

# EMBRACING PREJUDICES IN CULTURAL FIELDWORK: A GADAMERIAN APPROACH

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## Abstract

A prejudice free form of gazing toward research data is often quoted to be the hallmark of a good reliable and valid cultural research work. Such view is catholically accepted by many in research circles, and it has turned the notion into a kind of myth. As part of the need to de-mystify such idea, this article suggests the important of embracing cultural research data with prejudices (and biases) in a qualitative fieldwork. This work is largely informed by Gadamer's. As an illustration, experiences in a case engagement in Afro-Asia organization in United Kingdom are narrated.

**Key Words:** qualitative field work research, understanding, prejudices, Gadamer

## Introduction

A research is and as an engagement. In this view the research and the researched are seen as part of the whole process of doing research. Here a research is not just a question of methodology but part of a wider human process through which researchers make 'possible knowledges'. In this view, basic assumptions or frameworks engaged by the researcher, guide, prefigure and shape what is 'seen' in a research. In this mode of understanding, the research emphasizes the important of knowing the assumptions and practices that link the researcher to the phenomenon being investigated. These 'inside, partial and taking sides stand point' knowledges, arising out by a certain framing of meaning-making made by both the known and the knower, are indeed situated knowledge, said Hammersley (2000: 6).

A research as/is an engagement perspective acknowledged that it is a work carried out by flesh and blood figures; researcher and the researched. To some researchers, especially among the die-hard positivists, the above standing is an insult to the integrity of a research whereby objectivity, non-partisan and 'pure assumptions', like value-free or emotionless, must be rigorously maintained like chemists doing laboratory works, for its validity and reliability. The debate about 'methodological purism' is a very dynamic one, but this is not the purpose of this article to be in that circumstances. The intention of this article is to celebrate the implied 'impurities'; not to quest methodologically for 'secure' knowledge. Indeed it is not our aim to ridicule positivists in making possible knowledges of a life-world. In this regard, impurities such as prejudices and biases are gazed upon with passionate attachment for the sake of 'understanding the truth of the localized knowledge' produced from an engaged research activity. To this point, views from Gadamer are incorporated; a choice made in the wake of hermeneutical turn in social sciences.

## Gadamer and Prejudices

Hans-Georg Gadamer was a philosopher who wrote the Truth and Method (TM). In the book he iterated that two important leitmotifs govern our understanding, language and history. Language in his view allows human to dwell in the house of being, and it is the medium of human experiences. In this context, language sets up the world, articulates and makes things show up for us. In the above setting, language creates possibilities for a particular ways of feelings and sensible relatedness to emerge. As language becomes a kind of *energia* for living, the 'language speaks' for an understanding to be be

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made. An understanding in the above sensibilities is always a historical act. This aspect of historicity is a product of situatedness, times and places, of the engaged known and the knower ( $x$  and  $y$ ). Gadamer pointed that in the said engagement,  $x$  and  $y$  moves in motion with the historical situatedness of human life. It is a moment of fluidity of fusion of both  $x$  and  $y$  in search for understanding. It is a dialogue of both worlds, and it is the state of incompleteness of two life-worlds of  $x$  and  $y$ . *Erlebnis* (immediate lived experience) is the main factor for this deficiency, and this is a prejudicial form of life. Gadamer rendered that a person who is called experienced is open to new experiences (*offenheit fuer erfahrung*).

In a modern Enlightenment discourse, the term prejudice has a distinctively pejorative connotation. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer suggested that prejudices were just 'pre-understanding', not as an unfounded judgment. It is our first understanding before all elements that determine a situation have been fully examined. Gadamer refers prejudices as *vorurteil*. The *vorurteil* provides anticipation for a new meaning. Here, what is new is seen in the light of the known past of familiarity. Gadamer mentioned that to be aware of one's own *vorurteil* is part of newness creation whereby one is able to assert the truth against one's own fore-meanings. In this perspective, understanding requires the engagement of one's own biases. Furthermore, in *vorurteil* we dance with and in the *erlibnes*. Simply, newness in understanding could not be gained without the admission of our own fore-meanings and prejudices. In the process of creating 'contemporary' newness, they are not divorcing themselves from their heritage origins.

$X$  and  $Y$  are authors of *bildung* (openness to meaning). Weinsheimer (1985:70) posited that in *bildung*, 'one leaves the too all familiar and learns to allow for what different from oneself, and that means not only to tolerate it but to live in it.' Indeed through *bildung* one is keeping one's self open for more points of view by which one is suspended from one's immediate desires and purposes. Here,  $X$  and  $Y$  are in the process of conversing with each other where knowledge is not a fixed thing waiting to be discovered, but arises out of interaction. In that conversation,  $x$  and  $y$  find themselves in a realm of certain 'whereness' whereby self-awareness about own prejudicial knowledges of a particular vantage point is being realized. Sensibly,  $x$  and  $y$  try to understand a horizon that is not their own in relation to their own. Thus they must learn to look beyond what are close at hand for a better and larger whole. For Gadamer (1985) such attitude is important as  $x$  and  $y$  are just 'apprentices that need to learn in relationship to others. Surely, the nature of our 'conditioned and conditional thrownness' play a key role in that trying moments. Upshur (1999:322-323) elaborates,

The conditioned nature of our knowledge relates to our thrownness. We are born into cultures, practices, and beliefs that are not of our own creation. The conditional nature of our knowledge relates to its historicity: we are contingent, finite creatures born to inherit a relationship to cultures and traditions which is [not] of our own creation.

Basically in embracing Gadamerian prejudices for a qualitative engagement, a researcher must accept and adopt Gadamerian philosophical assumptions:

- a) There is no pre-suppositionless knowledges; the known and the knower are recognized to have their own conception and prejudices about the life-world under study. The fusion of both  $x$  and  $y$  worlds makes understanding possible.
- b) In order to understand the researched life-world, the researcher must understand based upon the researched own light. Meanings in this regard are constantly shaped and re-shaped by both the known and the knower.
- c) Situatedness especially the historicity of various events and moments is at the centre of the understanding process.
- d) In understanding, a circular movement from the part to the whole and back again from the whole to its parts tied the known and the knower, the researcher and the researched, in a research engagement.

The above assumptions indeed are not far from the idea about the important of immersing oneself in the life-world under study for understanding knowledges produced, as voiced by Kincheloe and McLaren (1998).

### A Case Engagement

Recently we were doing an ethnographic work concerning organization development in Afro-Asian organization. In line with the psychological contract made, the organization is to be known as the Rainbow. It is a community based organization situated in the northern part of United Kingdom. In this engagement, the Rainbow is being given the status as 'the field'.

In this 'restoration of meaning exercise' of fieldwork, we were clearly aware about our two main *vorurteils*; pragmatic semiotics about knowledge and psychological encounters in the 'restoration' of meaning. All of them were arising out my academic *erlibnis*. In the view of semiotics, knowledge is the result of a continuous interaction of signs processes whereby signs are seen to communicate meanings. In my *vorurteil*, the content of the knowledge is tied to social and contextual discourses of the signs. In this regard, knowledge is created within contexts. Semiotically, when a 'firstness' sign (*S1*) is interpreted, a new 'secondness' sign (*S2*) with aspects of the firstness sign (*S1*) are said to be 'contextually arriving'. In the dynamic movement from *S1* to *S2*, whims and preferences cannot be tolerated as semiotics is not about anything goes, but based on rules of the knowledge domain. Otherwise, it means that the interpreter is prejudicial to his/her own prejudices. The stability or the fixated state of meaning of *S2* could be temporarily achieved through a 'struggle' in a semiosis process; a single knowledge exists in affinity with other knowledge, and often it grows upon meeting with other intelligible signs. In other words, *S1* and *S2* are in the state of competition striving for 'completeness' of *S2*, and we were basically experiencing a fusion of horizons. Thus as the horizon of the present is being formed, the prejudices are being tested against the past such as the tradition, a place from which they come. Thellefsen and Thellefsen (2004:183) explain,

A sign upon being communicatively approached in its 'firstness' provides a perspective of having potentialities and possibilities of understanding about a certain aspect of knowledge, while in its 'secondness', a person interprets the sign to mean something.

As communicating with signs begins with visual acuity, we could not dismiss the likeliness of 'subversives' sticking to us like a wet leaf, to paraphrase Handy's (1994). Such predicament is akin to Jungian shadows, the other side of the conscious ego. Mortensen (1997:48) observes,

[By being] interactants, we are not always in a position to see things clearly or distinctly. Deficiencies in visual acuity may diminish the vibrancy and luminosity of the world around us. Distractions make us prone to ignore salient aspects of other's lives, as if they did not exist, and they also make us prone to self-absorption and even selfishness. Without visual acuity, we miss the rich detail. [Even] small loses of acuity can camouflage subtleties [of others]. This can happen if the light strikes the periphery of our visual field rather the centre.

Psychologically, we were emotional being. As such emotions like embarrassment, shame, guilt, social anxiety, anger, fear and happiness never left us alone while interacting with people at the Rainbow. As such we communicate with our own emotions and respond to the emotional displays of others. In that state of situatedness, we knew that appropriateness was expected to be displayed. Moreover, the availability of the repressed contents of the unconscious in the deepest of the mind, perhaps in term of phantasy, is acknowledged.

In the Rainbow 'field' we were 'outsiders'. We were Malaysian. As the field was rich with trees (of signs), we were scared for not being able to see the forest. Our research engagement began with self to find others. Specifically, we began with 'organization-of-the-mind'. We perceived that activities and relations are organized, structured and connected in our cognitive mind. In turn they give rise to and enacted images, emotions, values and responses in us. Organization-in-the-mind is basically about what happened in our head/mind; our reality may or may not be the reality of the field. In that situatedness, we chose to help ourselves by taking images of organization as written by Gareth Morgan (1986) seriously. In the field many of our prejudices were confronted in the horizon of understanding. As an illustration, we chose only several prejudices in relation to two main informants. The following paragraphs were entirely based on our 'in there' field notes, that is following the footsteps of Clifford Geertz (1973).

The Chief Executive Officer at the Rainbow was a man with Indian ancestry. The Chief was a man with scruffy hair. However he looked smart with his 'official attire', a white suit with a yellow tie.

His working table was messy with so many papers. There was a calendar on the wall. It had so many writings on the margin. We picked the calendar as our semiotic sign (*S2*). It was a work of 'reading' and tying parts to the whole big picture of the room. Our prejudicial thoughts brought us back to our small hometown in Malaysia. Specifically, the *vorurteil* rests on our *erlibness* about Indian barber shop (*S1*). It was our conditioned nature of knowledge relates to our 'thrownness'. During 1960's, Indians in my town like to write important notes on calendars. They were 'messy' men. Upon realizing our prejudicial penetration in the first encounter with the Chief, we stabilized our meaning that arising out of the calendar by taking Nielsen's (1984:143) suggestions seriously: One's has to train oneself to like one's [informant] from the beginning, to own up to one's own prejudices and preferences and search out ways to deal with them. At the end of our 'conversations-as-data' session, the Chief recommended us to see Mr. Caribbean. He assured us that he will personally tell Mr. Caribbean about it.

At home, we gazed at our field notes, and reflexively look at our prejudices. We knew that in every human being there existed a multitude of persons and voices, and they were considered to be the many eyes that see through ours. Gadamer used to say that we humans are saturated with the stated and unstated attitudes of their time whose temporal imperatives they cannot evade. Prejudices in this light informing our perspective and help us to become conscious of the biases. Which persons or voices were we during the meeting with the Chief? At that particular moment another *erlibnis* provided by Harris (1993) about Afro-Asian bothered us emotionally: Asians (including Indian) are like a silk brocade tapestry where stylized motifs stand in a tightly woven fabric. Thus if one strand of tapestry moves, the whole fabric moves. Harris also mentioned that African culture is like a woven basket where design takes advantage of its materials for function and beauty simultaneously. Here, little gets in once they were woven. But the weaving is very fragile and can be easily disrupted and destroyed. That night we concluded that a certain mastery of appropriating, at least along the rail mentioned by Hofstede (1980) must be attained in this fieldwork. To Hofstede, cultural differentiation could be seen along four continuums: individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculine-feminine. Boyacigiller and Adler (1991) works were the last important *erlibnis* of the night. Both authors noted that Westerners have developed 'fictional' theories without being sufficiently aware of non-Western contexts, models, research and values. We reflected that we were not going to reject Western 'fictions' about Others but to remain in the state of suspended judgment until a knowledge with 'newness' appeared on the horizon.

On the day we met Mr. Caribbean, we decided to be a 'fool' in the light of 'ethnographic imagination', not to say that we were indeed being influenced by Schein's (1987:22). A fool in this view must know what is happening, push less, open out and be aware, see without staring, listen quietly rather than to listen hard, use intuition rather than trying to figure things out. With the above foolish behaviours, we hope that we can be more open, receptive and easily known what is in the field. A point to note, being an ethnographic fool did not meant that were losing our 'hermeneutically trained mind'. Gadamer refers the said of mind as attunement to or disposition for thematizing prejudices that position us to believe that we already understand and know the right answer.

Mr.Caribbean was a muscular West Indian man. He was the right and man to the Chief. While waiting for him to turn up, we conducted 'tea room observations', that is looking for a 'problematic' artifact could be turned into a matter of interest. We saw a soiled cup on the table (*S2*). It was a recognition not acknowledging something that is familiar. In recognition, what we know is illuminated, said Johnson (2000:22). The green cup was not 'moving' since we entered the field. We do not know why we were so interested in cups. Perhaps it was related to our previous experiences with the Chinese teacher who taught us 'How to study'. In the class he visualized learning or taking new knowledge as work of filling water into the cup (*S1*). The teacher said if we pour water to the brim of the cup, we could not put more water inside. We believe in our unconscious mind, a cup is always related to a learning process. With that *erlibnis* couched in hermeneutic of suspicion, we viewed the cup as a sign to be semiotically explored. As man's reality is likely to be seen through a fog of symbols, the cup was elevated to be the gateway to the symbolic fields. The green cup provoked our prejudices, and it generates a dialectical movement of negation. Why the green cup was left for ages in the lounge? Prejudicially, we believed that people that lack of hermeneutical awareness would leave the cup alone. Then, we hope the green cup would gain its prominent in our engagement as the green bottle did for Linstead's (1986).

An instruction paper of how to behave well in the organization was pinned on the notice board in Mr. Caribbean's room. His signature on the paper was slanted upward. If Singer (1986), the graphologist, is right, Mr. Caribbean is a man with high ambition for power or control. Big photographs of Nelson Mandela, Malcom X and Martin Luther King on the wall make the room looked smaller. We believed that those visuals were 'hidden keys' of the field. With the prejudice of making those photographs as our text, we shoot our 'arrow of meaning' toward them. We started our conversation with "I have a dream" narrative made famous by Martin Luther King. It was a game of truth, said O'Neill (2007). It was a *speil* or play, one of the defining concepts of Gadamer's hermeneutics. *Speil* in our context was the 'to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that brings it to an end'. In that moment our own traditions were at risk as they were brought to a seeing/hearing distances. It was a work of exposition. Personally we like the play as it unites event and understanding. In Gadamerian term, the *speil* was an adventure. Gadamer (1985:73) writes the following in his *Philosophical Apprentices*: But what an adventure it was to be always applying oneself to new themes and new objects.

Our arrow hit the bull-eye and our *speil* works. Openness toward the Mr. Caribbean was part of the *speil* and it was he that completed the *speil*. Without him, the meaningfulness of the play was discounted. "They are all my heroes. I like Che Guevara too", said Mr. Caribbean. In his excitement of praising all the above iconic figures, Mr. Caribbean 'spewed' many secrets especially about the Chief. The photographs encouraged Mr. Caribbean a possibility of openness. According to him the Chief failed to uplift the Rainbow. We smelled rotten relationship between both men. Mr. Caribbean mentioned that the Chief was a 'messy' man like his Jimmy Hendrix's hair. "Without the wall calendar he is a lost man. On many occasions he failed to attend meetings with the City Council as he could not find notes on the calendar. We need funds from the Council to run the Rainbow. It is pointless to blame our predicament as the White agenda. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He should use the modern technology. But, alas he is scared of computers. He used to be an insurance agent. We are not selling insurances. We are here to give [the minorities] new initiatives for better future in New Britain. He must clean up himself. Ha ha ha he must clean the green cup too. The green cup was Chief's. Ha ha ha [Mr. Caribbean gave a big roaring laugh]".

### Conclusion

We excavated meanings at the Rainbow, among others, by having prejudices toward the calendar, the cup and the iconic images on the wall. Those signs were ensembles text of potentialities. In the beginning, those signs were 'thinly' gazed, but they turn out to be semiotically rich and thick. Those signs were parts that made the whole. In embracing prejudices, we were experiencing the other form of life with some personal significant. Indeed it is part of celebration of the known and the knower. Such entering of biases and prejudices into the research picture is unavoidable even if the researcher tries to stay out of it. In the above light, embracing prejudices ala Gadamer is not in the manner of false judgment but as a condition of truth. In this process, prejudices are formed and reformed. If we take the whole engagement as text, then the content of the text is being questioned rigorously for a new 'text' to exist. In that relation of *bildung*, the newly made 'inscriptions' are fashioned over the old ones, not entirely covering them up. Hence, prejudices are not bracketed, suppressed or ignored but rather suspended in the interest of exploring for common meaning. It is a kind of a fortiori that provides a ground of questioning a tradition. A certain Christopher Malone said that in this palimpsest activity the old and the new interpretations blend together to form new understanding. Realistically in this 'cultivation' both *x* and *y* are playing a game of mediation, relation and distanciation. In this 'game of truth', the researcher and the researched must work through their fore-understandings and prejudices, alienness and otherness. The voice of the Other in this view is equal to our own. As such we must hear and listen (*horen*) to the Other. In Gadamerian thinking, *horen* is an 'avenue to the whole'. Simply, our prejudices are not sacrosanct but open to change. We believe, for whoever pronounced himself or herself free of prejudices is all the more blindly exposed to their [prejudicial] power. In that situatedness, prejudices then will exercise their underground domination all more strongly, and potentially distorting when denied or repressed. Hidden prejudices make us deaf to what speaks to us, noted Gadamer (1992:270). In conclusion, it is safe to say as Shalin does, Gadamerian prejudices are just unacknowledged assumption, and assumption is an acknowledged prejudice. We end this article with a quotation from McAuley (2003:201). He says,

[And if this action] is undertaken in a good faith then the product of the research is an account that is on the one hand truthful (authentic) to the data but it is, on the other hand, not the only truth.

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