Advising with Understanding: Considering Hermeneutic Theory in Academic Advising

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One might say that good advising requires understanding of those being advised. Yet, the way to achieve an accurate understanding of each advisee is unclear. An introduction to the field of hermeneutics, including an outline of Martin Heidegger's notion of human being and existential understanding, is presented to offer advisors a new opportunity to think closely about how to approach the work of understanding the advisee. Hermeneutic theory is presented, not as a new methodological approach to advising, but as a way of reconceptualizing what ought to be involved in the process of understanding the individual advisee.

KEY WORDS: existentialism, Martin Heidegger, tools for advising

Introduction

Academic advising involves, at the very least, the complicated process of guiding students through an academic career. Such guidance involves negotiating advice about degree requirements, course selection, career path, campus involvement, and perhaps even physical and mental well-being. Determining how to navigate this journey with one's advisees can be difficult. Most current approaches involve application of social scientific theory (Hagen & Jordan, 2008), yet a number of theoretical frameworks are available for application from the humanities. In this paper, I suggest that advisors consider application of Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic philosophy as a foundation for conceptualizing an understanding of their academic advisees. Heidegger's theory provides both the opportunity to uncover how advisors might better understand their advisees as well as the occasion to explore how an active and ongoing interpretation of the advisee's continuously changing situation can lead to more effective and useful advice.

Hermeneutic theory is engaged with the question of what it means to understand. Advisors can use its insights to better discern what is important and meaningful to their advisees. Such a humanities-based theory generates open thought and a shift in focus rather than empirical data that demonstrate proof. I offer an outline of Martin Heidegger's thought and an explanation about how advisors can use hermeneutic theory as a tool to better understand their advisees. Hermeneutics is not offered as a methodological approach to advising, but as a wellspring of inspiration that provides space for reflection and a source of advice about how interpretation, socio-historical context, and change over time affect how advisees determine what makes sense and is important to them.

Some of the ideas and concepts outlined below may seem familiar to those versed in developmental (Hagen & Jordon, 2008) or appreciative advising (Bloom, 2008). They share the notion that advising should be based on an appreciation or understanding of the whole person. However, the way one understands a whole person within the context of a social science–based model differs from what understanding a "whole" person means in the context of a hermeneutic theory. Developmental and appreciative advising models are based on the scientific method and, therefore, are practiced from the position of the scientist. That is to say, in the search for a conceptualization of the elements that definitively characterize the advisee, a researcher investigates these models from the third-person perspective.

While these scientifically based models can often be quite useful, particularly when defining strategy for advising a group of students, they may not readily provide advisors with the tools to employ an understanding that involves recognition of the continually changing situation of the student, nor do they easily allow for an understanding that involves incorporation and evaluation of the advisor's subjective understanding. On the contrary, understanding the whole person from within the context of hermeneutic theory is an ongoing process involving a subjective rather than objective encounter with the individual. Through hermeneutic theory, one does not aim to uncover a definitive conceptualization of the advisee, but seeks, on a continual basis, to understand and interpret how advisees find significance and make meaning in the world within which they exist over time.

As suggested by Hagen and Jordon (2008), "There is no grand unified theory of advising," instead many theories can and should co-exist (p. 19). Therefore, while the following is an explanation of a hermeneutic approach to advising, it is not meant to provide the definitive method

for approaching the work of academic advising. Instead, I encourage advisors to add it to their reference library, as it can provide a means for interpreting and understanding the advisee.

Hermeneutics, Heidegger, and the Notion of Human Being

Generally associated with Biblical interpretation, the term hermeneutics is rooted in the Greek words *hermêneuein* and *hermêneia*, which can be translated as "to interpret" and "interpretation," respectively (see Palmer, 1969; also, Grondin, 1995, pp. 19-33; Seebohm, 2005, pp. 10-12). The term began to appear in print in the early 17th century with the first known use occurring in the title of the book *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponendarum sacrarum litterarum* written by J.C. Dannhauer and published in 1654 (see Ebeling, 1959).[1] Dannhauer's work became popular with German Protestant ministers who were restrained by a Church that would not allow them the authority to identify a definitive Biblical interpretation involving historical and cultural context. For the German clergy, hermeneutics provided a means for interpreting the Bible outside of and independent of official Church doctrine. By the 19th century, in the English language, the meaning of the term had broadened to include interpretation of texts other than the Bible, but only in association with texts of an "obscure or symbolic" nature.[2] While scholars identify at least six modern definitions of hermeneutics (Palmer, 1969), in this paper, discussion centers around the notion of hermeneutics as the phenomenology of existence and existential understanding as theorized by Martin Heidegger.

Heidegger, in his search for the meaning of both existence, generally speaking, and human existence, more specifically, argues that human beings understand and make sense of things from within the conditions of existence. Such an argument may seem straightforward, yet the particulars involved in producing a conclusion of this sort may not be obvious. Therefore, I briefly outline the key concepts involved in Heidegger's idea that human knowledge, and therefore human understanding, is conditioned by the very nature of human existence (Heidegger, 1962; see also Couzens Hoy, 2006; Mehta, 1976; Mulhall, 2005; Polt, 1999).

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962) maintains that the human entity should be understood in terms of how it finds and makes meaning in the world. He argues that the activity of interpretation is primary to human existence. Who we are, he might say, is constituted through the process of interpretation. Therefore, attention is focused on the role interpretation plays in shaping identity, meaning, and understanding. For Heidegger, interpretation takes place from within a contextualized existence in the world. This means that an individual's understanding is shaped by the social and historical context within which she or he is situated. Therefore, things have meaning for the individual human being from within the framework of his or her own life. That is, human beings' understanding is mediated by the context within which they exist in the world. Each human being makes sense of the world and her or his place in it from within her or his own individual socio-historical context, which changes with experience and situation.

If human beings are primarily characterized by interpretation and interpretation is shaped by an ever-changing socio-historical context, one can conclude that individuals are always in the process of becoming who they are. Of course, the idea that human beings change over time is not new, particularly to those familiar with developmental theory. Yet, unlike identity in developmental theory, who an individual is, in a Heideggerian sense, is fundamentally unique to each human being, who has a unique understanding of him or herself, the world, and that which is in it.

In sum, Heidegger argues that the process of interpretation is fundamental to human existence and that individual interpretation is shaped by a unique socio-historical context that changes over time. Therefore, human beings' interpretations and identities are continually changing and developing

[1] Ebeling (1959, p. 259) also mentions significant earlier works by Heinrich Bullinger (in 1538) and Matthias Flacius Illycrius (in 1567) whose conceptions of Biblical exegesis seem to anticipate Dannhauer's idea of hermeneutics. On Flacius and Dannhauer, see Grondin (1995) and Thiselton (1997, pp. 194–97).

[2] The art of hermeneutics, which was at first focused only on Biblical exegesis, had already been broadened by the time of Martin Luther to include not only the art of interpreting the Bible itself, but also sermons and other religious writings; hence, it was only a matter of time before inquiries were made to see if hermeneutics could also guide the interpretation of non-Christian, mystical, obscure secular, and other texts (Palmer, 1969, p. 35; see also Bruns, 1992, pp. 139–58; Grondin, 1997, pp. 45–62).

in accordance to the shift in their socio-historical context.

Four Concepts: Existential Understanding

For Heidegger, understanding involves something other than the application of prescriptive laws and scientific observation. Instead, to gain a hermeneutically informed understanding, one must seek to uncover meaning through the process of contextualized interpretation. Such an understanding, as argued by Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) in *Matters of Interpretation*, involves the use of four concepts: interpretation, connectedness, world, and time.

Interpretation

The crux of hermeneutical understanding involves recognition of interpretation as meaning (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998, p. 13). Meaning is not somehow already contained within the things "out there" in the world. Things do not have an innate identity apart from how one understands and makes sense of them. Instead, meaning is determined by the particular significance that something has for an individual human being. For example, the meaning of a "good" general education course differs greatly for two of my first-year advisees—Samantha and Mary.

Samantha is the first person in her family to attend college; she attended a public high school in a large city; her tuition is a great burden for her family despite the large amount of financial aid that she receives; she makes a contribution to her living expenses using the wages from her work-study job. Mary attended a highly selective private high school; she pays for her tuition with money from a large trust fund; she studied for a semester abroad in England; she lived in Peru as a volunteer in an orphanage between her junior and senior years in secondary school. While Mary identifies a particular course as good because it requires minimal effort and fulfills her requirements, Samantha identifies the same course as a waste of time because the amount she is learning is not proportional to the amount of money spent to take the course. The meaning of the course is determined by the individual student and not by some innate quality of the course itself. What constitutes meaning, or even reality, is not an essential part of the objective world "out there," but a product of how it has significance for an individual human being.

Connectedness (Being-with)

If the meaning of things is shaped by interpretation, what forms interpretation? As a being in the world one exists *with* others. One is only an individual insofar as she or he is separate from others in the world. How one interprets and makes sense of things, Heidegger argues, is highly influenced by separations and connections to the others with whom he or she exists. The degree to which an individual is separate or not separate, the way she or he makes sense of things in relation to others, whether each identifies as a member of a group, all affect her or his interpretation. Such factors play a role in positioning one in the world as he or she is. That is, the connections or disconnections one has with others inform the way she or he understand things.

Advisors should make note, therefore, of the individuals and groups from whom their advisees are separated or to whom they are connected. When helping a student choose a field of study, for example, advisors ought to keep in mind the thoughts and opinions of those people who may influence how a student associates worth to various fields. For instance, a student with deep connections to her family wishing to win the approval of her parents is likely to include family beliefs about education and career in her decision-making process. She knows that they disapprove of a career in music, but approve of a career in law or business. Regardless of her talent as a musician, she may decide that majoring in music is imprudent, while at the same time decide that studying political science or economics is necessary to secure admittance to business or law school. In such a scenario, the advisor needs to recognize the influence the advisee's family may have on her decisions. An advisor might help her produce a list of interesting or useful areas of study, but determining the level of interest or usefulness each area of study has for the student requires an understanding of the context from which the student makes sense of the world. Involved in such an understanding, consciously or unconsciously, are the influences of the connections and/or disconnections the individual has with others.

World (Being-in-the-world)

To whom one is connected or disconnected plays a major role in how an individual makes sense of things; similarly, where one exists contextually has an equally substantial role in the formation of interpretation and meaning. Within a Heideggerian hermeneutical framework, *where* does not simply signify physical location, but instead includes the overall socio-historical context of everyday life. In this sense, *where* connotes the socially and historically contextualized world within which meaning and interpretation are disclosed for an individual

human being. Heidegger argues that *world* is not synonymous with the physical universe; instead it is the individual framework of a given human being's everyday existence. Such a framework is not something one chooses to be "in." Instead, it is the context within which one has always been participating. *World* in this sense includes factors of socio-historical significance such as an individual's race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and religion as well as place of birth, educational background, experience traveling, books read, movies watched, familiarity with a particular hobby or sport, location of home, and number of siblings. Of course, this is not a definitive list of that which is included in an individual's world, but is only a sampling of the components that can be included in such a conception of *world*.

What role does the individual framework, *world*, play in advisees' lives, and how does it affect them? For example, Andrea, a second-year student, the daughter of two academics, and the youngest child with two brothers, grew up in rural New Hampshire, went to a public high school, belongs to a Unitarian church, plays guitar, reads poetry, and is recovering from an eating disorder. Andrea is attending a medium sized college in a large city. An advisor might ask how important a college education seems to her, if community and friendship are important within her university experience, and whether she is comfortable finding connections in a context that is larger than that of her rural upbringing. The advisor might also ask whether music and art are important to the way she understands and makes sense of things or if they help her relieve stress. As the child of two academics, she may feel that academic study is an integral part of becoming an adult, or she may feel that it leads to arrogance. Growing up in a small town may make her feel isolated and alone in a larger city, or it may make her feel eager to explore and meet new people. She may be timid and shy as the youngest of three children, or she may be outgoing and boisterous. There is no prescriptive way to identify how an individual's world will shape her or his understanding; yet recognizing the existence of each unique framework can guide the work of advising.

Time

While connections and *world* play an integral part in the process of interpretation, changes to one's life, world, and connections significantly affect interpretation as well. Advisors must acknowledge the role that time plays in the development of interpretation.

In popular culture, time is represented as a sequence of "nows," or a succession of individual present moments. In this sense, time is signified by a series of discrete instances monitored by a clock. However, under a hermeneutical understanding, time is conceived of as part of the process of existence—the context through which one endures and changes. In fact, time is the connector of past, present, and future. It is the framework through which interpretation takes place, the glue that bonds that which has been (past), is currently being created (present), and is anticipated to become (future).

With such a conception of time, it is important to recognize that over the course of an advisor's relationship with each advisee the student's interpretation will inevitably shift due to the unavoidable changes in connectedness and world that occur in his or her life. For example, Michael lost his father during the second semester of his sophomore year in college. Such an enormous change can affect not only how well he performs on the test he takes today, but also how he thinks about his performance in the biology class he took last semester, and what he believes is important for him to accomplish next semester. Michael had a close relationship to his father, but despite his father's wish for him to become a medical doctor, Michael aspires to be a social worker. However, the death of his father causes Michael to reconsider pursuing a career in medicine. As a result, he is disappointed with his performance in the biology course he took last semester and his intellectual confidence is affected causing him to study longer and harder for the exam he takes today. This shift in Michael's world affects his conception of what is important. In a deep sense his father's death affects not only the choices he makes in the future, but also shapes his interpretation of what was important in the past, what is important now, and how the future is involved in both the present and the past.

The death of his father has not only affected Michael emotionally, but has also altered the way he finds meaning in the world. Most advisors are not trained to help students deal with the emotional effects of losing a family member, yet they should be able to identify the effects that such a loss can have on interpretation and understanding. An advisee's needs change as her or his world and connections change over time altering the individual's needs.

Each student finds meaning and makes sense of what is encountered from within his or her own particular, continually changing, context. The work of understanding and advising students, therefore,

should involve something in addition to prescriptive advice. I suggest that advisors consider a hermeneutic approach to understanding their advisees, a mind-set that involves recognition of the roles that connectedness, world, and time play in shaping how each student interprets and makes sense of things.

How to Use Hermeneutic Theory

To use hermeneutic theory, academic advisors need to recognize, in a Heideggerian sense, their advisees as beings for whom interpretive activity is fundamental to existence. One should consider the four important concepts outlined above: interpretation, connectedness, world, and time. Hermeneutic theory involves the notion that interpretation is meaning, and that meaning is not already contained "out there" in the world. As a temporal process, interpretation is informed by a continually changing contextualization. For example, a field of study is neither implicitly good nor bad in itself. Instead, value is determined by the particular significance something has for the individual human being. Significance, therefore, emerges from the everyday world of influences for each individual. A hermeneutical understanding of any advisee should involve recognition and acknowledgment of the everyday context within which the student exists.

Without recognition and acknowledgment of individual context, advisors might be compelled to offer prescriptive suggestions about good courses or fields of study, the purpose of a college education, or effective ways to study. These prescriptive recommendations can be irrelevant if made without consideration of how they have meaning for the individual student. For example, what each student considers to be a good course depends upon what is important to him or her about that course. One student may put great value in a course that requires relatively little reading but large amounts of class time. Another student may value a course more if it offers the opposite. This is not to imply that prescriptive recommendations are never helpful. Students occasionally need to be reminded to read their assignments and attend lectures, seek out a mentoring relationship with a faculty member, or involve themselves with a nonacademic activity on campus (Light, 2001). However, advisors should begin each interaction by identifying and understanding from where and how the advisee interprets and makes sense of things, rather than simply offering advice from a list of predetermined recommendations.

How can such prescriptive suggestions be avoided? How might advisors identify from where their advisees interpret and make sense of things? I suggest that two-way, open-ended conversations may help advisors avoid relying on blanket suggestions and instead provide a fuller, more contextualized understanding of advisees. Through such communication, advisors can draw out individual context. Of course, gathering such information is not an easy task. A well-meaning advisor, eager to identify such information, may fall into the trappings of an interview style conversation. In the ideal case, however, most of this contextual data are revealed through organic conversation. In fact, advisors might want to avoid the sort of serial questioning often involved in an interview style conversation as it may lead students to feel inhibited or compelled to perform. An interviewed student may discuss only the information she or he wants noted in the file, avoid discussing relationships with family and friends, and offer misleading information about her or his goals for the college experience. Instead, by facilitating a dialog, advisors allow students to reveal their contextualization through conversation about their everyday lives.

How can advisors facilitate conversation that allows for such a contextual revealing? First, they should keep in mind the information to uncover about each advisee (e.g., siblings, hobbies, number of children, work experience, age, experience traveling, etc.). Second, while in conversation with advisees, they should ask open-ended questions to allow the temporal and intellectual space necessary for them to let down their guards and reveal contextual information about their lives. For example, if an advisor wishes to identify the location of a traditional-aged student's hometown (if the information is not in the file) an advisor might ask how he or she is fairing in the local weather. Here a conversation about the advisee's hometown can be facilitated naturally. Furthermore, an advisor could use knowledge of the hometown to gather information about other areas of the advisee's life. With an introductory note about the hometown, an advisor can lead into conversations about a parent's occupation or the student's hobbies. For example, an advisor might ask, "Isn't that area near a university? Do you have family that work there?" or "I think I remember that is a good climate for skiing. Do you ski?" Rather than rattling off a series of interview questions, a conversation can evolve to include discussion of exactly the kind of contextual information an advisor seeks.

Is this approach realistically possible for professional advisors to carry out? How are advisors to handle advisees who are unwilling to participate in such a conversation about their lives? How are advisors to find the time to include such lengthy, detailed conversations? With many advisors holding student loads in the hundreds, how can they engage in the kind of activity necessary to include hermeneutic theory in the everyday work of advising? I suggest three ways to incorporate hermeneutic theory regardless of advisee participation or advisor time constraints: a) use of general historical context, b) ongoing investigation, and c) advisor reflection.

General Historical Context

While all students in a given college class do not have the same contextual framework, some may share a general historical context, particularly when institutions cater mostly to traditional-aged students (matriculating at 18 or 19 and graduating at 21 or 22 years old). If advisors have a sense of the general age of students in a particular group, then they can formulate a common historical context. For instance, advisors may organize examples of political, cultural, and social events that have (and have not) taken place during their advisees' lives (i.e., the evolution of technology, the fall of the Berlin wall, the 9-11 tragedy, or the changing political and social climate of the world) to help form a common context. While a common context is not ideal—the information is comprised of generalizations about popular social and historical context an advisor deems important without knowing the level of significance such events have for the individual advisees—it can help advisors determine how to begin the process of interpreting and understanding advisees within a given group.

Ongoing Investigation

Most advisors do not have time for regularly scheduled hour-long conversations with each of their advisees; however, they may be able to find time for short ongoing conversations with many of them. Advisors could consider taking advantage of their 2-minute phone conversations, short E-mail exchanges, text messages, or Facebook posts as means for uncovering pieces of their advisees' contextualization. Once found, advisors may wish to store such information in multiple ways—a spreadsheet, a notebook, a group of sticky notes, or an information page in their file. How advisors retain the information is relatively unimportant. What is important, however, is that advisors search for, have access to, and use such contextual information to understand and advise their students.

Advisor Reflection

Whether advisees are open and talkative, withdrawn and reserved, or whether advisors have 5-minute rather than 55-minute conversations, they can incorporate the findings of hermeneutic theory through recognition of their own contextualization. At the very least, advisors are able to think about the ways in which their own contextualization affects how they advise and interpret their advisees. Recognition of such context along with ongoing self-reflection should help advisors avoid negative practices such as stereotyping (e.g., "all college students live on campus") or reductive analysis (e.g., "they reacted like x, this means they must dislike y"). Advisors ought to understand not only the role contextualization plays in shaping how their advisees make sense of things, but also the role it plays in shaping the way they carry out their own work as advisors.

Conclusion

Academic advisors are charged with guiding students through their academic careers, and yet how to navigate this journey can be unclear. While advisors have a number of methodological models from which to choose, it seems uncontroversial to suggest that it is still difficult to determine how to understand their advisees. With the introduction of Heideggerian hermeneutic theory, advisors find opportunities for reconceptualizing how to approach the work of such understanding.

Hermeneutic theory provides advisors a tool to rethink what it means to understand their advisees. Such theory involves the notion that meaning is determined by the particular significance something has for an individual human being and not simply something contained "out there" in the world. With such knowledge, advisors can begin the process of identifying those continually changing existential circumstances through which their advisees makes sense of what they encounter. From this perspective, recognizing who an advisee is should involve recurrent discovery of how and from *where* he or she interprets the world.

While an advisor's initial reaction to the complexities of hermeneutic theory may be to emphasize the difficulty of identifying its practical application, I suggest that with simple conversation, a search for general historical context, ongoing investigation, and advisor self-reflection advisors can incorporate hermeneutic theory into their daily

routine.

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