

Balint Leadership and Hermeneutic Research

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In line with the theme of the conference, Balint Training in a New World, I am going to talk about a different approach to research inquiry. This approach assumes that human interaction is complex, meaning-centered, and on a background of shared, yet often unacknowledged practices. This approach is capable of capturing the depth, richness, complexity and significance of human interactions, especially the type of interactions present in Balint seminars.

I am talking about a hermeneutic approach to research. As you probably remember, Hermes was the messenger god who brought messages from the gods to the people. These messages were rarely straightforward; they always needed some type of interpretation or some effort to understand what the Gods meant.

"Trying to understand, take meaning from, or make intelligible that which is not yet understood is not only the central task of hermeneutics, it is an essential aspect of our being in the world (Gadamer, 1976; Heidegger, 1927/1962).

As an approach to understanding written texts, hermeneutics has long been applied to fields as diverse as biblical exegesis, legal interpretation, and linguistic and literary analysis. It was not until the end of the 19th century that a hermeneutic approach for studying the human sciences began to gain prominence (Bleicher, 1980; Palmer, 1969, Addison, 1989a:110)

Hermeneutic researchers approach a particular problem from a concerned, involved [and self-reflective] standpoint; immerse themselves in the participants' world; analyze human actions as situated within a cultural and historical context; offer a narrative account of how a problem developed and is maintained; and offer directions for positive change." (Addison, 1989a:113)

When I first started conducting hermeneutic research, my sociology- and philosophy-trained mentors were surprised that I picked it up so quickly and easily. The type of thinking necessary to do hermeneutic research was exactly what I did as a psychotherapist, a group leader and a clinical consultant. My training in psychodynamics as well as my work in phenomenology and hermeneutics provided a solid foundation for my development as a hermeneutic researcher. Good Balint training will do the same.

Next I want to briefly outline five central aspects of hermeneutic research and show how each fits nicely with our practices as Balint leaders. I'll conclude by sketching the beginnings of a hermeneutic study on Balint leadership. But first, I'll talk about some of the parallels between conducting hermeneutic research and leading a Balint group.

In their attempt to make sense or bring order to social processes, hermeneutic researchers seek to unearth what is buried, to uncover what is hidden, to illuminate the background atmosphere, to struggle with contradictions, and to find what is missing. Each unearthed or illuminated aspect adds to the overall understanding of the larger whole. In a study I carried out on physician socialization (Addison, 1984, 1989b), I was never quite satisfied with the explanations I received as to why first year residents were required by their residency program to see more patients in their outpatient clinics than the national requirement. The most popular explanation was that when physicians were in practice they would have to see large numbers of patients to make a living; therefore, they needed to see a large number in their clinics from the beginning of the residency. This still didn't stack up against what I have observed to be bad habits the residents developed by being rushed so early in their training. It wasn't until I finally realized that the hospital was in part dependent on clinic fees that the larger picture became clearer.

In the same way, Balint leaders also attend to what is missing, contradictory or skewed in a case presentation. The leader routinely encourages the group to pursue aspects of a case presentation that don't make sense until the picture becomes clearer.

Second, hermeneutic researchers place their interpretations upon a larger social, cultural, historical, or economic background. Another way of saying this is that as they learn certain foreground conditions, they explore the background conditions which make the foreground conditions appear. And, as these background conditions become clearer, new questions enter the foreground. For example, in the same study on socialization, at first I was struck when the

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residents referred to patients as RTPs, goners, crocks, or the gall bladder in 204. To interpret the immediate foreground practice of the residents labeling or objectifying patients, as merely insensitive or unfeeling is to leave out the background condition of the residents' totalizing stress. When this background is brought into the foreground of interpretation, it becomes evident that the residents needed to resort to some form of objectification in the moment to complete their everyday tasks, get through the day, and survive their residency.

In the same fashion, Balint leaders must move between understanding the connection between foreground and background conditions of a case. For example, if a member presents a case in which he and a patient have an antagonistic relationship, the leader must explore certain background questions, such as does the presenter always have antagonistic relationships with this type of patient? Does the organization of the presenter's practice contribute to the antagonism? Is there something in the personal history of the presenter that makes a climate of antagonism more likely? Such hermeneutic ways of thinking bring background conditions into the foreground and light up other questions for further inquiry.

Third, hermeneutic researchers move back and forth between what I call understanding and interpretation. I think of understanding as an act of empathic immersion in which the researcher feels or experiences the perspective of the research subjects or participants. Interpretation is an act in which the researcher makes sense out of the disparate aspects of the research usually by constructing a narrative account of the practices in question. Again, in my socialization study, I tried to immerse myself in the residents' everyday life in the hospital, in their clinics, on call, and with their families. I would take notes about what I saw and what I felt. After following them on call, I understood how they felt grey, groggy, intensely excited, exhausted, depleted and desirous of any nourishment or nurturing. I used this understanding to begin interpreting the issues that were significant for them: the power of sleep deprivation, the difference between life in the hospital and life outside of the residency, and the need to cover over painful emotions and keep working in the moment. Each of these interpretations formed different aspects of my full account.

Balint leaders also oscillate between understanding and interpretation: As they sit in a Balint seminar, one of their primary ways of knowing is to experience the doctor-patient relationship from the perspective of the presenting physician. The leader uses this experiential perspective to put together an interpretive account of what is problematic in the doctor-patient relationship. For example, if a presenter offers a case of a dying patient, the leader will try to put him or herself in the position of the physician working with a dying patient to make sense out of how this situation is problematic for the presenting physician (and perhaps for the group). By making interpretations gleaned from this understanding, the leader helps the group increase their ability to empathize, listen, and comprehend the presenter's problem.

Next, hermeneutic researchers must be consciously self-reflective. This is what Heidegger and Gadamer added to the hermeneutic circle: the more one learns about the object of inquiry, the more one learns about him or herself. Getting clearer on one's biases, it is easier not to be blinded by them in researching a problem. In the process of studying physician socialization, I not only generated a narrative account of how individuals became family physicians, I also became clearer on where my blind spots and biases lay as well as on why I wanted to research this topic in the first place. This in turn allowed me to see the residents' situation more clearly.

Likewise, Balint leaders are also self-reflective. To Michael Balint, the group was a place where "mistakes, blind spots, limitations... can be brought into the open." (Balint, 1972:303) This applies to the leaders as well as the members of the group. (And here we are talking, in large part, about countertransference.) With or without the help of consultation, leaders must look at their own assumptions, beliefs and characteristic ways of leading a group that inevitably influence the development of the group. For example, in a presentation about an AIDS patient, the leader must examine his or her own feelings and beliefs about dying, about homosexuality and/or IY drug use, about treating dying patients, and about how these feelings or beliefs may interfere with the

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leader's ability to listen to the presenter and hear the presenter's situation. Balint leaders also need to examine their personal style of leading. For example, if a leader arrives late, seems bored or is overly predisposed to tranquilizing or normalizing interventions, it is unlikely that the group will feel contained or go into deeper waters. Unless leaders reflect on their leadership practices and style, they may never know why their groups seem limited.

Finally one of the most important goals of hermeneutic research is to allow for new possibilities for change, growth and self-reflection of the research subject participants. The measure of good hermeneutic research is not only whether a coherent or intelligible account is arrived at, but also whether some form of increased self-reflection is evident in the ongoing practices of the research participants. My account of physician socialization was productive not only because it was cohesive and illuminating, because socialization practices changed, but also because the account continues to help physicians reflect on their socializing experiences.

One of the explicit goals and objectives of Balint groups is illumination. Leaders strive to help group members listen to patients in a new way. They try to increase understanding and explore therapeutic ways of using that understanding. They hope that members' ways of relating to problematic doctor-patient interactions will change. Leaders also try to instill an ongoing habit of self-reflection in group members that will continue after the formal group has ended.

So now that you are all convinced that your past and continuing Balint training has uniquely prepared you for an alternate specialty in hermeneutic research, let's look at research on leadership.

Examples of classic interpretive studies on the role of leadership include: Alexander Wolf's writing on the leader of the group, (Liff, 1975) Wilfred Bion's (1959) research on ways the group avoids work by entering into different types of relationships with the leader, Philip Slater's (1966) research on the formation and development of groups, especially concerning the ritual relationship a group embodies to its leader, Dick Mann's (1967) analysis of member-leader relationships and Michael Balint's (1972) study of the doctor, his patient and the illness.

I can think of many questions about leadership that interest me: What leadership practices make for cohesive, productive, long term groups? What is the relationship between a leader's attitudes and beliefs about leading a group and his or her observed practices? How do leaders create a safe, contained structure for group work to occur? How do leaders handle anxiety in the group? How do leaders help groups deal with mistakes? How do leaders cope with residency groups in which attendance is not required and fluctuates wildly from session to session? These would all be fascinating topics for research on leadership; and I'm sure there are many more out there.

Since one of the issues we've heard about today is the credentialling of good Balint leaders, let's examine how we might go about investigating such a topic.

It is important to begin by framing the problem. If we are interested in training (and credentialling) good Balint leaders, we first need to find what makes for a good leader. If we can agree that this would be a helpful research focus, we can begin thinking about what our methodology might be for a hermeneutic study on what makes for a good Balint leader. (What we arrive at can then be utilized in setting criteria for credentialling leaders.)

We might begin by forming a research team of interested and motivated people with complementary skills and areas of expertise. This team might begin by talking among themselves about their preconceptions on the question. This is an example of hermeneutic self-reflection we talked about earlier. It is important to begin doing this at this stage and throughout the project so that the research is more than just the researchers rediscovering their own biases.

They might also do a literature review to look for issues of leadership they might have missed in their discussions. Here again, we see the hermeneutic researchers always looking for what is missing.

From here, the team might conduct a small focus group of very experienced leaders to talk about what makes a leader good. The focus group facilitator's task would be to help the group go beyond theoretical opinions or beliefs; he or she would try to get the group to relate narrative

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stories about acts of good leadership, about successful groups; about what made these groups good or about what made leadership stand out.

It is also important for the team to observe Balint groups over time. This aspect of the study would be the most costly, but potentially the most valuable in gathering data for analysis: because what people say they do is often found not to be what they are observed doing. Ideally, the groups would be chosen for observation, not just for convenience, but because they had the potential to offer different and potentially contrasting leadership styles.

Researchers might observe their own groups, videotaping or audiotaping the sessions, making progress notes after each session and then sending the transcribed sessions and notes to one or ideally two other members of the research team for analysis. The members of the team who do the analysis must immerse themselves in the transcripts of the groups, then step back to make sense of the transcript. Without going into the various types of analysis, I just want to underline the hermeneutic process of immersion and reflection, understanding and interpretation, we spoke of before.

Also, it might be helpful to analyze leadership in different contexts. Along this line of thinking, we would predict that a significant part of the analysis might address the background conditions of the group and the effect of these conditions on leadership. For example, a resident group that meets weekly during a dedicated noon conference time and that receives the full organizational support and encouragement of the residency and residents who attend consistently and are allowed to turn off their pagers, probably would evidence different leadership issues than a group of residents that meets monthly at dinner time and has a drop-in flavor. A group led by a psychologist might be different than one led by a family physician or by both. Looking at these and other background conditions is again one of the central aspects of hermeneutic research.

It is usual for analysis to occur concurrently with data collection. The research team will generate categories to be addressed in the account and begin spelling out their interpretation of the relationship between these categories. All the time the team is building its account of what makes for a good Balint leader, it will be looking for missing aspects, contradictions, and inconsistencies. One way of doing this is to read preliminary versions of the account to colleagues, critics, Balint leaders and members, group leaders and group members from other types of groups, and group researchers. Their suggestions must be attended to in the developing version of the account. As the analysis progresses, the team will become clearer on whether further observations, interviews or even consultation are needed to flesh out the developing account.

This is just a rough sketch of a hermeneutic study on good leadership. I'm sure if and when a research team convenes, they will come up with a much tighter and well thought out study.

In conclusion, as Balint group leaders, it is important to remember that researchers are no longer thought of as objective, isolated, disembodied voices outside any participatory interaction with the subjects of their research. The days of the removed, distant, neutral and disinterested research are past. This can free us to embrace research questions that matter to us and be open about that mattering. Hermeneutic research, like leading a Balint group, is involved, engaged, motivated, connected, and woven with meaning. Our attitude and training as Balint leaders is perhaps the best preparation for undertaking such research.

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Research Design

Framing the problem

Forming a research team

Examining pre-understandings

Reviewing the literature

Looking at contrasting cases

Building a preliminary account

Reading this account to others

Refining the account