Chapter 1

UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY

The central point of the hermeneutical disciplines consists in a specific kind of self-knowledge, and this point distinguishes them from the natural sciences.
—Hans-Georg Gadamer

Many students cringe at the thought of being taught theory in any discipline. The abstractness is difficult to conceptualize for some students and is difficult to apply to real situations for others. We will try to give you a grounding in real fieldwork situations as we explain the philosophical concepts that underlie the hermeneutic method. Hopefully, you will develop a "feel" for these theories. Your understanding will be deepened in subsequent chapters as we include references to philosophical principles in our descriptions of the practical aspects of fieldwork. We also expect students to be reminded of these philosophical concepts as they do their fieldwork projects—making the concepts more real.

It is our belief that method without theory is weak and indefensible and that theory without method is abstract and aimless. The two belong together and need to be taught together. We would like to introduce this topic by delineating two distinctive paradigms that exist in the social sciences today: the scientific and the humanistic. A paradigm is a major category of perspective, an orientation in thinking, a worldview. By understanding the humanistic paradigm and its distinction from the scientific, you can better grasp the rationale for the hermeneutic method.

We will present this to you in the form of a dialogue between a member of each paradigm (and a user of each method).

SCIENTIST: Those of us whose perspective falls under the scientific paradigm tend to see the social world as consisting of regularities and of laws that apply universally to all social groups. It is the investigators' responsibility to determine these laws and regularities in all their ramifications. They allow us to predict future events. We in this paradigm see the social world as existing objectively. By this I mean that it lies totally outside the mind of the investigator and of the subjects being studied. Just as we can study the chair on which you are sitting by measuring it, noting the material from which it is made, its shape and color, we can also study objective social reality.

HERMENEUT: So you believe that the social world can be studied without bias?

CY: Yes, in fact, the scientist has the responsibility to rid him- or herself of all preconceived notions while gathering the objective, empirical data that can be noted of the outside, social reality. This means that the investigator can, and must, control all prestructured knowledge in his or her mind and all of his or her bias. Likewise, in order to prevent any distortion in the scientist's view of objective reality, he or she must treat all subjects of investigation in exactly the same manner; the investigator should not influence those being studied, nor should the subject influence the scientist's method.

HERMAN: Hmmm. Can you give me an example of theories that are represented by this paradigm?

CY: Well, there is Freud. According to Freud, laws of psychosexual development determine human behavior. By being objective, a Freudian investigator feels able to see reality as it exists free of societal interpretation. For example, the Freudian anthropologist might explain myths, customs, or religious beliefs as culturally created means for group members to displace their *unconscious* internal feelings by interpreting them as occurring in external phenomena. According to this theory, the natives are not conscious of their true feelings and motivations, nor of the true nature of the processes being employed. So, painful male puberty rites might be looked at by Freudians

as related to the rivalry between father and son for the sexual attention of the mother. They believe that this rivalry is universal in human males, naming it the Oedipus complex, and that cultures often provide means for its expression and resolution. The natives would not express this explanation.

HERMAN: Okay. I think I understand. Can you give me another example?

CY: Followers of Marvin Harris's theory of cultural materialism would assume that laws of ecological or nutritional dependence dictate cultural practices regardless of the natives' conception of the practices. These theorists believe that universal laws regarding the need for nutrients cause the creation of cultural practices. For Marvin Harris, the sacred cow of India did not arise from purely religious sources (as the natives would say) but because of its usefulness for producing milk and draft power with little overt feeding by the owners. As was the case with Freudian theory, Harris's theory assumes that natives are not likely to be aware of the objective laws and explanations that underlie and give rise to their social behaviors.

HERMAN: I'm curious about how scientists can see objective social reality when the natives so frequently misinterpret it.

CY: We use the scientific method—an exacting, systematic method for explaining social reality.

HERMAN: That sounds like something that a physicist or chemist might use.

CY: Yes, it's basically the same method. We can't control people in the social setting the way the physicist might control his objects of study, so we might not follow the steps in the same rigorous manner. However, we still use the method as a model for investigation.

HERMAN: Hmmm. Those of us whose perspectives best fit within the humanistic paradigm don't presuppose that we can know objective social reality. We think that each group has its shared understanding of reality and that the best we can do is to study their shared understanding. We cannot know things objectively, but rather we know them intersubjectively—as a shared understanding among subjects.

CY: It sounds as if you are looking at an intersubjective truth rather than at objective truth.

HERMAN: That's another way of putting it.

CY: How do you learn about this intersubjective truth?

HERMAN: In order to learn about these shared meanings of social existence the investigator must examine some expression of the shared meaning. Some investigators study and interpret the behavior of the group members. Others feel, however, that the more appropriate data is the discourse of cultural (or social group) members, and in particular dialogue with them. The assumption here is that the investigator must ensure that he or she shares the intersubjective understanding of group members in order to be able to describe it to outsiders. This process involves tearing down one's mental structure or initial understanding through a negotiating dialogue with group members.

CY: What do you do about investigator bias?

HERMAN: According to this perspective, biases can cause conflict that is beneficial in its resolution. On the one hand, this conflict could be internal to the investigator. By this I mean that it could cause him or her to experience cognitive dissonance. On the other hand, it may be external to the investigator, such as a disagreement between the investigator and a group member over who they are. Whatever the character of the conflict, the resolution should lead to a congruent understanding. This is all part of the hermeneutic method, which is an exacting method in the humanistic paradigm. As you mentioned to be the case for the scientific method, the hermeneutic method may frequently be a mere model for the proper conduct of ethnographic investigation, rather than a rigorously adhered-to method. Humanists should seek to follow it as an ideal.

CY: I didn't know that humanist ethnography could be carried out using a stepwise method. Could we take a minute to compare this hermeneutic method with the scientific method?

HERMAN: That's a good suggestion; I appreciate your interest. How do we start?

CY: Let's each draw a diagram for our method and then describe each step in the process. You've probably seen the cycle of the

scientific method in sociology or psychology textbooks (see Figure 1.1). In step 1, the investigator generates a hypothesis about how one variable relates to another. This is nearly always based on a currently accepted sociological theory. In step 2, the scientist assigns operational definitions to the variables. In other words, he or she will describe the operations that will be used to measure each variable. In step 3 the scientist chooses a research design, and in step 4 he or she selects an unbiased sample that represents the population of concern. In step 5, the investigator generates data. For example, he or she might administer a survey to the population. In step 6, he or she analyzes the data, often by statistical analysis, and tests the hypothesis. In step 7, the analyses are interpreted in light of the original theory. Then the investigator designs a new hypothesis and the cycle is followed again. The key element in this method is testing the hypothesis. In other words, the scientist tries to disprove a story of how things work. This involves searching for and applying objective measurements for the variables so that the hypothesis can be objectively tested.

HERMAN: That was a clear and concise explanation. Let me see if I can do as well with my diagram. The basic hermeneutic method consists of three steps that are enacted again in a continuous fashion (Figure 1.2). The investigator first gathers data in a stepwise manner from sources such as written texts, dialogues, and behaviors. Then he or she attributes some meaning to the data. This is called interpretation. In the third step, the hermeneut constructs an understanding of the whole group from interpreted pieces of data. With each turn of the cycle the hermeneut adds more and more detail to his or her understanding. We assume that a holistic picture of the cultural members is being constructed through this process. By this I mean that the overall description shapes the interpretation of the next piece of information, and that the interpretation adds detail to the description.

In contrast to the scientific method that you just described, the story is broadened, deepened, and reshaped with each new piece of data. We aren't testing the story in an attempt disprove it. Perhaps the best metaphor for this process is artistry. Like artists, hermeneuts construct a detailed pic-

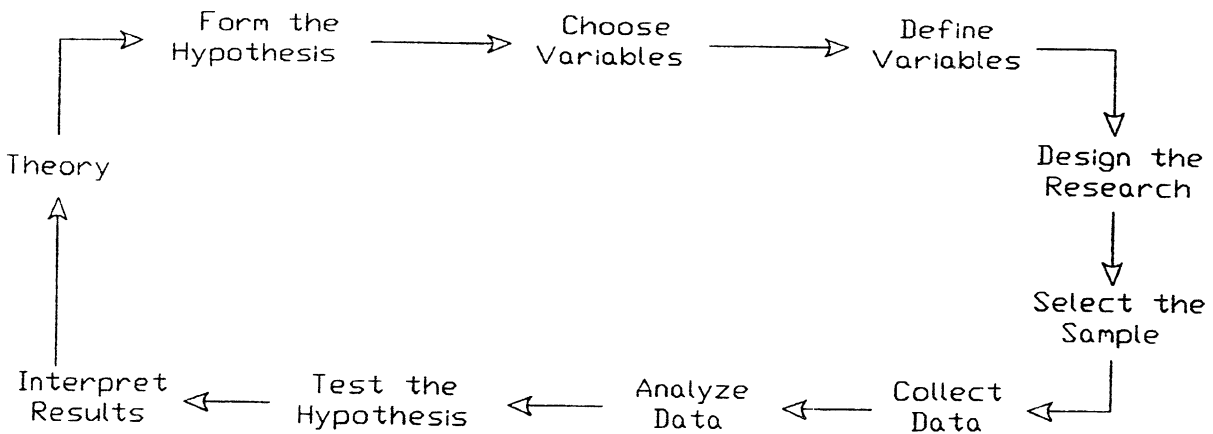

FIGURE 1.1
Scientific Method

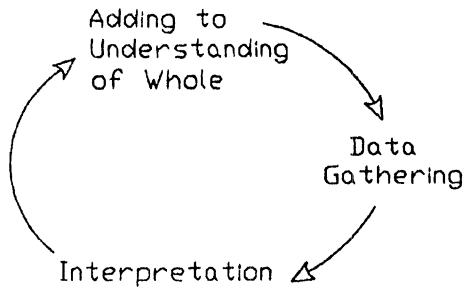

FIGURE 1.2
Basic Hermeneutic Method

ture beginning with rudimentary shapes and adding further refinement and detail with continued rendering. In this respect the process is additive or constructive.

CY: I can see that there is a difference of approach. I don't mean to be rude, but what you just described doesn't have the systematic nature or detail that the scientific method has.

HERMAN: Actually, I'm just getting started. The hermeneutic method includes two detailed models that differ in both procedure and presuppositions. These are the textual hermeneutic model and the dialogical hermeneutic model. The "challenge" is a key feature of both these models, so let me describe it first.

CY: Go ahead. I'll interrupt if I don't follow your explanation.

HERMAN: A "challenge" occurs when a discrepancy arises between the picture or description formulated thus far and a new piece of information. The new information cannot be added comfortably to the current understanding. You may have heard people say that something "does not compute." What they probably meant was that something did not make sense within their current understanding of a situation.

CY: Given what you said about "painting a picture," this challenge sounds like a disaster. Does that mean that all of your fieldwork up to that point will be discredited?

HERMAN: Actually, it represents more of a "eureka" experience—now the investigator can better get at the group mem-

bers' level of understanding. You see, the big picture now has to be reformulated. While this is time-consuming, the work of reformulation brings one to analyze his or her biases and, in some cases, to enter a negotiating dialogue with informants. The data that you gather after reformulation will either support this new picture or will lead to another challenge. Using the metaphor of the artist, he or she may find at some point that the painting does not properly capture the essence of the subject of interest. Perhaps the perspective or the overall tone is wrong. The artist will then rework the image until a suitable rendition is attained.

CY: I think that I'm following you. Maybe some examples would help me grasp the concept of challenge.

HERMAN: An investigator who grew up in the Nebraska farmlands may think that members of the working class of western Pennsylvania would have values similar to his or her own, that the presence of unions in a region discourages the entry of new business enterprises. One of the group members (we call them informants in anthropology) may say something that is out of character with this picture; for example, "Unions protect the worker." Because this is an expressed value that the investigator hadn't anticipated, a challenge should occur that would lead the investigator to discover that he or she had been using too much of past experience in understanding this informant. This is a form of bias. The field-worker would try to modify his or her understanding to accommodate the unexpected information and then interact further with him or her, keeping a watchful mind for new, unexpected remarks.

Another example I have comes from my own experience. In 1983 I had a stark challenge to my understanding of residents of a substance abuse facility. After agreeing to voluntarily teach and counsel at the center, I began to picture the residents as desperate and violent. My picture became more detailed as I viewed the male, adolescent residents on my trip to interview with the director. Unkempt appearance, tattoos, and loud and crude language fit my picture of a dangerous group. The director talked to me about security procedures and told me that most of the adolescent residents had been sent there by a judge in lieu of prison. This added more detail to the picture that I had already painted. I found even more

supporting evidence when I reported for my first evening of teaching; the dining hall was filled with a raucous group. Then I experienced new evidence that challenged the picture I had been forming. The students whom I taught were very eager to please me. They seemed very innocent and childlike. I was forced to reformulate my picture of these students as dangerous, and I found myself examining my biases concerning drug users, unkempt and tattooed adolescents, and the attitude of the supervisor.

By the way, I need to point out that the challenge step in the hermeneutic method is different than the other challenges that the project may present to investigators. Talking to strangers about their lives may be a challenge, but this is not the challenge step in hermeneutics.

CY: This notion of challenge makes sense to me. I'm eager to hear how it fits into the two models that you mentioned earlier.

HERMAN: With the textual model, the investigator gathers data as if the culture were an unchangeable text to be read. This model works well for studies of archival data, archaeological data, or of observed ritual behavior or interpersonal interaction. Have you ever heard of ethnomethodology? It's a specific type of theory and method in sociology. People who practice it observe people's behavior and interpret it while maintaining as unobtrusive a position as possible. They may overhear conversations among group members but seldom enter into them. For them, the social scene appears to be an unchanging text. For all three cases that I've mentioned here, the investigator collects data, interprets it, and adds it to a whole description in a piece-by-piece fashion (see Figure 1.3). When discrepant data occurs, it causes a challenge to arise. The challenge requires that the investigator go through a secondary loop in which he or she analyzes biases in a process called reflexion. Note that the word is spelled with an *x*.

CY: With an *x*?

HERMAN: It means more than reflection with a *ct*. Reflexion requires one to contemplate the cultural, political, and personal biases that led to the errant description. By personal biases I'm referring to psychological biases. Once he or she is aware of how these biases may have led to an improperly drawn

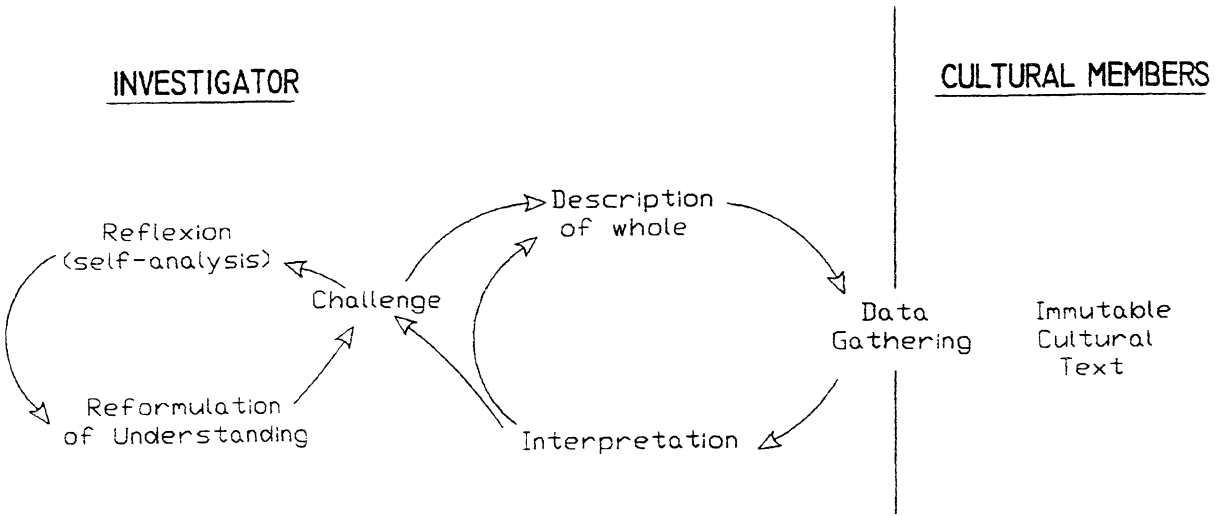

FIGURE 1.3
Textual Hermeneutic Method

picture, the investigator is able to reformulate the description, including all the data gathered thus far. Thereafter, the investigator follows the basic additive cycle until another challenge occurs.

CY: I can see now what you meant when you mentioned earlier that bias acts as a signal to the investigator. What about the dialogical model?

HERMAN: In the dialogical model, dialogue between group members and the ethnographer represents the best source of data. Other sources include other discourse such as overheard conversations, poems, speeches, fictional writing, or song lyrics. Dialogical methodologists consider these to be expressions of an evolving intersubjective understanding, in other words an evolving culture. Followers of this model do not see culture as an immutable text.

There are more loops added to the basic cycle (see Figure 1.4). First of all, there is a reflective branch added because interpretation sometimes requires time for the hermeneut to digest the information. This reflection may include some considerations of the context under which the discourse was created. For example, an investigator might ask how the cultural member viewed the situation in which he or she created the discourse—Was it meant as humor rather than a serious statement? The reflection could also include analysis of the process by which the analyst obtained it. This model includes the rudimentary additive cycle and separate paths necessitated by a challenge to the description. Of course, the challenge step has been added to the rudimentary cycle. Arrows indicate that the sources of challenge can be interpretations of discourse and interpretations of observations. In other words, an investigator may see or hear something that he or she interprets as incongruous with the current understanding. These challenges are solved in two possible fashions: (1) by reflection—that's with a *ct*—followed by reinterpretation or (2) by reflection or reflexion followed by dialogue and reformulation of the description.

CY: Excuse me, but I'm not sure I follow.

HERMAN: Let me explain further. An example of the first type of resolution would be for the investigator to think about the con-

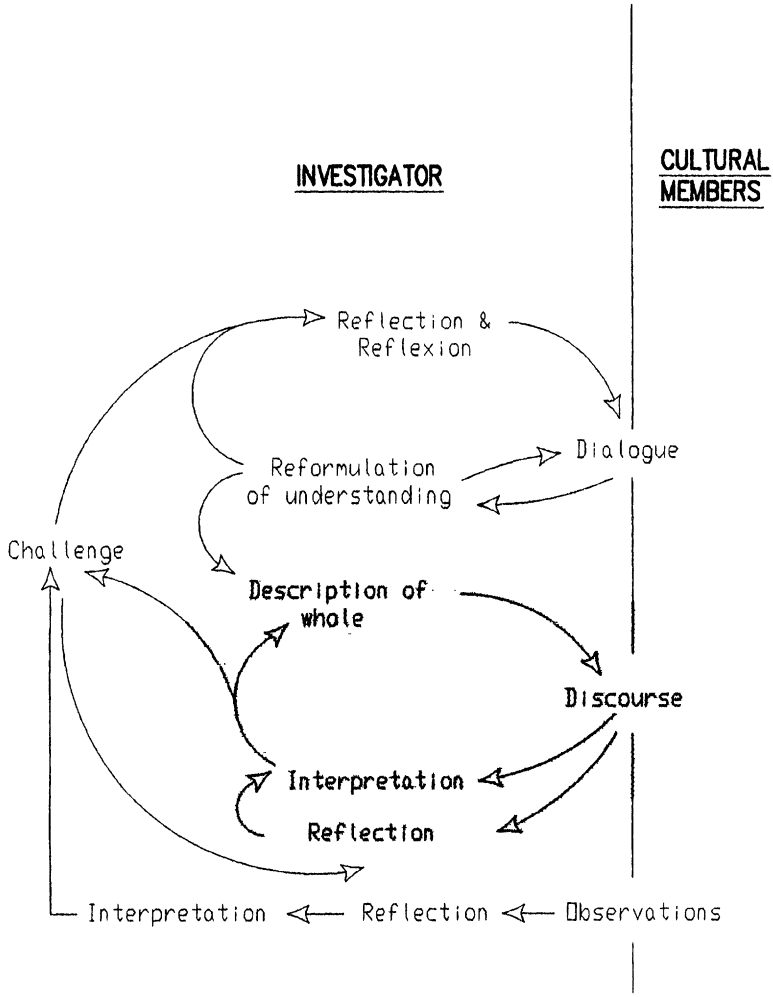

FIGURE 1.4
Dialogical Hermeneutic Method

text in which he or she observed or heard something. What appeared to be a challenge may be understandable with minor expansion of the current description. The second type of resolution requires reflexion by the investigator prior to dialogue, checking for his or her cultural, political, or psychological biases. Bias may have given rise to the challenge and subsequent need for dialogue. As I mentioned before, the biases need to be explored and relaxed for appropriate interpretation to occur.

CY: That sounds like your description of the resolution of challenge for the textual model. Am I right?

HERMAN: Yes, it is very much the same. Since close interaction with people is involved, it might involve more psychological bias. I'll tell you more about this later. I'll describe the second sort of resolution of bias now. It involves negotiation with the informant or informants through dialogue. This negotiation cycle can involve many reformulation steps and several reflection/reflexion steps before the investigator is ready to alter the description of the whole. The dialogue may involve one or more people in one or more conversations. It may occur during one sitting or may require weeks or months.

The resolution cycle may take place many times before the investigator feels prepared to reformulate the overall description. Following the reformulation, the investigator will again interpret the data and add it to the overall understanding until another challenge occurs.

CY: Could you give me an example using this method?

HERMAN: Are you familiar with Richard Lee's article, "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari"? It is a good illustration of the processes involved in dialogical hermeneutics.

CY: I've read it but not recently—refresh my memory.

HERMAN: In his narrative Lee tells of his efforts to present his !Kung informants with an ox for their "Christmas" celebration as a goodwill gesture. He sought the largest, meatiest ox available for slaughter. To Lee's surprise, the !Kung commented unfavorably about his gift. They laughingly referred to it as a bag of bones. When the slaughtered animal proved to be layered with prized fat, Lee was puzzled. The natives still laughed at

his "meager" gift. Feeling that something important had gone wrong in his relationship with the !Kung, he asked a Tswana man who had married into the !Kung culture about it and was told that this was customary even among themselves. The hunter's kill was always ridiculed. He then questioned his !Kung informants who told him that they acted this way to prevent arrogance in the provider. They feared that should pride remain the man will someday kill another.

The ridiculing behavior of the !Kung presented a "challenge" to Lee's understanding of them. He resolved the discrepancy between behavior and expectations by reflecting on the situation and on his biases, and by entering into a dialogue with the !Kung. He finally was able to match his horizon or understanding with theirs and to reformulate his description of their culture. He became a part of their circle of shared understanding. In other words, he became able to describe their intersubjective truth.

CY: It seems to me that the most significant difference between the scientific and hermeneutic methods lies in the way their practitioners perceive truth.

HERMAN: Yes, and from that difference flows differences with regard to handling bias, validating stories, and controlling aspects of the investigation. But let's start with epistemology.

CY: The scientific method rests on the assumption that there exists an objective social reality that can be reproducible measured in time and by different investigators. These social phenomena exist "out there," free of investigator bias and investigator interference. Scientists feel that they can categorize and explain social phenomena and even predict them by means of cause-and-effect relationships that some people call laws. For example, cohabitation would be considered an objective phenomenon that can be objectively measured with regard to a variable like years of college education. It does not matter to the scientist that the term "cohabitation" may not be a part of most people's vocabulary, and that the meaning of the live-in relationships may vary widely among those experiencing such practices.

HERMAN: In contrast, the hermeneutic method rests on the assumption that reality cannot be known objectively, but is

understood intersubjectively. This means that knowledge of reality is shared among group members. This is their truth. However, it may vary from the truth of another group. The group members create a meaning for what they experience. According to practitioners of the hermeneutic method, truth varies to some extent with time, individual participants, and individual investigators.

CY: That difference in epistemology must have ramifications elsewhere, for example with regard to bias. We espousing the scientific method feel that investigator bias is a preconceived notion that interferes with or distorts taking a measurement of the objective social reality. To us, bias can and must be controlled. We believe that some sort of objective measuring technique must be used to prevent the investigator from distorting the data. An example of such a technique might be survey forms, administered to each participant in exactly the same manner. The investigator usually attempts to distance him- or herself from individuals being investigated. He or she carries this out to control both investigator bias and any deleterious effect that the investigator might have on the responses of the individuals being studied. How do hermeneuts conceptualize bias?

HERMAN: Contrary to what you just described, the supporters of hermeneutics feel that a totally unbiased appraisal of people in the study group is impossible and that the controlled and distant interaction used by scientists in the effort to control bias is undesirable. Rather, they use bias as a detection device. As I mentioned earlier, bias leads to "challenges" to understanding and subsequently to new understandings. Hermeneuts who follow the dialogical model believe that intersubjective truth must be understood through the communication of the investigator with the people being studied; together they must negotiate the understanding that the investigator eventually describes. For example, the investigator trying to understand coal miners might ask an informant: "Would you help clear up something for me? I was under the impression that coal miners realized the dangers under which they were required to work, but you're telling me that you and your fellow mine workers took the responsibility for your own safety. I'm confused." And the investigator might then make more clear his or

her sense of contradiction in the statement: "Wouldn't the men hold the company responsible for at least some of the conditions that they had to endure?" A plausible reply by the miner might be: "Only if they were trying to get away with not meeting government regulations." This still might not satisfy the investigator, so he or she might ask: "Do government regulations really provide for a safe workplace?" The informant might reply: "Not entirely, but I say that mining can't be done without some injuries and even deaths." This negotiation of what is considered true for this informant, and possibly for most members of his or her group, would continue until the investigator shed his or her own biases about mine danger and understood the thinking of the informant. This type of process indicates a power relationship that does not exist for the scientific method or for the textual model of hermeneutics.

CY: What type of power relationship are you talking about?

HERMAN: The dialogical hermeneut often finds him- or herself in an equal or inferior position with regard to power since he or she must negotiate what is real with the informant. In contrast, the scientist is in a superior position in exercising the power to treat the subjects of his or her study in an objective manner. The scientist attempts to treat them in a detached manner, as if they were data. Those being studied are relatively powerless with regard to interpersonal relations. Hermeneuts, in their interpersonal relations must often argue with, cajole, seek help with, and reflect understanding back to their informants.

CY: And the textual hermeneuts—where do they fit in?

HERMAN: Hermeneuts using the textual model fall somewhat in-between the scientists and the dialogical hermeneuts. Since they do not negotiate the meaning of reality with their informants they are in a superior power position. They make the interpretations without consulting group members. However, if they are doing participant-observation, they need to please group members as a means of maintaining access to the group. In this sense they treat group members in a less detached manner and have less power.

There is a secondary difference with regard to power. The proponents of the scientific method, and to a large extent the

proponents of the textual model of hermeneutics, are elitist in their conclusions.

CY: Excuse me for interrupting, but I don't like the label "elitist."

HERMAN: I only mean to refer to the drawing of conclusions, not to an overall attitude or character. I mean that well-trained social scientists constitute an elite group who have the power to decide what is going on in objective reality (or in the intersubjective understanding of reality of group members for the case of textual hermeneuts). The self-description of those being studied is generally not sought, and is considered irrelevant. In contrast, dialogical hermeneuts must not exercise the power to define the world for other individuals. They must seek dialogue with their informants and through this procedure negotiate an understanding. In this case, the people exercise the power to define themselves. This method requires the investigator to assume a humble posture.

CY: I can see your point. I'll try to not take it as a derogatory adjective. What else do we need to discuss?

HERMAN: We should compare means of validation. How do investigators know if their analysis is valid?

CY: In the scientific method this is brought about through a process called replication. Since followers of the scientific method assume that reality can be objectively determined, they feel that results obtained in one study should be validated by reproducing them in subsequent, identical studies. If you keep getting the same data, it is considered valid.

HERMAN: With regard to the textual hermeneutic model, the validity of the study is determined by the coherence of the description. In other words, the more consistent the description, the more valid. Validation for the dialogical hermeneutic model involves the process of assuring that the investigator's description matches the group's understanding. The assumption here is that it is the group members' shared understanding, so they ought to be able to recognize when an analysis is valid.

The hermeneut needs to validate his or her description through ongoing dialogue and negotiation of understanding with informants. The investigator must articulate his or her

current understandings to the informants for comment, refinement, or correction. In essence, the investigator must ask: "Do I have this right?," "Can you tell me more?," and "Can you make it more clear to me?" This validation may occur as an ongoing process during interviews or conversations with the informants. Another means of validation involves asking informants to comment on a written description of the investigator's understanding.

CY: Could you give me a little more detail? It is very different than validation in the scientific method.

HERMAN: In the case of negotiation during interviews, the investigator asks the informant for verification of on-the-spot interpretations. This can include the hermeneut's rephrasing of what he or she thinks the informant is saying or can involve his or her articulating what appears to be implicit meaning within what the informant expressed explicitly. It might also involve asking informants to refine their explanations or descriptions. What ensues during the engagement of serious interviewing is an interaction between two people who react in relation to each other and reciprocally influence each other. The questions and statements of one person can cause the other to reflect on and analyze issues in new ways and perhaps to react emotionally to what is said or the manner in which it is said. Validation may also occur during subsequent interviews when the investigator asks the informant to comment on the interpretations from information provided in the previous conversation.

For example, a negotiation could involve the interpretation of ethnic poetry (or lyrics) by an anthropologist. He or she would present this interpretation to one or more culture members to verify the interpretation. The informant(s) might disagree with the analysis, pointing out errors in understanding. After considering this, the investigator might come back to make certain that his or her new interpretation is that shared by the informants. When informants agree with the interpretation, it would be validated. Again, correction and elaboration become part of the negotiation process. In carrying out negotiations, it is proper to guide the informant toward certain issues or themes, but not toward specific opinions about those issues.

The most comprehensive form of validation of understanding occurs when written material is presented to informants for comment. These manuscript drafts have been designed to express descriptions with a precision greater than that which characterizes conversations. Also, they indicate a sense of permanence. Such qualities may move informants to more carefully consider the validity of what has been expressed. Their comments may lead to further negotiation, to revision and to a final validation.

Table 1.1 summarizes the comparison among the three methods. We hope that this comparison of the analytical methods helps you to see how hermeneutics is distinct in its philosophical basis. In the next chapter we will detail the characteristics of the hermeneutic method. Remember, each time that we address the characteristics of the hermeneutic method it will become more clear to you. Even in later chapters as we describe the fieldwork procedures, we will be again addressing these philosophical principles.

TABLE 1.1
Comparison of Methods

	Scientific	*Textual Hermeneutic*	*Dialogical Hermeneutic*
Epistemology	objective	intersubjective/ subjective	intersubjective
Bias	controllable	tool (challenge)	tool (challenge and dialogue)
Power	with investigator	with investigator	with informants
Validation	replication	coherence	verification by informants

Exercises

1.1 Define the following words based on descriptions in this chapter: trust, challenge, reflexion, understanding, negotiations, reformulation, description, dialogue, and intersubjective truth.

1.2 Write a short essay based on your understanding of chapter 1: Can a person carry out a heremeutic study if the informants don't believe in intersubjective truth, but rather in one objective truth that they have figured out? Why or why not?

1.3 Draw the diagram for the dialogical hermeneutic method, explaining why the two arrows lead into description and one comes out. Tell why the two arrows lead into challenge and the two arrows come out.