Hermeneutics and Communication

David D. Reedy

Omega Graduate School

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Professor

Dr. Ken Schmidt, Ph.D.

Assignment #3 – Essay on a case study 1. Write a 5-page paper on a specific event or phenomenon (e.g., a historical event, a cultural practice, a legal decision), and interpret it from a hermeneutic perspective. This would involve understanding the event within its context and recognizing the role of your prejudices in shaping your interpretation. The student should direct developmental readings from Assignment #2 on the hermeneutic issue for this assignment. 2. Paper Outline a. Begin with an introductory paragraph that has a succinct thesis statement. b. Address the topic of the paper with critical thought. c. End with a conclusion that reaffirms your thesis. d. Use a minimum of eleven scholarly research sources (two books and the remaining scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles).

# School Wars, The Return of a Community

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# School Wars, The Return of a Community

Our daily news is filled with battles from the culture wars. TheThe public school system is often the battleground between conservative and progressive values, with children caught in the middle. One such battle occurred in U.S. District Court in August of 2023 between a faction ofparents and their school district. Without mutual understanding, motivated by closed world views, and empowered by tribal alliances, such battles only increase injury. A better way forward exists, stepping back from fighting about the trees to recognize the value of the interdependent forest to regain our sense of community through shared goals and empathy.

On August 9, 2023, a group of parents requested an injunction in U.S. District Court to allow their students to be exempted from LGBTQ curriculum and books offered in the classrooms of the Montgomery County school district. The judge ruled against their injunction. Supporters of the curriculum defended its facilitation of inclusion and tolerance. Some parents objected, stating their religious and parental rights were being denied, with parental roles being assumed by the school district. (Moody & More, 2023) Too often, the result of such conflicts is winners and losers, increasing tribalism in our society, and a loss of community.

Metanarratives once held Western society together as a community. Today, we have the competition of various groups holding diverse micronarratives. Contemporary politics has become identifying with one’s own tribe and the exercise of power, resisting the power of those different, and using power to impose our preferences on them. (Veith, 2020, p. 259) Is common culture and community exhausted? Without common ground are we left with using values as symbolic capital wielded to gain power over others? Some see this environment as providing the necessary conflict to help human evolution flourish. (Fuchs, 2021, p.134) It is difficult to imagine how the dismissal and depowering of others will assist in building an inclusive and tolerant society for the 21st century. The application of hermeneutical principles can point a better way.

Society has moved. The idea of universal truth is no longer operative in the intellectual circles impacting our society. The emphasis has moved to what is “my truth.” (Rich, 2021, pp. 6-7) Amid diverse viewpoints in our society, the common strategy is to withdraw within the fortresses of hardened viewpoints with like-minded folks defending ourselves from attack while preparing to go on the offensive. When we venture out, we find rules of discourse that carefully guard what privileged positions are acceptable, and which will not be considered. (Rich, 2021, p. 60) It is difficult to imagine a genuine conversation or a win/win scenario when one side is labeled transphobic and the other evil. In Montgomery County, the parents and the school administrators are on center stage as the combatants, with the children hardly recognized as collateral damage. For instance, Christians lose sight of the child who has gender dysphoria because of chromosomal disorders who hears their life is somehow less or wrong. While progressive teachers and administrators seem fine with undermining parental authority. Closed minds do not lead to inclusive and loving outcomes.

All understanding involves encountering another’s horizon, whether reading a text or holding a conversation. In this process, we bring our understanding horizon, beliefs, experiences, and attitudes. If we are open to hearing the other, a “fusion of horizons” is possible (Voelz, 2009). All understanding, all conversation, operates in this way. But that is not to say all conversations will necessarily result in a “fusion of horizons” or finding common ground.

Many advocates suggest the pain and emotional suffering of LGBTQ individuals demand listeners' emotional and moral response. (Neumann, 2022, p.131) This implies value in such a fusion of horizons, an empathic finding of common ground. Yet Neumann argues that the response demanded is for the conservative Christians to join their progressive siblings in questioning the inerrancy of Biblical teaching on sexuality and accepting LGBTQ people and behavior as not sinful (Newmann, 2022, p. 131). This is not advocating for a genuine fusion of horizons. This is advocating for one horizon to be swallowed up by another.

Like an amoeba consuming its lesser cousins and transforming them into itself, the fusion of horizons that results when power is brought to bear results in one horizon consuming another. Parady(2003) describes how secular progressivism has overtaken Canadian culture to the point that free speech with dissenting views is no longer tolerated. While this may be an overly broad conclusion, the point is well taken that the losers may not feel heard in the battle of winners and losers. They feel consumed. This goal to consume and transform other’s worldviews is the engineered approach advocated for and adopted by many school districts. Engineered interventions, such as staff training, policy changes, affirmative displays, and curriculum changes are expected to educate children into affirming LGBTQ behavior resulting in safety and belonging for LGBTQ children (McDermott, 2023.) Is this the kind of society we desire, where we achieve a sense of community because one tribe has conquered all other tribes?

What is required for a truly inclusive caring community? Hermeneutics has long recognized the role of a particular community for understanding a particular text. For example, in Biblical hermeneutics, it is posited that reader of the text will be more likely to understand what the writer intended to communicate if the community interprets the text it is addressed to who is congenial to the text because there is a shared set of values and understandings (Voelz, 2009). While true, one could conclude that our competing tribal communities simply can’t understand one another. Dilthey posits that to understand a text we need to “re-live” the experience of others stepping from our horizon into theirs by exercising sympathy. He suggests it means the “…rediscovery of the ‘I’ in ‘ you” (Thiselton, 2009, p.26). We are becoming too lost in the forest, arguing over which tree is best. We have lost sight of the forest that is the human community. From a Christian standpoint, all people are created in the image of God, one humanity. We make our lives together with others in the circumstances that are given to us. Tribal warfare only results in further injury. We need common ground when we engage social challenges such as making schools safe for LGBTQ children. We need to recover the “I” in “you” and the “you” in “I”.

We fear being consumed by different viewpoints. Engaging different horizons need not be threatening. Blount notes it is common to become aware we are different from others simply by the presence of others. A black man, he writes of being bi-cultural, navigating in a world that often feels other and sees him as other, but doing so in a way that does not cost him the “…spiritual mooring of his own space.” (Bount, 2019, p.9) The hospitality approach and “openness to the stranger” without throwing out one’s own beliefs, overcomes the conversational barriers raised by defensiveness and fear in interreligious dialogues. (Cibotaru, 2023, p.2) Understanding can be achieved without losing our sense of self.

The hermeneutician’s recognition that understanding, a fusion of horizons, requires some shared tradition, some third point to stabilize and enable communication between two viewpoints, is vital to building an inclusive community. Gadamer recognizes that the common toolbox of ideas and concepts within language enables communication. (Sherman, 2023, pp.6-9) The fact that people do communicate indicates there is indeed something more familiar to our lives than we may currently acknowledge. Common ground does not have to be created, it already exists b because we all live human lives. This third point serves to orient the fusion of horizons into something ,beneficial rather than oppressive, something that can be healing rather than injuring.

Sarah Honore, a teacher in Texas, advocates for cooperative relationships with parents as well as advocating for students. She advocates for making resources available but respecting a child or a parent’s desire not to utilize those resources if they do not “fit”. She highlights the importance for children to be exposed to different views and experiences so they may develop the skills to decide what to incorporate into their worldview and how to be understanding of those who are different (Honore, 2023). While some LGBTQ advocates and conservative Christian parents might not value her approach, the idea that children need to develop critical thinking skills and empathy is well taken.

In Montgomery County, the interested parties, rather than fighting it out, could take a step back and look at the forest and examine what they have in common. They desire schools to be a safe place for all children. Productive relationships between teachers, administrators, and parents are valued. Rather than using the power of position or legal power to impose a strategy to force acceptance of a specific world-view, a focus on teaching children to be loving and caring of those different from them, even if they do not agree with them, or even like them, could be mirrored by parents, teachers, advocates, and administrators by doing the same.

The strategy of seeking power over others, no matter how righteous we feel about our position, is only causing increased division and injury, sometimes even to those we seek to protect, in this case, children. We need solutions that don’t require injuring and depowering others. We need communal solutions, for we make our lives together. Finding common goals, in this case, the safety of children, strategies of respect, empathy and caring, can empower the community and lead to more positive lives for all.

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