the theme* as a legitimate endpoint for analysis.<sup>3</sup>

The key point here is that although there are different approaches to qualitative research available, thematic analysis is a data analysis strategy commonly used across qualitative research (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Despite its prevalence, however, it remains 'poorly demarcated, [and] rarely acknowledged' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 4; also see Bendassolli, 2013; Holloway & Todres, 2003). Broadly understood, thematic analysis stands for the 'identifying, analyzing, and reporting [of] patterns within

data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006; p. 80). The problem is that the identification of such patterns—themes—is actually a 'surface-level consideration' which 'taps the part of our brain that notices commonalities among things, aspects that are similar from one case to another' (Thorne, 2020, p. 1). It has also been argued that themes—the so called 'bricks' of meaning identification and construction—tend to be 'formed ... from a mould that is then shaped from the researcher's conscious and unconscious assumptions and orientations' (Scheurich, 1995, p. 241).

This is the point that much thematic analysis relies on surprisingly consistent internal processes of interpretation. Indeed, as Kvale (2006, p. 485) points out, following the processes of thematisation can often mean that the researcher has a 'monopoly of interpretation over the interviewee's statements', and as such 'maintains exclusive privilege to interpret and report what the interviewee really meant and to frame what an interviewee says in his or her own theoretical schemes'. That is, the researcher typically operates as the 'big interpreter'—able to make determinations of the meaning embedded within aspects of the interview material that he or she further deems significant as well as common (Kvale, 2006, p. 485). Given the significance of thematisation for much qualitative research, its capacities to meet the requirements of *fairness*, *ontological* and *tactical* authenticity need careful consideration.

## 2.2 | Designative assumptions about language

Assumptions about the nature of language and meaning-making are at the heart of both critiques of thematic approaches and our critique of such abilities to be authentic. A summary of the thematic analysis process of interpretation is useful here. Understood most basically, when carrying out thematic analysis, the researcher takes the highly nuanced and deeply expressive experiences of individual people and then makes determinations—interpretations—about which elements are significant along with their meaning (see, e.g., Braun & Clarke 2013; Creswell & Poth 2016; Vaismoradi et al. 2016). The researcher's perceptions of similarities between various elements allow them to be grouped together as themes that are in turn considered to act as representations of the once unique person (or persons) who actually had the experience with the phenomenon of interest (Peck & Mummery, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). Importantly, such practices align with the assumptions typical of what have been called designative views of language (Taylor, 1985). At the heart of designative accounts is a belief that all individuals capture phenomena—for themselves and for others—by appealing to the way that words mean what they designate and can therefore provide an accurate and unambiguous representation of the way things are (Taylor, 1985). These things include states of mind and thoughts, as well as states of affairs and material entities and objects. Designative theories—according to which language is simply an instrument of thought, able to signify or designate thought—therefore consider both meaning-making and meaning

<sup>2</sup>Guba and Lincoln (1994) have identified authenticity as the criterion for developing the trustworthiness of a qualitative inquiry that is most distinctively aligned with the constructivist paradigm.

<sup>3</sup>The broad goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes—patterns in the data that are important or interesting—and use these themes to gain understanding about an issue.

itself as unambiguous and straightforward processes.<sup>4</sup> At some level, then, a researcher engaged in the process of thematic analysis adheres to assumptions that overlook and foreclose considerations of the complex relations of language to their own and others' constructions and understandings of reality (Peck & Mummery, 2018).<sup>5</sup>

It might be argued that some approaches to thematic analysis evade designative commitments regarding processes of researcher interpretation. This would be because they incorporate further engagements with participants in the order of member checking (Mays & Pope, 2000; Pope et al., 2006). Such a process would suggest an address of the problem of the *big interpreter* and, further, some address of the dimension of *fairness*. We would argue, however, that because this typically occurs well after the original encounter with the participant, and given the unequal power dynamic common between researcher and participant (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018), this engagement is unlikely to significantly challenge the researcher's designation of meaning. And, regardless, addressing *fairness* in such a way does little to address the requirements of the other four dimensions of authenticity.

### 2.3 | Zooming out and the authentic

It is important to remember that in the actual work of qualitative research, researchers are not dealing with things that can easily be dismantled, re-labelled, and re-packaged—such as a theme—but instead with feelings, experiences, emotions, thoughts, and the innermost experiences (or qualia) of other people. It is argued, therefore, that these inherently unique elements of individuals will always exceed their subscription to any superficial level of data abstraction. This is the point that, to conjure themes that are considered able to collect and then represent the views of those involved in the study, one can only take a broad perspective. Unfortunately, at such a level of generality, no representation can be considered to be a complete or even a faithful representation of the views encountered (Azzahawi, 2021; Smythe & Murray, 2000).

To elaborate on this issue, similarities between a thematic representation and the operation of the website Google Earth can be identified. Containing archival satellite imagery of the world with amazingly clear angle reduction or zooming properties, the website enables the user to select a geographical focus for closer examination. Here if you wished to focus upon your own house you may be able to recognise clearly your garage, the children's toys in the back garden, the sandpit or even the clothesline. The detail at this level is quite remarkable and the unique elements that make your house your

own are easily noticed. If you decided to view the wider municipality or township you would *zoom out* from your yard to the broader town. At this level you can see perhaps a large expanse of water, a noticeably main road, or an industrial or retail area in such a configuration as to be indicative of your hometown. However, at this level your own home may appear as merely a tin roof, one amongst many other tin roofs and generally unrecognisable from the others. Here you can see that yes you do have a lot in common with the rest of your town in that you too have a tin roof the same colour as the majority of others and that you have a very similar yardage as your fellow community members. But at this level the idiosyncratic aspects of your own yard are indiscernible, lost to the broader picture of the masses or the generality of your township by the *zooming out* from the detail that is possible. These losses mean that attempts to address the five dimensions of authenticity will be shaped primarily through reference to broad commonalities rather than the more nuanced perspectives that are possible.

### 2.4 | Authenticity: More than just a good tale

Within the presentation of qualitative research, one typical measure with which to address the issue of authenticity around fairness has been the presentation of frequent and lengthy—and therefore supposedly accurate—quotations from participants in an effort to represent a connection with reality (Johnson, 1997; Lee, 2001; Parkin & Kimergård, 2022). According to van Maanen (2011, p. 64), qualitative researchers work meticulously to be perceived as being 'fully able to whistle native tunes'. Despite this, he goes on to suggest that the use of these lengthy, grammatically incorrect, and at times incoherent quotations from participants' interviews as evidence for this competence, ultimately represents a corruption of even co-constituted work of representation. Suggesting that the use of these quotations is always staged, van Maanen (2011) argues that they tend to be surreptitiously edited in such a way as to represent and emphasise the researcher's perspective, all the while being presented as (if) the authentic views of the participants. Further to that, researchers use literary strategies to draw the reader into the story being told and persuade them of its representative capacity (Parkin & Kimergård, 2022; Strathern, 1990; Weiss, 2004).

Green (2013) has provided an account of her decision-making process in the selection of interview data, which ultimately has profound implications for that which is represented by the research. Green goes on to highlight the way that she used verbatim quotes for the purposes of 'marshalling materials to progress an argument, and of writing with a particular readership in mind' (Green, 2013, p. 105). Weiss (2004), seeking to provide useful insights for the use of participant quotations, cautions against 'investigator bias', recognising the ever-present opportunity for:

An investigator who is determined, consciously or unconsciously, to have a particular theme emerge from his or her study can choose respondents whose interviews are likely to produce that picture ... and

<sup>4</sup>Lawn (2004) suggests that in designative accounts of language 'questions about the actuality of language are quickly overshadowed or forgotten. The diverse and extensive nature of language is overlooked and a limited concentration upon the dubious belief that language discloses states of mind neglects the phenomena of language' (p. 9).

<sup>5</sup>In the case of thematic analysis, it could be argued that some of these adherences are down to poor implementation rather than limitations of the principles or methods of thematic analysis. However, in this same case, the need to identify commonalities across individual data sets almost mandates the overlooking of the speculative nature of language and meaning, promoting designative commitments.

write a report that neglects whatever might disconfirm it. (p. 49)

Indeed, Smythe and Murray (2000, p. 321) suggest that the greatest risk to participants involved in qualitative research is the risk of having their story reinterpreted and filtered through the 'lenses of social-scientific categories'. This can mean, as Smythe and Murray (2000, p. 184) point out, 'that the researcher's account fails to jibe with participants' views of themselves; it fails to capture their sense of their own individuality and uniqueness'. The words of Chase (1996) most completely capture this problem: 'If a participant expects that the researcher will capture fully who she is, then it must be disconcerting to have her story analysed for the social processes it reveals rather than preserved in its uniqueness' (p. 50). The main point here is that while the voices of participants are thus given space within these seemingly *realist tales*, they are none the less designed to serve the needs of an absent and disembodied author. As Sparkes (1995) puts this:

It's the author [i.e., researcher] whose guiding hand selects the quotations and shapes the story presented ... [the researcher's invisibility] needs to be seen as a textual strategy, a conscious decision to focus attention upon the subject's words with a view to drawing the reader into the storyline ... and evoking a response. (p. 170)

Despite their ethical obligation to represent the real people and real lives encountered as genuinely as possible, and to produce faithful co-constituted representations that exceed any requirement to be simply a *good* or convincing *read*, qualitative researchers are clearly implicated in the construction of the final text. Given researchers' power to write people and their experiences into and out of research accounts, the written product cannot be seen as an innocent or neutral element in the movement of understanding. These assumptions in turn show a number of implications for the goal of delivering authentic constructions of the experiences and lives of real people.

## 2.5 | Challenges to authenticity

Together these points raise questions as to whether researchers can legitimately be considered to authentically—fairly—represent the individual(s) involved in qualitative research when their primary focus of concern, at least in the case of thematising analysis, is at the wider more superficial level of generality. This position closely echoes that of Seale et al. (2003) who suggest that qualitative researchers often produce 'low quality research and research results that are quite stereotypical and close to common sense' (p. 2). It is clear, after all, that the zooming out from an individual's unique backyard—analogue to their inherently unique experiences—to the more *general* aspects of a shared society carries with it a loss of attention

to detail, a loss of idiosyncrasy, and a change in the depth of focus and a vanishing of the authentic.

Herein lies what we see as the core challenge for many contemporary qualitative approaches. In the search for *generality* as a theme, among or across a group of people, all of whom are considered to be homogenisable, the discipline of qualitative research would appear to have sacrificed a tremendous depth of understanding of the real people and real lives encountered. In other words, it is this stress on generalisation that opens much qualitative research up to challenges regarding the degrees of authenticity that can be achieved in research. We consider this challenge next, making reference to each of the dimensions of authenticity outlined previously.

Beginning with *fairness*, it is reasonable to assume that within the dialogical encounter with the participant typical in qualitative research—the interview, for example—the researcher would likely come up against the individual's values and constructions. However, it follows that a zoomed-out thematic representation would be incapable of representing the full diversity of values and nuanced constructions of the world that each individual brings with them to their encounter with qualitative research. These highly personal and deeply nuanced elements of a person's being—their *qualia*—do not lend themselves to the generalisation that is inherent of a theme. In turn, *ontological*, *educative*, *catalytic* and *tactical* authenticity each stress, at some level, the importance of a change or development in the original constructions of the participants involved in research. Whether this refers to coming to see the world differently, the development of empathy, or a stimulation of a change in behaviour for action, these dimensions of authenticity require that each individual is able, through participation in the research process, to have their own constructions interact with the constructions of others to the point of change. However, as has been previously noted, the stress laid on the work of the *big interpreter* and the presence of power imbalances between the researcher and her research participants in thematically oriented qualitative research can mean that individual participants are not provided adequate opportunity for their constructions to be shaped through the dialogical practices supposedly important for the establishment of authenticity.

## 3 | TOWARDS A MORE COMPLEX CONSIDERATION: HERMENEUTIC CONSTRUCTIVISM

What these various points suggest is that the genuine curiosity that propels a researcher towards a qualitative appreciation of a phenomenon and towards authenticity might also point to the need for what Thorne (2020, p. 1) describes as 'a more complex line of intrigue' than that which may be carried out in thematically oriented processes of qualitative research. This is where the ideas of Hermeneutic Constructivism (henceforth HC) enter consideration (Peck & Mummery, 2018). HC represents a series of theoretical



assumptions that arise from a re-envisioning of Kelly's (1955) Personal Construct Psychology through the lens of Gadamer's (2003) Hermeneutic Phenomenology (Peck & Mummery, 2018; Peck, 2015). In particular, HC stands for a philosophical position that deliberately and explicitly strives to illuminate the *qualia* or *inner outlook* of a person for the purposes of qualitative research (Peck & Mummery, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). We suggest it offers a theoretical opportunity to redress some of the limits of thematically oriented approaches to qualitative research regarding the development of authentic understanding. The key commitments of HC are as follows.

HC begins from a Gadamer inspired central assumption that the human comportment of being is always towards understanding events of the world and that the medium of this comportment is language. This is an *expressivist* (rather than *designative*) view of language insofar as it takes language not as a tool but as the medium within and through which human experience transpires. Understood as being at the very core of human comportment towards the world, language allows a thing to be understood, to come to meaning. Such views give rise to HC's Fundamental Postulate: *A person's understanding processes are guided by his or her languaging of events*. This Fundamental Postulate is then elaborated through 11 corollaries which logically follow from and augment it.<sup>6</sup> Together these corollaries establish that the individual person of HC, through the medium of language and the movement of languaging itself, is a proactive constitutor of the world that he or she comes to understand and share through their own conduct of a form of qualitative research.<sup>7</sup>

For HC, then, the process of languaging embodies the movement of bringing a thing that is to be understood to understanding through the medium of language. The languaging of an event takes the form of a dialogue. Here, reflecting the insights of Gadamer (2003), a dialogue is understood as a structure that does not have any predetermined end point (Peck & Mummery, 2018, 2019a). Instead, a dialogue, much like the structure of a conversation, follows a to and fro or question and answer movement. This movement represents an inherent circularity where an individual puts something forward as an initial understanding and opens it to questioning—with an eye to its confirmation, alteration or eventual rejection—(as if) by another person. This initial understanding HC terms a prejudice, meaning, following Gadamer (2003, p. 270), 'a judgement rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined'. Each prejudice carries with it a *horizon* that represents the possibilities according to which the world can be understood from

that starting vantage point. These possibilities—the basis for a dialogue through questions of understanding—are then either ruled in or out. Importantly, this development of understanding does not assume an understanding of things in themselves in terms of any perfection or finality of understanding; it is rather always an understanding of that thing as it *for that person at this point in time*.<sup>8</sup> This means that any developed understanding of any thing is only ever partial and always open to further development. Put another way, the process of understanding always begins from an initial position—an existing prejudice—and is propelled from that towards either affirmation of that position or to a different position, which itself becomes a new starting position for understanding. The key point is that this dialogic process is what enables a person to filter those prejudices that lead to adequate understanding from those that may lead to misunderstanding in the future.

The anticipatory nature of prejudices and the work of languaging in its operation to develop understanding underscores HC's fundamentally proactive conceptualisation of human experience. That is, HC considers that every individual is able to determine for themselves those aspects of the world towards which they direct their understanding processes as well as that *something* that they make of those events. In this movement of making something of the event—the to and fro movement that epitomises both experience and the development of understanding for HC—a person is constantly developing (and redeveloping) the prejudice(s) that mark the initial position from which he or she projects an understanding. An individual's experience is therefore both conditioned by, and conditions, their prejudices. In consequence, on the basis that each person selects both those aspects of the world that are to be understood, as well as the vantage point or prejudice from which they are then understood, the person of HC is considered to be fundamentally idiosyncratic in nature (Peck & Mummery, 2018, 2019b).

At the core of this idiosyncrasy is the ongoing development of an inherently unique system of prejudices. Given that it is the fundamental ontological structure by way of which each individual ultimately understands the world, their *Self*, and others, the prejudice represents the essential precondition of the human comportment of being itself. This means that an exploration of a person's prejudices is a look at that person's inner outlook—that is, the way that he or she understands the world—as well as at the possibilities that are available to this person for understanding the world differently. It is for this reason that gaining an appreciation of the prejudice, and its further elucidation, represent most completely the remit with which HC concerns itself. Such a remit is arguably also key for qualitative

<sup>6</sup>The Fundamental Postulate and the explanatory Corollaries of HC are discussed in a previous paper by Peck and Mummery (2018).

<sup>7</sup>Here Hermeneutic Constructivism shows itself as sympathetic towards Kelly's (1955) view of the world and the conceptualisation of the individual in terms of 'man-the-scientist' [sic] (p. 4). Here Kelly affords each person scientist-like characteristics, suggesting that every person seeks to predict, control as well as confirm and disconfirm aspects of his or her developing understanding of the world. Beginning from the notion that each person develops or erects for him or herself a theory to predict and control, to the best of his or her ability, the world around them, 'might not the differences between the personal viewpoints of different men correspond to the differences between the theoretical points of view of different scientists?' (p. 5). This idea also drives Hermeneutic Constructivism and is particularly evident in the ontological significance of the prejudice.

<sup>8</sup>Gadamer (2003), in his work *Truth and Method*, challenged the notion that understanding could ever be free from interpretation. Here he provided one argument—amongst others—that 'scientific truths' are but interpretations. At some point a 'scientist' must make an interpretation about what it is that a *thing* is showing to be the case. Although not fully fleshed out here, Gadamer was able to highlight that understanding is indeed interpretation. Gadamer (2003) also established by way of his broader Hermeneutic Phenomenology that 'interpretation is not an occasional post facto supplement to understanding; rather, understanding is always interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding' (p. 307).

research given its focus on understanding and representing the everyday, *what is it like* characteristics or qualities of experience and meaning-making (i.e., qualia).

### 3.1 | Qualitative authenticity—A HC lens

By now it is clear that HC strives to recognise the nuances of each individual's unique understanding and meaning-making process while drawing attention to the fundamentally dialogic nature of being human through the movement of languaging and the development of an understanding. Much of what has already been said about HC examines those psychological processes by way of which individuals come to understand the world (Peck & Mummery, 2018). However, the to and fro movement of dialogue that allows a person to bring the world—or indeed another person—to understanding is the same work for sharing that understanding.

Following the dialogical movement of languaging under the aegis of HC, what can be identified in the qualitative research interview is the ongoing dialogic work of determining the degree of *fit* between the prejudices of the researcher and those of the participant. This is not simply an exercise of seeking agreement by another person with one's own vantage point or prejudices—agreement that is not always possible to attain. Instead, in a genuine dialogue, this would be a process of coming to recognise another person's prejudices. That is, the researcher informed by HC moves with the participant dialogically around one prejudice until the researcher achieves an authentic construction of the participant experience. That is, the researcher seeks to come to the clearest understanding they can gain thus far of the participant's prejudice and experience (Peck & Mummery, 2018, 2019a). In so doing, the researcher seeks to establish a fit between what is understood so far and the experience of the participant—an *Intersection of Understanding*.<sup>9</sup> Importantly this fit can be variable, ranging from a close fit, representing a deep understanding or an adequate interpretation, to a much looser connection, representing a shallow understanding or a less adequate interpretation. Dialogical movement would ideally continue until such a time that the researcher develops an interpretation that accents those aspects of the participant's inner outlook so adequately that the interpretation is not seen or rather is effaced as being an interpretation at all. This point is the *mot juste*, meaning the best words to capture the thing that is to be understood. Although HC sees the *mot juste* as possible it would also be rare, most common is the recognition that HC's dialogism means that there can always be different, perhaps better interpretations.

This rehabilitation of the centrality of the dialogic movement is at odds with the zooming out or search for the generalisable that is implicit in thematising approaches to qualitative research, and offers

an alternative to the need for post hoc verification of the researcher's analysis. HC is also well-placed to address the requirements for the five dimensions of authenticity as set out by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Beginning with *fairness*, for instance, it could be argued that the prejudice, as an ontological precondition of understanding, is akin to what Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe as a person's values or constructions. While highly personal and deeply nuanced constructions of the world typically escape the remit of any approach that seeks generality, they are the central concern of the HC approach. HC further suggests that a person's prejudices are grouped together in a system of sub and superordinate relationships which in combination embody all that a person currently understands about the world, as well as the possibilities they have available to them to envisage the world—this is a person's *authentic understanding*. Put another way, a person's system of prejudices can be understood as standing in for his or her *Self* and, in so doing, highlights the complexity and depth of understanding that is possible of a person's core values or constructions. Thus, the deep dialogical engagement with the individual participant that HC enables suggests its alignment with the fairness standard for authenticity outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

As has been outlined, the *ontological, educative, catalytic* and *tactical* dimensions of authenticity are equally important for the authentic construction of the insider's view of human experience and these are also all well accounted for in the HC position. At its core, ontological authenticity asks that inquiry should seek to 'raise consciousness or to unite divided consciousness, likely via some dialectical process, so that a person or persons (not to exclude the evaluator) can achieve a more sophisticated and enriched construction' (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 81). Importantly, this uniting of consciousness is not an achievement of agreement (necessarily), instead, as outlined through educative authenticity, it is an appreciation of a series of complexities in one's understanding of another individual's constructions of the world that are enhanced by the process of understanding itself. In the words of Lincoln and Guba (1986, p. 81), the core of educative authenticity is a recognition that 'Each stakeholder in the situation should have the opportunity to become educated about others of different persuasions (values and constructions), and hence to appreciate how different opinions, judgements and actions are evoked'. The role of the dialogic in the achievement of these two tenets of authenticity is palpable and suggests that a theoretical model founded upon the expressivist ideas of language—such as HC—would be required to meet these tenets. In addition, the individual's unique constructions or values that Lincoln and Guba (1986) describe represent a particularly high level of abstraction. In HC, the prejudice is the condition of all understanding and as such it is the precondition for qualia and is therefore commensurate with these deeply individual elements of a person's experience. Thus, through the to and fro movement of understanding embodied by languaging, the level of abstraction required of ontological authenticity sits very comfortably within the HC framework.

<sup>9</sup>The term 'intersection' is not to be confused as a slippage into a naïve realism, where the prejudice merely seeks a correspondence with the *thing*. Instead, the notion of an intersection epitomises the way in which understanding for HC is always interpretation.

The achievement of educative authenticity is what Lincoln and Guba (1986, p. 81) describe as 'a more sophisticated and complex construction (an emic-etic blending) of both personal and professional kinds'. These authors go on to argue that it can be difficult to know when educative authenticity has been achieved. We acknowledge that it is indeed difficult to achieve this element of authenticity through modes of qualitative research that tend towards reliance on designative approaches to language, seeing these as only able to capture the etic elements of experience. We would suggest that HC's focus on the prejudice as the achievement of languaging with another individual is sufficiently sophisticated to achieve this standard. That is, the founding of HC within an expressivist view of language and meaning-making acknowledges that meaning goes on well beyond simply that which is said, and, in so doing, addresses the etic and emic blend that Lincoln and Guba (1986) see as important.

Catalytic authenticity is a call to action, it is founded upon a recognition that the outcomes of ontological and educative authenticity are not sufficient by themselves and that change and empowerment on the part of the stakeholders should also be demonstrated. As Lincoln and Guba (1986, p. 82) outline, 'The naturalistic posture that involves all stakeholders from the start, that honours their inputs, that provides them with decision-making power in guiding the evaluation, that attempts to empower the powerless and give voice to the speechless, and that results in a collaborative effort holds more promise'. Again, these ideas are reflected strongly in the HC approach where the participant co-constitutes the dialogical movement and affirms the understanding that is ultimately achieved through the intersection of understanding as an authentic construction of an individual's prejudices.<sup>10</sup> This deep focus at the level of abstraction that HC deals with maintains, unapologetically, the focus at the level of the individual. Understanding at the level of one's prejudices, or unique qualia, exemplifies an honouring of the input of each individual. At the level of the individual, HC provides an effective way of giving voice to the individuals who might otherwise remain speechless through thematising modes of qualitative research focused on developing an understanding at the level of the common.

Finally, tactical authenticity captures the redistribution of power as a function of the inquiry process so as to influence meaningful change amongst the stakeholders. Accordingly, Lincoln and Guba (1986, p. 82) argue that the actions taken or the principles that inform the actions taken during the process of inquiry provide a potential for action.

<sup>10</sup>We acknowledge that the co-constituting analysis outlined here is not an assumption adopted by all hermeneutic researchers. In HC, such a focus is played out with reference to the idea of *mot juste*. Gadamer—in an essay titled 'The Limits of Language' (1985)—outlines what he describes as the unsatisfying search for the *mot juste* or the perfectly appropriate word or phrase for a situation. He goes on to suggest that the constant search for the *mot juste*—and the recognition of the impossibility of ever achieving it—is the embodiment of human life itself and the genuine essence of language. In HC the researcher is seeking the *mot juste* or the most perfect (up to now) word or phrase with which to capture an interpretation of the experience being understood so that the person whose experience is being considered is able to recognise the embodiment of their experience in the interpretation as a fusion of horizons (Peck & Mummery, 2018, 2019a).

It provides practice in the use of that power through the negotiation of construction, which is joint emic-etic elaboration. It goes without saying that if respondents are seen simply as 'subjects' who must be 'manipulated', channelled through 'treatments', or even deceived in the interest of some higher 'good' or 'objective' truth, an evaluation or inquiry cannot possibly have tactical authenticity. Such a posture could only be justified from the bedrock of a realist ontology and an 'objective', value-free epistemology.

Such a view resonates with the tenets of HC, in particular with the expressivist ideas that condition the dialogic work and development of understanding between interlocutors. In the application of HC, each individual is engaging in a reciprocal movement that ultimately brings about a change in prejudices that epitomises understanding and, in particular, addresses the etic-emic elaboration espoused.<sup>11</sup> When the initial arguments about thematically oriented qualitative research are considered in light of tactical authenticity, it is clear that the assumptions that obligate designative ideals and the work of the big interpreter can also give rise to the manipulation and subjugation of the participant to the role of subject. While it may be difficult to identify that tactical authenticity has occurred (Shannon & Hambacher, 2014), the philosophical foundations of the HC position provide a productive basis for its achievement.

#### 4 | CONCLUSION

It has been suggested that thematically oriented qualitative research approaches tend to endorse a subscription to both generalisation and designative assumptions about language. This opens up questions about the degree to which such approaches are able to achieve the standards of authenticity that are arguably fundamental to the task of genuinely representing the subject matter of qualitative research—individual experience. HC, however, rehabilitates the expressivist account of language. This is the notion that language is disclosing of the world, and that it is the condition of all understanding, to the extent that an expression cannot be understood independent of another expression. Although it could be argued that other approaches to qualitative research do stress the importance of dialogue, this can be a very thin understanding of dialogue. That is, the requirement for post hoc analysis that involves the selection of aspects of the dialogue that the *researcher* believes to be significant as well as the subsequent application of meaning to these statements by the researcher—often in the complete absence of any real-time dialogue with the participant—raises doubts about the degree to

<sup>11</sup>The researchers appreciate that power sharing is of course not simple in execution. Outside of the power imbalances that are implicit in all research alone, we recognise the challenges of working with diverse participants who may find it more difficult to participate in standard models of power redistribution: children, people of colour, those of socio-demographic disadvantage. While the HC position is not a panacea for these challenges, it does provide one new avenue to pursue in addressing the influence of power.



which experience is authentically captured. Instead, under HC, the researcher is engaged in ongoing dialogue—to seek elaboration of an individual's prejudices as the medium of their internal experience—through which a well-fitting and shared understanding can be determined. The illumination of prejudices is genuinely representative of the real people and real lives encountered in qualitative research. To this extent, HC not only accommodates at least some of the challenges levelled at thematically oriented qualitative research but is also commensurate with the core principles inherent within the notions of authenticity as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Having said this, the question may be asked as to the capacity of HC to offer such productive—authentic—insight with regard to the comparative consideration of a variety of individuals' experiences, given that this, of course, is one of the capacities of thematically oriented qualitative analysis. This is an important question, but one that also perhaps assumes that qualitative research is strictly focused on comparative work. This, of course, is mistaken given that qualia are understood to be unique to the experiencer, and qualia are arguably also a key focus for qualitative research. Here the words of Mininni (2008) embody the idiographic focus that HC espouses, 'Personal experience is worth to be accurately described not although it should be regarded as "unique" or "particular", but quite because it is so' (p. 255). Such a view foregrounds a focus on a single case study, or a series of single case studies (see, e.g., Yin, 2004, 2017; cf. Smith, 2004),<sup>12</sup> as a means for understanding more deeply the individual people that are the focus of consideration. Those seeking a genuinely authentic understanding of the qualia or *inner outlook* of individuals will find HC a productive beginning point for carrying out this endeavour of qualitative research. Further and future work is needed to examine new forms of expressivist, non-generalising research that seeks to make authentic comparative considerations of a variety of individuals' experiences.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no data sets were generated or analysed during the current study.

<sup>12</sup>Smith's (2004) Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is another qualitative approach that—although ultimately succumbing to the interpretive requirements of conventional approaches to qualitative research—supports the idiographic, single case study approach. Smith (2004) suggests that a focus upon the single case has been 'sorely neglected' (p. 42), a position supported by others (cf. Radley & Chamberlain, 2001; Smith, 1993; Smith et al., 1995). Smith (2004) goes on to describe a focus upon the single case as an important area for development and encourages 'a PhD student to be bold and consider the conduct of detailed analysis of single cases' (p. 42), 'studies with an *n* of one—doing elaborate detailed, nuanced single case studies' (p. 51), maintaining an idiographic commitment to the case which do justice to the case in its own right.

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