

## **BOOK REVIEW OF *MATTERS OF INTERPRETATION: RECIPROCAL TRANSFORMATION IN THERAPEUTIC AND DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS***

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Disengagement, boredom, violence. Hanging out, gangs, drugs, alcohol, sex. Family disruptions, runaways. School drop-outs, unemployment. These words identify problems well known to child and youth care workers today. Depending on their preparation and their practice situation, workers may implement a variety of interventions, yet be disappointed at the outcomes. Perhaps another approach, even another way of thinking about child and youth work is needed. We are now ready for a conceptualization of the work that is broad, complex, and integrative theoretically, is connected to the reality of youths' lives in society today, and is able to be faithfully implemented in practice.

*Matters of Interpretation* provides such a framework through its exposition of a hermeneutic approach to applied developmental work with youth. The book offers a "conceptual guide for considering how one's social and psychological situatedness affect interpretation, or processes of meaning making, and how they shape what one looks for and finds in applied developmental practice, research, and theory building" (p. xiv) with particular reference to at-risk youth. It provides insights that address a number of contemporary issues in providing human services in general that are also pertinent to child and youth care work: the use of self in professional practice; the continued challenges to professional education to prepare practitioners who can truly enact positive change; the relationship between theory, research, and practice; and the structure and content of human service professions and how they relate to each other, particularly in today's economic and political realities. While *Matters of Interpretation's* focus is on the hermeneutic method of applied developmental practice and its rationale, the accounts in the book offer a new window into the content of young people's lives and how they view the issues that confront them. This review will discuss how the book approaches all of these topics.

### **Hermeneutics: The Theoretical Cornerstone**

Hermeneutics is the new theoretical cornerstone for applied developmental work provided by *Matters of Interpretation*, on interpretation and understanding of texts, (loosely interpreted as spoken and written

productions), and on how people perceive and create meaning in the world. Since the origin of hermeneutics is philosophical, the reader may wonder what the connection is between the intent of hermeneutics and applied developmental, psychological, and educational work. The authors implicitly respond by acknowledging that hermeneutics has been "largely undeveloped" (p. xix) while being able to serve as "a practical tool for the promotion of human well-being." They proceed to present an enlightening and groundbreaking chapter that embraces the roots of hermeneutics in the depthful, philosophical thinking of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur (among others) and articulate it into a viable and contemporary theory of applied developmental—or child and youth care—work. In line with this, the relationship of the central concepts of hermeneutic thinking to the general thinking of child and youth care workers as well as those working in human services can be considered.

#### *Central Concepts of Hermeneutics*

Particularly useful is the "four-pronged definition of hermeneutics" (p.13) provided in the introductory chapter. At the risk of oversimplification, these four components—interpretation, connectedness, world, and time—will be briefly defined to show how the connection is made between hermeneutics and child and youth work. Interpretation involves both worker and youth co-creating and critiquing their interpretations of situations raised in their interactions and revising them as new knowledge is uncovered. This is in contrast to the more customary "therapeutic" approach in which the meaning of situations is interpreted by the adult practitioner and imposed on the youth. Connectedness involves recognizing how youth interpret the connections and disconnections they experience in their daily life space of family, peers, and school; and how extended or not immediately apparent connections that need to be uncovered can serve to promote health rather than as simply being seen as pathological. The notion of "world" conveys the cruciality of understanding youth in the contexts, or real world, in which they actually live. This notion, of course, has been central to the field of child and youth care work since its inception. Within a particular counseling or child care worker-youth relationship, the worlds that each participant brings to it are opened to each other on the premise that with exposure to the worlds of others, one's own worldview is extended in complexity and understanding. Time is identified as at the core of the process of youth development and growth, centering on the issues of "Who am I becoming" and "who I hope to become" (p.18). In a hermeneutic perspective, only over sufficient time can growth be perceived as it may take place in steps forward, steps backward, and in tiny and subtle increments.

Hermeneutics, in a "postmodern" vein, also embraces the notion of emancipation from hegemonic practices that establish a power discrepancy on the assumption that one party—the one providing "service"—is superior to that receiving service (i.e., youth). Furthermore, in order to work

with youth in a way that is ethically sound, that is, does not use a power advantage to the youth's detriment, it is essential that the values driving practitioner perspectives be clearly brought out. By doing so, the possibility is opened for increasingly meaningful and empowering relationships. With its emphasis on connectedness, or systemic influences in the lives of youth, hermeneutics has also a flavor of the ecological perspective that underlies effective program design. Perhaps advantages of hermeneutics as a theoretical system for conceptualizing child and youth work is the fact that, as presented here, hermeneutics both coherently embrace such a multiplicity of significant ideas and is directly and practically tied into real and pressing issues that need to be reexamined.

#### *Matters of Interpretation: A Hermeneutic Format*

Many of us in child and youth care work have claimed that self-understanding (clarifying our belief systems and values towards our work) has its origins in our own childhoods. The two major authors, Nakkula and Ravitch, provide descriptions of their own childhoods and how these shaped each one's later choice of youth work and overall professional development. These are followed by first-person accounts of Master's degree students in the Harvard Risk and Prevention program practicum course written as phenomenological case studies. Their richness, individuality, and varied formats show how values, with their sources in past experience, are shaped; how these gradually have given way in the face of new information and experience acquired in directly working with youth; and how the writers emerged with more and more questions, rather than unilateral answers.

#### **Professional Issues**

*Matters of Interpretation* throughout offers transformative perspectives on many of the professional issues that must be faced in addressing the emergent needs of youth through an applied developmental approach. These include use of self, ethics, integration of theory, research and practice, time, interdisciplinarity, and professional education. All topics have implications not only for direct practice, but also for working indirectly with the network of systems that situate youths' and professionals' lives. They also, of course, provide impetus for reexamining the earlier theories and practices that have not worked well.

#### *Use of Self*

Human service professionals educated even recently will recognize hermeneutics as a far cry from the fundamental tenets of their professional socialization, where professional distance may have been emphasized and the professional's expertise was automatically considered superior to that of the youthful clients. Since child and youth work preparation more and more emphasizes relationship as a fundamental component of the work, the hermeneutic philosophy provides a strong rationale for it. And since boundary issues come up in relationship-centered practice,

an articulate theoretical rationale can provide a means to systematically examine them. In traditional professional education, practitioners have been expected to divorce any awareness of memories from their own upbringing, any individuality of style, or perspective from their work in the service of objectivity. In a hermeneutic perspective, there is no pure objectivity and it is in fact much more realistic to admit this and allow the admission into one's approach in a mutual process of discovery. Self-revelation, in traditional professional education, has been suspect. A reading of the evocative concluding essay by Robert W. Leary will certainly provoke a new perspective on this issue. When considering work with youth already experiencing detachment from the adult world, and facing unprecedented familial and societal disruptions, these distancing and artificial approaches only serve to reinforce disconnectedness, alienation, and the feeling of the youth that adults and the world are unfriendly and oppressive. While in a hermeneutic approach the practitioner may take initiative in undertaking work with a youth, both together seek increased awareness of the assumptions that underlie interpretation of the meaning of behavior as they work to understand the context of the youth's daily life. Both the practitioner's response to the youth and the youth's to the practitioner are mutually explored leading to a more real and connected alliance. This process is transformative to both parties and leads to more effective practice and ultimate positive development for the youth.

In the hermeneutic approach described here, and in line with its philosophical origin in critical theory, professional expertise no longer rests in one person with the most degrees and formal credentials. Rather, it is shared among all concerned and in that way enables a sense of ownership by, and empowerment, for all. Hermeneutics recognizes that our own "self texts," concepts of ourselves, are constantly being constructed. No expertise is absolute since one's knowledge and ways of applying it are with growth, experience, and ongoing interaction with a client who is constantly changing. This does not mean, of course, that the practitioner has to devalue knowledge or its use in a caregiving, counseling, or educative relationship. Communication and observation skills, for example, are key in embracing a hermeneutic approach, as is, of course, one's ever evolving understanding of the hermeneutic framework.

In recent years, the concept of "reflective practitioner" has emerged in discourses on professional education and practice in child and youth care work. The effective professional continually reflects on what s/he has done in practice, integrates new knowledge into these reflections, and changes practice as a result. Certainly this is a powerful concept and represents a shift of paradigm from the traditional professional with static knowledge that is applied to a youth who is viewed as needy and ineffective. The hermeneutic approach, however, gives the concept "reflective practice" that is increasingly discussed in child and youth work education real utility. The accounts in the book show how reflections became more informed and more complex over time, how the practitioners truly

altered their perspectives and actions, and how the youth in turn changed theirs to the point of actual transformation.

### *Ethics*

Ethics, as has already been stated, is a philosophical linchpin of applied hermeneutics. While the Codes of Ethics of human service professions including child and youth care are crucial, they do not require the questioning of the values and often deeply ingrained assumptions that underlie practice of the particular field or profession. The hermeneutic approach transcends a listing of ethical practice guidelines to be more deeply concerned with questions of what is truly human and what is the proper and just treatment of other people particularly in the areas of prejudice: race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class. In hermeneutics, ethics is built into the actual content and context of all interactions as "lived" practice, as through the process of "critical self-reflection" practitioners develop a greater recognition of the personal values and biases that shape their interpretations and could thus limit and even damage the growth potential of the client. In this reconfiguration of the traditional power relationships often built into educational and therapeutic work, prejudiced misapplications that disenfranchise are avoided. The ethics reflected in hermeneutics attains another very significant result. The uncovering of prejudice is separated from the glib acknowledgment of political correctness and instead becomes the core of ethical practice towards other people.

### *Integration of theory, research, and practice*

Frequently, in child and youth care literature and discussion, the concept of "theory-to-practice" is brought up with one component (theory) prescribing another (practice) in a conceptual leap, often inaccurately. Usually the role of research is not included, but if so, research is considered to inform theory. The theory-practice notion is reconfigured in the hermeneutic approach in which there is a dynamic, connected interplay among all. Theory, research, and practice are not viewed as dichotomous or adversarial, but rather as integrally intertwined. As the act of mutually uncovering more and more complex layers of meaning proceeds, practitioner and client in the context of their interaction generate new knowledge of the determinants of development (theory) that can be recorded (research), and in a circular way continue to shape and apply an emergent form of practice. In fact, the hermeneutic perspective on theory, research, and practice is compatible with the dynamical systems theory approach to social issues. In complexity theory, for example, the interaction of the three components would be seen as a complex adaptive system, which is continually open to and entraining of new information. This ongoing process transforms the dynamics of the system which continues to adapt and emerge into greater complexity. As such systems move towards the saturation point of information, over time they may bifurcate or split into two new systems, again to repeat the process of growth and adaptation.

As the system is poised at “the edge of chaos” it is at a state most likely to undergo transformation.

Since human development and change itself is now viewed as a complex adaptive system, any approach: theoretical, research, or direct practice, may be the most realistically grounded in hermeneutics since hermeneutics is dynamic rather than static, and embraces and integrates new information, rather than casting out that which doesn't fit preconceived expectations.

### *Interdisciplinarity*

There has been much recent discussion of the need for child and youth work as an emerging profession to establish its position vis a vis other more established human service professions such as education, social work, counseling, and clinical psychology. It has also been suggested that the milieu and life space orientation of child and youth work would support the notion of its being a “coordinating” field. Advanced child and youth workers with a developmental focus would work with the other professions so that clients experience services collectively as responsive, integrative, and coherent. The hermeneutic approach as described here can provide a common undergirding for practices that on the surface are more profession-specific, focused on specific problems or issues, and targeted to specific client characteristics. If the child and youth work field embraced a hermeneutic approach, this could enable enhanced relationships among the professions by identifying connective possibilities and actually making the connections. As hermeneutics may come to be embraced by practitioners in a multiplicity of professions and disciplines, such action in itself could not only serve as a means for reexamining practices within professions, but also it could serve as a common thread of communication reaching across professional boundaries.

### *Time*

Continually emergent in all of the discussions in the book, as already mentioned, is the role of time in hermeneutically based practice. Only over time as the circular interactive process of practice, reflection, questioning, and conceptualization takes place, does the level of connection and understanding between youth and practitioner deepen and become meaningful. However, in today's current human service system, time has much more than philosophical significance. The perspective that understanding evolves over time, and time is essential for this to happen, runs completely counter to the current managed-care system in the health, mental health, and welfare sectors, in which cost containment takes precedence over the needs of the clients. It can be anticipated that as interest in implementing hermeneutic approaches across the human service system increases, there will be a concomitant conflict with the prevailing practices of how decisions are made and how services are funded. If the unifying aspects of a hermeneutic framework succeed in encouraging productive alliances across professions, this stronger constituency may

serve as a force towards a more flexible, cohesive, and successful pattern of human services. Child and youth work too, because it is the field in which practitioners spend the most time with clients, can readily support the hermeneutic perspective towards time.

*Professional Education for Human Services*

Since the basis for all professional education is to provide appropriately knowledgeable, skilled, and effective practitioners, and since higher education (like the service system) is subject to the increasing emphasis on reducing cost, without of course sacrificing quality, issues arise of how quickly a profession can induct novice practitioners into the norms and methods of the particular profession in ways that reflect the profession's purpose. The case studies cited in *Matters of Interpretation* show vividly how in just one short year the students changed and grew in their understanding of self, how that self interrelated with the individuals and systems in which they worked, and how they created a "dialectic of mutual influence" with their youthful clients and with their colleagues (p. 113). The rapidity and depthfulness of this growth in one year is incredible, and suggests that the practicum model of the Harvard Risk and Prevention Program could be adapted in child and youth work higher education programs as highly effective in preparing new practitioners well not only for initial practice, but also to set the tone for ongoing professional growth and insight development throughout their careers.

There is, perhaps one caveat in embracing the hermeneutic approach and in training others in it. Despite the fact that hermeneutic theory is relevant to other current strands of thought, to be properly trained in application of hermeneutics is a labor-intensive enterprise, particularly when conducted in a time-limited way. The authors discuss the notion of "thrownness" experienced as working from a hermeneutic perspective that challenges students' traditional value systems and, for some, their concept of what it means to be a professional. It is at this point, as one world view gives way to a new one, that supportive supervision and guidance are needed. Any institution of higher education that utilizes hermeneutically based education needs to be poised to provide an expert and available faculty and support system. There is a paradox in that despite the variability that hermeneutic preparation allows in practitioners—witness the range of content and format in the essays—careful instruction and intensive supervision is required because of the nature of the approach which continues to raise questions rather than to provide answers.

Because of its power and suitability for contemporary issues in development and youth work, a hermeneutic approach should be widely embraced in education and human services preparation programs. There will be a challenge to provide faculty with the expertise not only to teach hermeneutic theory and applied practice, but to successfully introduce it into intransigent structures, be these institutions of higher education, training programs, schools, or social service agencies.

## Content Issues in Youth Work

Even though *Matters of Interpretation* focuses on hermeneutics as a holistic approach to youth work, the student accounts, especially, provide new perspectives on pertinent and specific issues such as play and activity, control, and the family. These of course add to the richness and utility of the book.

### *Play and Activity*

The developmental significance of play and activity (e.g., games, hobbies, sports, expressive arts, and the like) as a form of exploration and discovery, and as a marvelous way to situate an emergent relationship, is highlighted in several essays. Play and play acting are highly validated as fundamental ways for humans to learn about the world and to relate to each other. Despite the large body of both quantitative and qualitative research that compellingly articulates the power of play and activity to promote positive developmental outcomes, play and activity are continually institutions that should be promoting and encouraging them. As a disconcerting example, recess now is literally being eliminated from school schedules, and community playgrounds are increasingly declining in the variety of well-maintained equipment they offer. The authors, as well as the Harvard students throughout their essays, emphasize the significance of play and activity in their hermeneutic work and as central in the development of language. Yet play and activity are not supported in schools, treatment settings, and the like. Furthermore, academic and professional preparation programs that provide extremely sophisticated training in interpersonal and relationship-building skills may ignore play and activity as a field of knowledge and practice, (i.e., theory of activity, activity programming, play facilitation skills, and the like) only mentioning them in passing or dealing with them implicitly in the context of other topics,

### *Control*

Many human service practitioners today acknowledge the reality of a pervasive ideology that crosses professional disciplines and the array of programs and agencies for youth control. Views of the youth, and hence management practices, focus on making sure that youth are tightly reined in and do not enact the implicit fear of adults: that they will get out of hand. The pervasiveness of this control ideology and practices as they continue to exist both implicitly and explicitly in group care programs, schools and similar youth-serving settings is a strong theme in all of the essays. These certainly are diametrically opposite to the empowerment and contextual approach of applied developmental work. Bringing a hermeneutic perspective to the very common use of behavior modification in both regular and special education and in numerous group care facilities, in which certain behaviors earn privileges and rewards, profoundly shows the limitations of the practice. Opportunity to play or participate in activities are often the rewards. These frequently are the very



activities that encourage positive development and relationships. Such activities regulate behavior by providing focus, interest, and challenge and provide a sense of meaningful participation in the world. Deprivation of play and activity limits youth from the empowering, even politically focused, learning opportunities of the playfield where team work, goal orientation, and effective strategies, for example, are nurtured.

### *Families*

Even though the current emphasis in both social services and education is to involve families in interventions for youth at risk, there is a strong tendency either to view families as problematic, not recognize that many children and youth live with relatives in nontraditional or extended families, or scrutinize one's own culturally determined value systems with reference to families from different cultural backgrounds. Integrated throughout the book are compelling examples of how in an unfolding process students changed their perspectives on their own values about families and became more circumspect about imposing them on their clients. In this context, then, hermeneutics can be seen as having tremendous implications for positive and empowering work with families in any human service discipline.

These are just a few examples of areas that cross settings that serve youth. We can anticipate that as more and more practitioners embrace the hermeneutic approach to applied developmental work, new perspectives on other crucial areas will also emerge.

### **Some Final Comments in a Hermeneutic Vein**

A hermeneutic approach to youth work may not singularly solve the problems described in the first paragraph of this review, but hermeneutics certainly represents a strong step forward by charting the way towards new alliances and insights that are dynamic, humanistic, and situated in current reality. Perhaps, too, *Matters of Interpretation* might also move us towards a practice-oriented profession in itself focusing on applied development in a way that pioneers a truly contemporary and transformed model of what it means to be a profession and a professional. Taken in this way, hermeneutics seems an ideal perspective for adoption by child and youth care work.

"Theatrical Dialogue: A Hermeneutic Analysis of Change in One Act" by Robert W. Leary, the spectacular student essay that appears at the end of the book might appropriately be cited at the end of this review. This piece brilliantly reflects, in one synthesis, the honesty and the complexity of the hermeneutic approach: development of increased understanding over time as reflective analysis leads to new questions as it "...integrates theory and research and practice." Presented in the format of a play "intended for live performance" and thus underscoring the significance of language and play in a hermeneutic approach to applied development, "Theatrical Dialogue" features actors who "Rob" encountered in his year of study, including Practicum Professor Nakkula and the hermeneutic

philosopher Gadamer (p.303). In the ensuing dialogue, the players at first are self-conscious. As time continues, and as the hermeneutic circle unfolds, they become more themselves and in flow with each other in their mutual process of self-discovery.

*Matters of Interpretation* is a work that invites, actually compels, continued rereading. Perhaps no greater embodiment of the potential of the hermeneutic approach can be exemplified, for in each revisit one may discover a concept missed, a nuance, or an enhanced insight. Thus the book will have lasting value as practitioners become more attuned to hermeneutics and its vision of youth work. Certainly it will continue to energize an already existent movement towards making development, in all of its varied trajectories and contexts, not only a grounding for child and youth work, but also for all the human service professions concerned with youth development. The tasks of the future will include coming to value hermeneutics, understanding its complexity, integrating it so that it can situate practice, and gradually implementing it in a human service system that still is relying on the cheap and easily prescribed quick fix.

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