

Reflections on Analysis in Qualitative Research: The Hermeneutic Circle in Ricoeur

Ida Kublikowski¹ 

Abstract: Faced with the challenges that qualitative research poses to psychology, our aim, from Paul Ricoeur's perspective, in addition to explaining what we do when we analyze, is to highlight the role of analysis in the interpretative process in qualitative research, with its potential to constitute a critical instance. This is a theoretical study whose relevance lies in recognizing the need for criticism which, as part of the process of interpretation, offers protection against arbitrary readings. In this process, the role of analysis stands out through which the researcher, from an ethical stance, approaches the constitution of subjectivity in midst of a polysemic otherness to avoid interpretations that can obliterate what is possible and perpetuate violence. Beyond the method, analysis puts distance at the heart of the experience of belonging and allows us, through critical reflection, to move on from the sedimentation of meanings offered by tradition.

Keywords: qualitative research, data analysis, hermeneutics

Reflexões sobre a Análise em Pesquisas Qualitativas: o Círculo Hermenêutico em Ricoeur

Resumo: Frente aos desafios que a pesquisa qualitativa coloca à psicologia, temos por objetivo, da perspectiva de Paul Ricoeur, além de explicitar o que fazemos ao analisar, destacar o papel da análise no processo interpretativo em pesquisas qualitativas, com seu potencial de constituir-se como uma instância crítica. Trata-se de um estudo teórico, cuja relevância reside em reconhecer a necessidade da crítica que, inserida no processo de interpretação, oferece uma proteção contra leituras arbitrárias. Nesse processo, destaca-se o papel da análise, pela qual o pesquisador, a partir de uma postura ética, aborda a constituição da subjetividade em meio a uma alteridade polissêmica, para evitar interpretações que podem obturar o possível e perpetuar a violência. Para além do método, a análise insere o distanciamento no coração da experiência de pertencimento e permite, por meio da reflexão crítica, movimentar a sedimentação de significados oferecidos pela tradição.

Palavras-chave: pesquisa qualitativa, análise de dados, hermenêutica

Reflexiones sobre el Análisis en la Investigación Cualitativa: el Círculo Hermenéutico en Ricoeur

Resumen: Frente a los desafíos que la investigación cualitativa plantea a la psicología, nuestro objetivo, desde la perspectiva de Paul Ricoeur, además de explicar lo que hacemos cuando analizamos, es resaltar el papel del análisis en el proceso interpretativo en la investigación cualitativa, con su potencial para constituirse como una instancia crítica. Se trata de un estudio teórico, cuya relevancia radica en reconocer la necesidad de la crítica que, como parte del proceso de interpretación, ofrece una protección contra las lecturas arbitrarias. En este proceso, se destaca el papel del análisis, a través del cual el investigador, desde una postura ética, se aproxima a la constitución de la subjetividad en medio de una alteridad polisémica, para evitar interpretaciones que puedan bloquear lo posible y perpetuar la violencia. Más allá del método, el análisis pone a distancia en el centro de la experiencia de pertenencia y nos permite, a través de la reflexión crítica, salir de la sedimentación de significados que ofrece la tradición.

Palabras clave: investigación cualitativa, análisis de datos, hermenéutica

The strategies presented here for carrying out qualitative information analysis (QIA) reflect a worldview that, by recognizing the complexity of reality, has ended up providing the researcher with a powerful set of metaphors to understand

the human being. Such an approach has implied profound changes in the traditional perspectives in psychology, which have shifted their focus from the uniformity of experience in a permanent world, to the recognition of a reality actively constructed by social actors, through their encounters with the world and negotiations of meanings with others. These conceptions, while on the one hand posing difficult questions for research in the human sciences, on the other hand open up possibilities for reflection on human subjectivity, which can

¹Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, São Paulo - SP, Brazil.

Correspondence address: Ida Kublikowski. Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo. Rua Ministro Godoi, 969, sala 4E-05. São Paulo - SP, Brazil. CEP 05015-901. e-mail: idakublikowski@puccsp.br

be approached using qualitative and hermeneutic methods. In this sense, the challenge facing the researcher lies in listening to and trying to understand the multiple voices that arise during the process of carrying out qualitative research, even the most timid ones, or those that, due to circumstances, are practically silenced, which requires self-scrutiny on the part of the researcher, who is himself immersed in such a context.

This manuscript is not intended to exhaust the subject, considering the number of methods proposed in the literature for analyzing qualitative information, but it does aim to highlight the role of QIA in the hermeneutic circle, as conceived by Ricoeur (1986). Writing this article arose from our observation not only of the doubts and difficulties faced by researchers at this point in their work, but also of the scarcity of literature that allows us to better understand, from an epistemological perspective, why we analyze. However, beyond the method, approaching the analysis called us to a critical reflection, which starts from procedures in the interpretative process and goes beyond them, in the sense of ethics.

To this end, an epistemic-methodological path is proposed, which encompasses theories and practices with a view to illuminating possible routes that the investigation can follow. To refer to possible paths is to consider them provisional, given the socio-historical nature of paradigms, or the set of assumptions on which the researcher's thinking is based in order to question and interpret reality (Velásquez et al., 2022).

From a systemic perspective, we consider reality to be constructed in a process that is individually coined and socially legitimized in the interpersonal spaces of the negotiations of meaning that we carry out in a given culture and historical moment. In this recursive movement, identities are produced in the dialogical relationships that are established between individual and sociocultural systems.

The question we face when conducting qualitative research is how to approach this process empirically. The answer, already established in psychology, led us to narrative theories, which generally consider the self as a storyteller who, by narrating their experience, organizes it into an identity and, through the meanings, allows self-understanding and openness to others. We then turn to Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology, whose thinking opens up a horizon of theoretical and methodological possibilities, possibilities that are exposed as we go through the literature.

We have seen applications of Ricoeur's hermeneutics in qualitative research methods, as well as in methodological discussions in different areas of knowledge. It is worth remembering that the term 'qualitative research', besides covering a wide variety of approaches and methods, implies different epistemological positions based on the realist, constructivist, and relativist paradigms (Coyle, 2021), and unfolds in countless models of analysis, which does not allow us to conceive of a methodological unit that can contemplate the field of psychology research in all its diversity (Lyons & Coyle, 2021).

This article therefore sets out to circumscribe its limits, starting from the task of approaching Ricoeur's hermeneutic circle, which is based on the methodological unity between

explanation and the hermeneutic understanding of meaning. The idea of the hermeneutic circle classically presupposes that interpretation is always guided by a prior understanding of what is to be interpreted (Gadamer, 1998). Based on this reading, in agreement with Grondin (2023, p. 17), Ricoeur conceives that the essential arc of hermeneutics is the dialectic between the hermeneutics of suspicion and trust, and states that this idea is innovative and foreign to the hermeneutics developed by Heidegger and Gadamer, before Ricoeur and independent of him. In this sense, we note the impossibility of speaking of hermeneutics in the singular, and we favor Ricoeurian hermeneutics, which casts suspicion on immediate interpretations, as well as promoting an openness to diverse points of view, which can be illustrated in his work *Interpretation and Ideologies* (1990), in reference to the debate between Gadamer and Habermas.

Bringing Ricoeur's hermeneutic circle closer to the analysis of information in qualitative research implies that conceptualizing interpretation as the result of the dialectic between understanding and explanation, in addition to ensuring greater scientific rigor, promotes the recognition of subjectivity, contributing to empirical psychology (Melo, 2016), as well as critical reflection and possibilities for emancipation and transformation, i.e., it involves ethics and politics. The issue of interpretation, as explained above, has been adopted by researchers in the field of phenomenological hermeneutics and has interfaces with the present study.

The research by Pimentel (2022) and Diniz and Pimentel (2022) propose, respectively, an itinerary for carrying out documentary studies and a flowchart that offer paths for the interpretative process, built on the dialectic between understanding and explanation. Pimentel (2022) illustrates her arguments by interpreting a poem by Cora Coralina. Diniz and Pimentel (2022) apply discourse analysis to interviews, with the caveat that it is not a literal method, given Ricoeur's emphasis on the interpretation of texts. The results highlight the contributions of this approach to opening up senses. The importance of distancing in clinical practices is also proposed by Silva (2020), who defends Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology as a path for psychotherapists who, faced with the immediacy of consciousness, expose themselves to the risk of fitting the client into their own convictions.

On the other hand, Albertini et al. (2022) discuss the applications of Ricoeur's thinking to qualitative research, highlighting in his work the dialectic between opposites, as a path that allows for a better understanding of subjectivity, as well as opening up space for cultural and political awareness. We consider dialectics, which unites two antagonistic but inseparable principles in the understanding of a reality, to be a typically Ricoeurian stance, which, as Dosse (2009) states, is a thought of conflict, which leads to a limit point, and without aspiring to a synthesis, shifts the terms of the dilemma in order to build possibilities of escape. In this sense, explaining and understanding, the universal and the singular, the same and the other, are conceived in the space 'between', which unfolds in multiple descriptions of a reality that is constituted in a complex way, in tangled hierarchies and without obvious priorities.

The reflection proposed here was conceived and developed in a long experience as a professor and researcher who lived through the paradigm shift in psychology and the challenges imposed on those entering the field of qualitative research. Better understanding the meaning of analysis was one of the many questions that emerged along the way. Ricoeur's philosophy presented itself to us as a solution which, centered on the text model (Diniz & Pimentel, 2022), has its limits if considered as a paradigm or statute for the human sciences as a whole (Lauxen, 2022), but which finds application here in its approach to QIA. On the other hand, a facet interviewed, but not explicit in the information sources consulted on the subject, has been addressed here and refers to how QIA, which offers a reflective space, can meet the demands of culturally sensitive practices, so dear to systemic approaches.

This is a theoretical investigation, which turned to bibliographical research as a resource for expanding knowledge about the meaning of QIA in qualitative research. The problem, which emerged from academic practice, was translated into the objectives proposed below. In order to achieve them, Paul Ricoeur's work was revisited, as well as those of his commentators, highlighting the relevant points for the argument developed. The articles cited were selected, partly in the period between 2019 and 2022, in order to update the references, by searching databases (SciELO, PePSIC, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar) using the keywords: Ricoeur, qualitative analysis, psychology, and Ricoeur, qualitative research, psychology, in Portuguese, English, and French.

Considering that the notion of distancing proposed by Ricoeur represents a transformation of philosophical hermeneutics, by promoting the emergence of a space for critical reflection at the heart of the experience of belonging, we build a path that, starting from the dialectic between explanation and understanding, moves towards the application of the theory of the text to human actions. The path to the realization of QIA is then explained, followed by the final considerations. From Paul Ricoeur's perspective, in addition to explaining what we do when we analyze, we aim to highlight the role of analysis in the interpretative process in qualitative research, with its potential to be a critical instance.

Explaining More is Understanding Better

Conceiving the meaning of human actions in their openness to new readings leads Ricoeur (1986) to the methodology of interpreting texts and to a discussion about its application to the human and social sciences, a relationship that is not accidental, as it represents part of his philosophical anthropology. Reflecting on different fields of knowledge meant for this author analyzing them from a critical and interdisciplinary philosophical perspective, around epistemological and methodological issues, with a view to valid scientific knowledge in understanding human subjectivity (Vendra, 2020).

His proposal for a hermeneutic variation of phenomenology aims to resolve the apparent divergence

between methodological explanation and participatory understanding. This divergence stems from romantic hermeneutics, which sees understanding as the method of the social sciences and explanation as the method par excellence of the natural sciences. Ricoeur (1995) transforms this dichotomy into a dialectic, which articulates these moments in a complex process he calls interpretation. Therefore, on an epistemological level, there are not two methods, explanatory and comprehensive, because only explanation is methodical.

Explanation and interpretation complement each other dialectically as an in-depth understanding, which offers the meaning of the work, constituted through the analysis of the text, the explanatory moment. The appropriation of this meaning by the reader updates it, making it different, which characterizes comprehension. Ricoeur (1995, p. 31, emphasis added) then states: "This is how I arrived at the formula 'explaining more in order to understand better', a formula that in a sense became the motto of hermeneutics, as I conceived of it and attempted to employ it."

The relationship established between interpretation and comprehension also involves the concept of appropriation, since interpretation associated with comprehension refers to the power of the text to open up possible worlds. Thus, it is not a question of remaking the text from our perspective, but of the text's ability to project a redescription of the world, which represents an expansion of the self that this appropriation promotes. What emerges here is the rapprochement between understanding the text and self-understanding, which takes on relevance in the work of psychologists as they seek, in their practices, to understand the other person's understanding of themselves through the meanings they attribute to their own experience, meanings that are constituted in networks in which researchers and participants are involved.

The hermeneutic experience is the experience of a world revealed in the linguistic exchanges of life. Ricoeur's (1996) proposal for an approach to subjectivity through the philosophy of language brings us back to the idea of a person who changes through their ability to designate themselves, by attributing meaning to the world. The agent who speaks tells their own story, which unfolds in the temporal dimension of human existence and constitutes it, making life a text analogous to action, interpreted in its meanings which, in addition to the self, involves the other, because the only possibility of understanding subjectivity is from a perspective anchored in intersubjectivity.

Narratives are seen as the space between experience and cultural ideals. If experience and expectation merge in this space, alterity is installed asymmetrically, constituting a limiting and blind hermeneutic circle. The possibility of breaking this circle through critical reflection constitutes an opening, which lies at the heart of the dialectic between explanation and understanding and represents the methodological moment of distancing (Ricoeur, 1990). By settling at the heart of the experience of belonging, it allows us to move meanings sedimented by tradition and explore new imaginative possibilities for subjectivities' ways of existing.

This moment represents the focus of this article, as it allows us to understand how analysis procedures are inserted

into qualitative research, in the sense of recognizing the strength of belonging, as well as the power dynamics that can transform the interpretative process into a receptacle for prescribed truths and reduce the other to passivity. From this perspective, the section here on qualitative analysis is artificial, for didactic purposes, and far from proposing a technique, it favors analysis as a segment of the hermeneutic circle.

The Challenge of the Empirical: Texts and Actions

In qualitative research, we could consider each narrative obtained in the collection of information as the emergence of a dynamic unit of meaning, which brings to language impressions that would otherwise remain opaque, as they are experienced as mute states. Articulated over time in a plot that interweaves other life stories, it expresses the experience of the protagonist who, in narrating his story, constructs his identity (Ricoeur, 1996).

This configuration, which transforms lived experience into a narrative, restructures a new way of being in the world, which opens up to understanding oneself and others. By outlining the self in action, the lived experience, mediated by language, emerges in meanings in the researcher/participant dialog. When transcribed, it becomes texts of actions, mute par excellence. If, in the dialog, understanding and explaining occur almost simultaneously, the text requires interpretation and becomes susceptible to hermeneutic treatment (Ricoeur, 1990).

By taking the long route in the process of interpretation, Ricoeur (1969) leads us to methodological procedures in the human and social sciences, in order to reflect on direct access to experience, the short route, as conceived by the analytic of Dasein. According to this author, the diversity of hermeneutics is constituted by an epistemological difference, which is expressed in the different techniques and rules of each perspective, as well as in the conceptions of the functions of interpretation. The long route, which goes through the analysis of language, would be the methodical way of practicing interpretation.

Interpretation is then conceptualized as “the work of thought that consists in deciphering the meaning hidden in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of signification implied in the literal signification” (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 14). In Ricoeur’s (1990) view, distancing is a necessary stage in the process of interpretation, even as a condition. The text has an autonomy, as it escapes the limited intentions of its author, the cultural situation, and the social conditions of its production.

In the encounter with a text, the reader’s subjectivity is suspended, as is the world they see. If distancing from oneself is the condition for understanding the text, appropriation dialectically complements this distancing and, in this sense, the text, which had a sense, i.e., internal relations, a structure, becomes meaningful through its realization in the reader’s own discourse. Appropriation thus

makes contemporary and similar what was at first strange (Ricoeur, 1986).

The activity of analysis emerges as a segment of the hermeneutic circle, in search of the text’s intention. Explaining and understanding become two different moments in a single hermeneutic arc. Analysis does not offer us the intention of the author of the text, but rather the thing the text is talking about. In turn, what is offered to understanding is not the initial situation of discourse, but a possible world. In this process, the mediating role played by analysis aims to provide us with a non-intuitive understanding of the underlying intention of the text, while at the same time inviting us to conceive of its sense as an injunction that starts from it and calls for a different way of seeing things, recourse against previously established realities (Ricoeur, 1986).

It is worth noting, especially with a focus on qualitative research in psychology, that in his work, *From Text to Action*, Ricoeur (1986) points out that the text model can be extended to social actions. By establishing an analogy between texts and actions, the philosopher states that in action, as in discourse, interaction is overtaken by its meanings, fixed through narrative in a social time. Detaching itself from its agents, action leaves inscribed traces, which become documents for human action. A meaningful action is one whose importance transcends its relevance in the initial situation, in meanings that can be updated in other situations, opening up a world before them.

Considering that in qualitative research we aim to understand the meaning of human actions from the perspective of our participants and, according to Ricoeur (1986), that doing can be considered a kind of enunciation, similar to that of written language, the meaning of the action can stand out from the event of the action in time and, because of its importance, leave its meaning inscribed in a social time.

The model of textual analysis taken as a paradigm of explanation could then be extended to all social phenomena, insofar as the semiotic or symbolic function, which consists of substituting signs for things, allows the author to state “not only that the symbolic function is social, but that social reality is fundamentally symbolic”. (Ricoeur, 1986, p. 210).

Therefore, if the text is fixed by writing and has autonomy, action can be detached from its agent by having a social dimension. Like a text, “human action is an open work whose meaning is suspended” and can be considered for possible interpretations, based on its translation into statements (Ricoeur, 1986, p. 198). The analogy between text and action allows us to approach qualitative research in psychology, in which significant actions that represent people’s lived world are narrated and can be approached using the hermeneutic method.

Having started from the dialectic between explanation and understanding, which inserts analysis into the interpretative process, and having established the relationship between text and action, we will now try to explain an analytical path that initially orders the information, breaks it down to identify patterns, recomposes the narrative and builds a scheme to

present what this information shows, relating it to the space of criticism in qualitative research.

The Methodical Phase of Qualitative Research

The strategies for carrying out QIA arise from the theoretical perspective used by the researcher, as well as the paradigm on which the study is based, but regardless of epistemological assumptions, its importance is fully recognized by authors who focus on the subject. Lester et al. (2020) highlight how the strength of qualitative research is related to the researcher's ability to conduct a rigorous analysis, and more specifically, to understand what it means to analyze. Rigorous analysis makes it possible to illuminate the complexity of human actions, inform interventions and give voice to lived experience. However, despite its importance and the progress observed in its use, we are still dealing with a nebulous process (Raskind et al., 2019). Minayo (2012), in an article on the subject, emphasizes the difficulty of granting priority to the analytical task, given that the reflective process in qualitative research implies a movement that simultaneously encompasses and surpasses the previous phase, which does not prevent the author from affirming the importance of in-depth and systematic analysis.

However, before focusing on the analysis, it is worth reflecting on the type of text we deal with in qualitative research, which differs greatly from literary texts. The texts that originate, for example, from interviews, deal with life narratives and are constructed in co-authorship with the researcher. They represent a specific interpersonal situation, which implies bodily presence and situational reference. Transcription that does without the signs present in the living situation results in hybrid products that fall between conversation and the formal style of written texts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

In this sense, the texts would be a means of interpretation, guided by the objectives of the investigation. Conceiving of the transcript as just a set of words or phrases can prevent the continuity of the conversation and the opening up of possible worlds. The alternative is to open up a dialog with the text in order to develop, clarify and expand its meanings in a more in-depth and critical way.

Thus, in qualitative research, researchers focus on meanings. The quality of such studies cannot be guaranteed simply by following appropriate procedures, since interpretations and meanings are situated. QIA is developed in such a way as to make explicit how participants understand their experiences, co-constructed with the researcher.

What is said tacitly involves the beliefs and values in force in a given social and cultural context, which must be made explicit in the process of analyzing and interpreting the information obtained during the research. Meaning is constituted as something involved in our actions; constantly changing, meanings are produced and reproduced in different nuances depending on the context.

The qualitative researcher engages with this uncertainty and enters the hermeneutic circle. The first stage consists of reading the material as a whole, which allows us to conjecture its more general meaning. Next, units of meaning are identified which stand out and give rise to groupings of sentences or paragraphs. An analysis strategy that starts from the sentence makes it possible to restrict the possible meanings, given the polysemy of words, which generates ambiguity. In the context of dialog, ambiguity can be negotiated, which is not possible when dealing with written material produced after interactions during research (Ricoeur, 1990).

The process is non-linear, and it is up to the qualitative researcher to understand the phenomenon in its nuances. The tactic for generating meaning consists of noticing regularities and grouping them together. It is then necessary to develop some sort of classification scheme, i.e., to differentiate elements and then regroup them, which implies identifying and naming patterns in the information. It is worth noting, however, that in addition to the regularities, the qualitative researcher must pay attention to the differences between the participants, insofar as personal experiences are not presented to us in black and white, but in nuances that end up being expressed in the interpretation process.

In the next stage, there is an integration of categories around a category that represents a higher level of abstraction and brings out broader categories of meaning. Categorizing is then a process that is constituted from the whole to the parts and from the parts to the reorganized whole, which produces a new understanding and allows the researcher to "hear" new interpretations present in the information.

In this process, it should be remembered that the text has a relief and is open to a plurality of interpretations. The reconstruction of its architecture takes on a circular form, since a certain kind of whole is implied in the recognition of the parts; at the same time, by constructing the details, we reconstruct the whole. The attribution of different degrees of importance to certain aspects is made by conjecture. As a singular totality, the text can be approached from several sides, but not all of them simultaneously. So, when we reconstruct it, we always do so from one perspective (Ricoeur, 1990). The author then moves on to validate interpretations, considered an argumentative discipline that deals with the logic of uncertainty and qualitative probability. "It allows us to give an acceptable meaning to the notion of human sciences. The method of the convergence of indications, typical of the logic of subjective probability, gives a firm basis to a science of the individual" (Ricoeur, 1986, p. 202).

Therefore, validating does not mean verifying (Lacour, 2017), since conjecturing and validating are presented as a dialectic between objectivity and subjectivity, circularly articulated in the hermeneutic arc. Far from assuming that this is a vicious circle, Ricoeur (1986, p. 206) reminds us that if there is more than one way of constructing a text, not all interpretations are the same, since it is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, confront interpretations and decide between them. What's more, the author affirms the

impossibility of a place for the last word, because “if there is one, we call it violence”.

Following this reasoning, the type of explanation offered by the analysis is different from the classic model of causality, conceived as a succession of antecedents and consequents, which remain constant. It is not an inductive inference, but a judgment that evaluates counterarguments in defense of conclusions. In other words, scattered factors are thought through and regrouped with a focus on the final conclusions, which takes on the meaning of a singular causality by making it possible to explain a single event (Lacour, 2017).

Therefore, in general, qualitative analysis involves different phases with different purposes. It results in the transformation of information, which is condensed in search of regularities that allow concepts and theories to be revised or constructed, in a movement that begins at the descriptive level and reaches the comprehensive level. In this path, it is important to emphasize the importance of a rich and detailed description of the phenomenon, which allows the reader to understand it. The description, which is carried out by transcribing the information, therefore forms the basis of any qualitative research and must be presented independently of the interpretation.

This forms the hermeneutic circle, which moves from existential understanding to explanation, and from explanation to existential understanding. From a subjective approach, this arc constructs the world behind the text, through the prior understanding with which we encounter it. Analyzing the text with a focus on the interconnection of its parts prevents the full expression of the reader’s subjectivity, which the further you go into the meaning, the more it is prevented from expressing itself. The propositions end up pointing to a limit situation, and interpretation reveals the meaning of the text no longer as a situation, but as a kind of world opened up by its non-ostensive references (Ricoeur, 1990).

In this sense, analysis offers protection against arbitrary readings and represents a prophylactic against traditions that lead to the suppression of the text’s otherness. Assuming, according to hermeneutic phenomenology, that it is impossible to speak outside a particular tradition, how can we escape the prejudices that are triggered by such competence? (Westfal, 2011)

The answer is distancing, a space for attribution and the constitution of identities and, at the same time, potentially oppressive, due to its encounter with particular ideologies that permeate all knowledge about reality. Thus, the ideology that offers an interpretation of reality can become a “sealing of the possible” in the generation of authoritarian readings (Ricoeur, 1990 p. 71). Utopia, on the other hand, projects the imagination to another place and, in a complementary way to ideology, questions reality and allows us, through imagination, to think about the social being in a different way. But utopia, beyond its liberating function, generates power, and at this point “it announces future tyrannies that run the risk of being worse than those it wishes to overthrow” (Ricoeur, 1986, p. 383). Thus, the reverse of ideologies and utopias can produce crystallized discourses and prevent

expectations of the future from reopening past potentialities and moving tradition forward.

If we translate this question into terms of analysis in qualitative research, we reaffirm the contributions of the literature on the subject: its importance for research in psychology and for understanding subjectivity (Melo, 2016), the need for an explanatory moment in the interpretative process carried out through a systematic and rigorous procedure (Minayo, 2012), clarity regarding the epistemological assumptions that the researcher uses to give voice to lived experiences, shed light on human actions and inform interventions (Lester et al., 2020). However, we agree with Morrisette and Malo (2018) on one aspect that remains silent in this process, as it is an issue that can challenge the usual production and dissemination of knowledge, based on the researcher’s canons of objectivity and neutrality.

Referring to ‘giving voice’ brings us to interpretation. As researchers, we give meaning to these other voices, which leads us to consider that interpretation, which has analysis at its core, emerges as the basis of qualitative research and is presented as the systematic construction and appropriation of theoretical assumptions by the researcher, which, articulated with the reading of the empirical, aim to support the exploration of lived experience. This concept of interpretation, open to otherness, pushes the boundaries of epistemology, which can only carry out its work at the invitation of ethics, transforming qualitative research into a practice that cultivates respect in dialogue (Lavoie & Bourgeois-Guérin, 2021; Thiboutot, 2021).

The method, which is developed in order to encourage the expression of what the participants experience and to transform this experience into knowledge, becomes inseparable from the worldviews and beliefs of the professional, who is challenged to preserve their ideologies and allow each of the actors to participate in the construction of knowledge with their own ideologies. This collaborative work is encouraged in qualitative research, particularly in the production of analyses. Reinserting the concrete work of analysis into social practices, conceiving it as a collective action, negotiated between the people involved in producing meaning from the materials studied, is important not only in the choices regarding the direction taken by the research, but also in creating what is presented as its results. If this condition is not met, the other person’s discourse, however surprising or inconvenient it may be, can be imprinted with alien worldviews, leading us to consider that interpretation without ethics becomes alienating (Morrisette & Malo, 2018).

Concluding Remarks

This reflection explored the hermeneutic circle as conceived by Paul Ricoeur and brought it closer to analysis in qualitative research, in order to better understand its role in the interpretative process. Far from meaning a reification of theories, it highlighted the importance of making explicit the researcher’s conception of the treatment given to the empirical material, which, in conjunction with their theoretical and interpretative positions, has an impact on methodological

designs. As previously pointed out, we have dealt with a facet that is little exposed in the literature, and it would be better to investigate the factors involved in this game of light/dark, when we observe that in psychology productions the authors exercise reflexivity, which becomes more diffuse when it comes to justifying the forms of analysis used.

However, it is worth pointing out that the position adopted here has its limits. Recognizing the influence of systemic ideas and the paradigm that supports them shows that the path presented is not applicable to all realities and phenomena to be explored. On the other hand, adopting a notion of interpretation that involves reflexivity generates research that supports the subjectivity of the researcher, which excludes the possibility of adopting a totally neutral and objective stance. This reveals a sensitive issue in the field of psychology research, which opposes evidence-based psychology to positions supported by the new paradigm of science and finds a middle ground in those that defend the possibility of accommodating relativist and objectivist perspectives in the same investigation, an issue that deserves our attention.

In order to meet the proposed objectives, we have entered the hermeneutic circle through analysis, which, by promoting distance, preserves the otherness of the voice of the texts and discourses we are dealing with. We need to make a parenthesis here to expose another issue that we cannot avoid, which involves the digitization of qualitative analysis, which is widely disseminated and used, and which generates vehement debate. This debate is divided between those who defend the use of CAQDAS (Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software) and their opponents, based on epistemological and methodological arguments, and which deserves further investigation. Understanding the use of technologies in the context of research as outlined here, even in the face of Ricoeur's (1969, p. 97) assertion that: "the units we reveal through analysis mean nothing; they say nothing; they merely join and separate", is a point that gives food for thought.

Returning to the hermeneutic circle, the distancing promoted by analysis corresponds to the appropriation of meaning, which implies the appropriation of the world of the text by the reader and the expansion of the self. Conducting qualitative research inescapably includes the belonging of the researcher, who transforms information into meaning. Co-constructed in a dialog with the participants, they answer specific questions about the lived experience. However, the attribution of meanings by the researcher to the experience of others, without a mediating critical body, could legitimize the inclusion of pre-judgments in the field of scientific investigation. Ricoeur (1986, p. 211, emphasis added) states that the solution is not to deny the researcher's personal commitment, but to make it more precise. If understanding is mediated by explanatory procedures, then understanding is not something "that can be felt, it is the dynamic significance highlighted by the explanation".

Since it is not possible to exclude the researcher's personal commitment to interpretation, and since we accept that the hermeneutic circle remains a necessary condition

for producing knowledge about the human, the researcher's personal commitment would lie in respecting the stranger, the different, and not allowing interpretation to prevent what is possible and/or perpetuate violence.

Continuing along the hermeneutic circle brings us to the key point of this article. Researchers who are aware of their competence can recognize the role of ideology in the way they perceive and construct themselves, as well as in the way they perceive and construct the meanings that others offer them. If reflexivity is absent, the conceptions that are formed in these encounters with otherness become crystallized or distorted, with unpredictable consequences in the lived world. Therefore, the use of distancing represents a space of relative autonomy, as a critical moment that allows us to look for alternatives to revisit tradition and open up possible worlds (Ricoeur, 1990).

Interpretation then leads to the emergence of a narrative that begins with what is said, renews conversations and, through the idea of communication without coercion, validates conjectural constructions through argumentation, which makes it possible to delineate, at various points on the continuum between sedimentation and innovation, the constitution of spaces of autonomy that renew memory and maintain hope for the future through the idea of non-violence (Ricoeur, 1986).

Qualitative analysis strategies, considered as a moment in the interpretative process, are a privileged locus for this opening up of possibilities and are closely linked to epistemological and methodological issues, as well as ethics and politics. Qualitative research is produced through a relational construction of meanings, which requires recourse to language and conventions, as well as an openness to otherness. It invites the researcher to adopt a position of reciprocity in relation to the participants, in which recognition plays an important role. In this sense, the practice of interpretation calls on the researcher to allow themselves to be transformed by these encounters, which in an exercise of reciprocity transform both of them. Through the testimony of others, the researcher learns and gives back, through interpretation, other possibilities of understanding, which, appropriated by people, can generate changes.

An intersubjective relationship organized from the self towards the other only becomes productive when it transforms the other from a stranger into a fellow human being. But this process of constituting meaning, devoid of an ethical direction, implies attributing responsibility to another, whose response can be passivity. On the other hand, social institutions function as normative sources that challenge people and offer, a priori, the meaning of action. Since life is mediated by the symbolic, it is up to interpretation to offer the space to re-signify the dissymmetries in interpersonal relationships and the deformations that can be generated by ideology.

In this sense, anchoring the justification for QIA in Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenological project allows the researcher to articulate what is passively received as experience and the active creation of meaning. This process, which begins with analysis at the methodological level, moves on to the ontological level and gives rise to a third level, a

creative center, which allows what has been received to be extrapolated into other possibilities of belonging. Conceiving the analysis of information in qualitative research as a segment of the hermeneutic circle, which preserves the space for critical reflection, thus makes it possible to transform vicious circles, which bind life, into creative spirals.

References

- Albertini, R. Z., Pinto, W. C. F., & Costa, M. L. (2022). Contribuições da abordagem ricoeuriana para a pesquisa qualitativa em psicologia [Contributions of the Ricoeurian approach to qualitative research in Psychology]. *Revista Ideação, 1*(46), 43-61. <https://doi.org/10.13102/ideac.v1i46.7865>
- Coyle, A. (2021). Introduction to qualitative psychological research. In E. Lyons, & A. Coyle (Eds.), *Analysing qualitative data in psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 11-52). Sage.
- Diniz, C. P. S., & Pimentel, A. D. S. G. (2022). Uma proposta metodológica para análise do discurso baseada na hermenêutica de Paul Ricoeur [A methodological proposal for discourse analysis based on the hermeneutic of Paul Ricoeur]. *Revista Psicologia em Pesquisa, 16*(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.34019/1982-1247.2022.v16.29928>
- Dosse, F. (2009). *O desafio biográfico: Escrever uma vida* [The biographical challenge: Writing a life]. Edusp.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1998). *Verdade e método* [Truth and method] (F. P. Meurer, & E. P. Giachini, Trad.). Vozes. (Original work published 1960).
- Grondin, J. (2023). Les tournants herméneutiques de Paul Ricoeur [Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical turning points]. *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies, 14*(1), 9-24. <https://doi.org/10.5195/errs.2023.630>
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Lacour, P. (2017). Pourquoi cela est-il arrivé? L'explication causale de l'événement chez Paul Ricoeur [Why did that happen? On Paul Ricoeur's causal explanation of the event]. *Methodos, 17*. <http://journals.openedition.org/methodos/4810>
- Lauxen, R. (2022). Sobre os limites da epistemologia hermenêutica de Paul Ricoeur [On the limits of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic epistemology]. *Revista Ideação, 1*(46), 16-42. <https://doi.org/10.13102/ideac.v1i46.8351>
- Lavoie, D., & Bourgeois-Guérin, V. (2021). Parcours réflexif: Élaboration d'une méthode d'analyse existentielle en approche inductive [Reflexive course: Development of an existential analysis method using an inductive approach]. *Recherches Qualitatives, 40*(1), 105-127. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076349ar>
- Lester, J. N., Cho, Y., & Lochmiller, C. R. (2020). Learning to do qualitative data analysis: A starting point. *Human Resource Development Review, 19*(1), 94-106. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1534484320903890>
- Lyons, E., & Coyle, A. (2021). Preface to section III. In A. Coyle, & E. Lyons (Eds.), *Analysing qualitative data in psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 125-127). Sage.
- Melo, M. L. A. (2016). Contributions of the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur to the phenomenological research in psychology. *Psicologia USP, 27*(2), 315-325. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0103-656420140071>
- Minayo, M. C. S. (2012). Qualitative analysis: Theory, steps and reliability. *Ciência & Saúde Coletiva, 17*(3), 621-626. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1413-81232012000300007>
- Morrisette, J., & Malo, A. (2018). La fabrique interactive des analyses qualitatives [The interactive factory of qualitative research]. *Recherches Qualitatives, 37*(2), 10-16. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1052105ar>
- Pimentel, A. S. G. (2022). Itinerário hermenêutico de análise de textos na pesquisa qualitativa em psicologia [Hermeneutic itinerary of text analysis in qualitative research in psychology]. *Revista de Filosofia Moderna e Contemporânea, 10*(1), 487-504. <https://periodicos.unb.br/index.php/fmc/article/view/43508>
- Raskind, I. G., Shelton, R. C., Comeau, D. L., Cooper, H. L. F., Griffith, D. M., & Kegler, M. C. (2019). A review of qualitative data analysis practices in health education and health behavior research. *Health, Education & Behavior, 46*(1), 32-39. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1090198118795019>
- Ricoeur, P. (1969). *O conflito das interpretações. Ensaios de hermenêutica* [The conflict of interpretations: Essays in hermeneutics] (M. F. Sá Correia, Trad.). Rés.
- Ricoeur, P. (1986). *Do texto à ação. Ensaios de Hermenêutica II* [From text to action: Essays in hermeneutics II] (A. Cartaxo, & M. J. Sarabando, Trad.). Rés.
- Ricoeur, P. (1990). *Interpretação e ideologias* [Interpretation and ideologies] (H. Japiassu, Trad., 4a ed.). Francisco Alves. (Obra original publicada em 1973).
- Ricoeur, P. (1995). Intellectual autobiography. In L. E. Hahn (Ed.), *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (K. Blamey, Trad., pp. 3-53). Open Court.

- Ricoeur, P. (1996). *Si mismo como otro* [Oneself as another] (A. N. Calvo, & M. C. A. Tolivar, Trans.). Siglo Veintiuno de España. (Original work published 1990).
- Silva, J. (2020). A mediação fenomenológica-hermenêutica em Paul Ricoeur: Uma proposta ao psicoterapeuta frente o imediatismo da consciência [The phenomenological-hermeneutics mediation in Paul Ricoeur: A proposal to the psychotherapist in face of the immediacy of conscience]. *Estudos e Pesquisas em Psicologia*, 20(4), 1212-1231. <https://doi.org/10.12957/epp.2020.56658>
- Thiboutot, C. (2021). Interpréter [To interpret]. *Recherches Qualitatives*, 35(2), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084377ar>
- Velásquez, L., Perdomo, E., León, Z., & Barroeta, V. (2022). Modelo epistémico-metodológico para interpretar textos filosóficos desde la perspectiva de Paul Ricoeur [Epistemic-methodological model to interpret philosophical texts from Paul Ricoeur's perspective]. *Revista Revoluciones*, 4(9), 7-21. <https://doi.org/10.35622/j.rr.2022.09.001>
- Vendra, M. C. C. (2020). Paul Ricoeur and Clifford Geertz: The harmonic dialogue between philosophical hermeneutics and cultural anthropology. *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, 11(1), 49-64. <https://doi.org/10.5195/errs.2020.488>
- Westphal, M. (2011). The dialectic of belonging and distancing in Gadamer and Ricoeur. In F.J. Mootz III & G.H. Taylor (Ed). *Gadamer and Ricoeur: critical horizons for contemporary hermeneutics* (pp. 43-62). New York, NY: Continuum

Ida Kublikowski is a Ph.D Professor of the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, São Paulo-SP, Brazil.

Author Contribution:

The author is responsible for the conception and design of this study, as well as for the analysis and interpretation of data and for reviewing the manuscript and approving the final version. The author assumes public responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

Associate editor:

Sônia Maria Guedes Gondim

Received: Sep. 14, 2022

1st Revision: Jun. 09, 2023

2nd Revision: Jul. 21, 2023

Approved: Aug. 01, 2023

How to cite this article:

Kublikowski, I. (2023). Reflections on analysis in qualitative research: The hermeneutic circle in Ricoeur. *Paidéia (Ribeirão Preto)*, 33, e3319. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-4327e3319>