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## CHAPTER 35: FROM HERMENEUTICS TO POST-STRUCTURALISM TO PSYCHOANALYSIS

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### KEY CONCEPTS

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The issues to be discussed in this chapter relate to the question: How does language shape the life it seeks to describe and how does life shape language? This circularity is an example of the ‘hermeneutic circle’, where ‘hermeneutics’ might be understood simply as the process of interpretation, often combined with the term ‘phenomenology’; the logic of the world as experienced (see Chapter 15 of this volume). The focus is on how people experience the world and make sense of it rather than on any notion of underlying truth. We consider these terms here in relation to how researchers experience and describe the world but also with how those descriptions impact on subsequent experience.

The chapter is guided by Gallagher (1992) who categorises four forms of hermeneutics:

### ***Conservative Hermeneutics***

This early conception of hermeneutics is exemplified in the task of reading a text where the primary objective is to understand the author in the way the author intended, or within schooling, the learner's task is restricted to understanding what the teacher had in mind. As Scheleimacher puts it, this involves a 're-cognition and re-construction of a meaning (towards) prepar(ing) the individual for common participation in the state, the church, free society, and academia' (cited in Gallagher, 1992: 213).

### ***Moderate Hermeneutics***

Leading exponents of twentieth century hermeneutics were **Gadamer** and **Ricoeur** (e.g. 1981), for whom there are certain truths that orientate our way of seeing things.

Moderate hermeneutics does not see tradition as fixed, but rather sees it as being transformed through an educative process, where its components are not seen as fully constituted objects to behold but rather in a permanent state of evolution. Hermeneutics permits a range of interpretations, some of which may be seen as being closer to the truth, yet no interpretation is ever final. Such understanding never arrives at its object directly as one's approach is always conditioned by the interpretations explored on the way. Here there is an attempt to capture the continuity of understanding in discrete forms, as explanations, which themselves then feed into and shape the continuous experience of understanding. Whilst one's own understanding may become 'fixed' in an explanation for the time being, such fixity is always contingent. Were I to act as if my explanation is correct, the world may resist my actions in a slightly unexpected way, giving rise to a new understanding, resulting in a revised explanation, providing a new

context for acting and so on. This circularity between explanation and understanding is another encapsulation of the *hermeneutic circle*.

***Critical Hermeneutics (or Critical Social Theory)***

Here we have a conception of human behaviour understood in relation to consensual universal principles (e.g. moral perspectives, the existence of God, particular forms of common sense) that can be called upon in the event of some supposed divergence from rational behaviour. Its chief contemporary exponent **Habermas** aims for unconstrained language but sets out by supposing that in most societies language has become distorted as a result of the interplay of alternative forms of political power. Habermas seeks 'Ideal' communication without the hidden exercise of force resulting from supposed ideological distortion. His reflecting subject has a conception of the universal principles at work and of how any in-built contradictions to these can be overcome. This subject is thus trying to find ways of making things better from some supposed deficit position. This entails an *emancipatory* interest whereby these contradictions are confronted and action is designed to remove them.

***Radical Hermeneutics (or Post-Structuralism)***

'All my books...are, if you like, little tool boxes. If people want to open them, or to use this sentence or that idea as a screwdriver or spanner to short-circuit, discredit or smash systems of power, including eventually those from which my books have emerged...so much the better' (Foucault, cited in Patton and Meaghan, 1979: 115).

**Foucault** (e.g. Rabinow, 1991) rejects the idea of human activity being governed by universal principles and specifically rejects Habermas' notion of communication based around these.

The idea that there could exist a state of communication that would allow games of truth to circulate freely, without any constraints seems utopian to me. This is precisely a failure to see that power relations are not something that is bad in itself, that we have to break free of. I do not think a society can live without power relations, if by that one means the strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others. (Foucault, 1997: 298)

For Foucault (1998, p. 448) 'no given form of rationality is actually reason'. There are no universal rules to be located beneath ideology. Habermas later suggested that with the publication of the *Birth of the Clinic* Foucault elected to abstain from dealing with texts through commentary and give up all hermeneutics, no matter how deeply it may penetrate below the surface of the text. He no longer (as he did in *Madness and Civilisation*) sought madness itself behind the discourse about madness.

Another leading writer identified with post-structuralism is **Derrida** who has shown how our understandings of the present are conditioned by the media through which we receive depictions of it. Actuality is *made* and virtuality ('virtual images, virtual spaces, and therefore virtual outcomes') is no longer distinguishable from actual reality. 'The "reality" of "actuality" -- however individual, irreducible, stubborn, painful or tragic it may be -- only reaches us through fictional devices' (Derrida, 1994: 29).

*And then to psychoanalysis*

If phenomenology is the logic of world as it is experienced, how do we understand the 'person' 'experiencing'? Also, how do people use language in describing the world around them and by implication the way they see themselves fitting in? And how do we share ways of describing the world, which perhaps lock us into discourses that favour some more than others?

**Freud** is at the root of contemporary psychoanalysis. In the following extract Habermas characterises the importance of Freud's contribution:

Freud dealt with the occurrence of systematically deformed communication in order to define the scope of specifically incomprehensible acts and utterances. He always envisaged the dream as the standard example of such phenomena, the latter including everything from harmless, everyday pseudo-communication and Freudian slips to pathological manifestations of neurosis, psychosis, and psychosomatic disturbance. In his essays on cultural theory, Freud broadened the range of phenomena which could be conceived as being part of systematically distorted communication. He employed the insights gained from clinical phenomena as the key to pseudo-normality, that is to the hidden pathology of collective behaviour and entire social systems. (Habermas, 1976: 349)

Thus Freud's work underpinned Habermas's critical quest to detect the faults in society more generally and find ways of repairing these. Freud's psychoanalytic sessions were

predicated on a supposed cure achieved through 'helping the subject to overcome the distortions that are the source of self-misunderstanding' (Ricoeur, 1981: 265).

Giddens discusses this:

Self identity has to be created and recreated on a more active basis than before. This explains why therapy and counselling of all kinds have become so popular in Western countries. When he initiated modern psychoanalysis, Freud thought that he was establishing a scientific treatment for neurosis. What he was in effect doing was constructing a method for the renewal of self identity... what happens in psychoanalysis is that the individual revisits his or her past in order to create more autonomy for the future. Much the same is true in the self-help groups that have become so common in Western societies. At Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, for instance, individuals recount their life histories, and receive support from others present in stating their desire to change. They recover from their addiction essentially through re-writing the story line of their lives. (1999: 47--48)

Perhaps this account of Freud provides a helpful metaphor for practitioner research in which the researcher is seen as a psychoanalyst's client who lies back on a couch and talks of her life, her motivations, fears and aspirations, which become more tangible as they are spoken to the analyst. The words and the way they are put together become part of her. The story that the client tells of her life shapes her actual experience by providing a framework against which she understands what she is doing. Nevertheless, this reification of lived experience can deceive as well as enlighten.

An alternative to Freud's quest for a cure, is possibly to be found in the writings of **Lacan**. Lacan (e.g. Homer, 2005) sees the human subject as caught in a never ending attempt to capture an understanding of his or her self in relation to the world in which he or she lives. The human subject is always incomplete and remains so, where identifications of oneself are captured in a supposed image, an image of which, Lacan insists, we should always be wary. Here the individual is forever on a quest to complete the picture she has of herself in relation to the world around her and the others who also inhabit it. She responds to the fantasy she has of the Other and the fantasy she imagines the Other having of her. The identity thus created evolves through a series of interpretations (and mis-recognitions) through interactions with others.

In the context of practitioner research, for example, reflective writing may provide a forum for building such a narrative layer, in which the researcher acts as her own analyst as it were (Brown and England, 2004; Brown 2008). The images constructed in this process provide material for the researcher to interrogate herself. In this perspective the flow of narrative is an on-going construction of a reflective/ constructive/ disruptive layer that feeds whilst growing alongside the life it seeks to portray.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH DESIGN

These alternative attitudes to how we relate to the language depicting our actions primarily lend themselves to practitioner research contexts centred on building analytical apparatus through which to inspect and develop practice. They are a powerful means of deepening self-understanding and to build a conception of one's professional situation in terms of what one can do about it through a process that unfolds through time and experience. They relate to conceptions of action research shaped around *reflective* analysis, targeted at stimulating a process of 'professional development' that get at how current practice is trapped in regulative, *conservative*, or merely tired models, by following a cyclical *reflexive* model in which new understandings of self emerge during the research process. The questions to be asked along the way might include: How do I understand the broader social context within which my work takes place? How do I resist/ support the discourses that define my professional practice? What stories do I tell to justify my actions? Here the practitioner researcher forges, and reflects upon, a professional trajectory within which the research situation is recognised as being a function of her evolving perspective and the discourses that shape her practice, resulting from successive encapsulations of herself created within the research process (*moderate hermeneutics*). In *critical hermeneutics* research this becomes a transformative process, primarily concerned with the "emancipation" from the ideological structures that govern professional actions (curriculum frameworks, codes of conduct, legislative frameworks, terms of reference, etc). *Radical hermeneutics*, meanwhile, entails a complete break with existing structures. For Foucault, each individual is responsible for her own self-mastery without reference to universal or ideological rules. The individual must harmonise any perceived antagonisms to create a

‘balanced’ person. Through such processes the researcher develops an understanding of her practical relation to the situation.

An analogy might be drawn between such processes and a sequence of *psychoanalytic* sessions where the researcher, in creating reflective writing, would be producing accounts of herself, revelatory of particular perspectives. That is, writing, produced as part of the research process, would be seen as providing declarations by the researcher, more or less aware, of who she was and of what she was trying to achieve. The writings would provide framings of the past and possible formats for crafting the future. Yet within a psychoanalytic framework this version of events is perhaps haunted by the bits that she chooses not to see, or is unable to see. The image might be seen as a cover story for things the researcher is finding difficult to address. At the same time the researcher has to reconcile her own image with the image others seem to have of her and also how the tasks she faces seem to be framed for her by others. But more broadly these cover stories might pertain to a wider community, specific forms of common sense or ideologies that govern ways of life (Žižek, 2008). The research might then become an attempt to address personal difficult issues or, more widely, to better delineate how ideologies shape forms of action.

Such research procedures may be shaped primarily around the researcher collecting autobiographical data, such as a reflective diary, over a period of time, in relation to the world she occupies, perhaps shaped around some specific research questions that perhaps change as the research evolves. Such data could include the routine or mundane as well as more noticeable events. On-going discourse analysis of the data (see Chapter

17) could provide points of reference for her in constructing an account of who she was at different points in time and in different situations. Through this later analysis the researcher could provide an account of her own evolving self as a professional and as a researcher, shaped around earlier data that now provides an historic account of earlier events and perspectives. This research approach is discussed more fully by Brown and Jones (2001). At an ideological level the research may be shaped more around discursive analysis of the structures that govern social action in specific populations, such as curriculum documents, codes of conduct etc (Brown and McNamara, 2005; Brown, Atkinson and England, 2006).

## **STORIES FROM THE FIELD**

DANIEL HEGGS

I have read comic books for as long as I can remember and had associated them with fleeting, simple pleasures, yet looking at them with a critical eye has changed my relationship with them. A general history of the medium might focus on humorous newspaper strips, American superheroes and children's comics and these dominate our common perceptions of what is suitable material for a comic. Here the relationship between word and image is seen as straightforward. Knowledge of the typical content then regulates understandings of the form. So, the '... silly medium, suitable only for children' (Barker, 1984: 6) is hampered by a restricted message, in spite of having '... a

highly developed narrative grammar and vocabulary based on an inextricable combination of verbal and visual elements' (Witek, 1989: 3). Comics are texts in which representations are held in the blend of words and pictures, and so recognition of their hybrid form is an important first step in their analysis. This offers up a first problem. Interpretation and analysis develop from a translation of a hybrid medium into a verbal one. Simple description involves choices as to what is included, especially as intertextual knowledge can constrain what is focused upon. For instance, popular characters have a longevity that has seen them be regularly updated for new audiences and media. Batman and Superman have both moved into film, television, radio and cartoon. Our cultural knowledge of the characters and settings must be taken into consideration when looking at them critically as our preconceptions influence how a reading might progress.

The research from which this section is derived took Superman and Batman comic books as its main object of enquiry. These American superheroes have long and intriguing histories (Brooker, 2001; Wolk 2007). They have been updated, translated for various media and always in print in comic book form. It was important, then, to develop and employ a theoretically informed approach to the analysis of these hybrid texts that would remain sensitive to their signifying properties, that would provide a methodical and checkable approach and that would look to the function of the texts in broad cultural contexts. Concepts from narrative analysis, discourse analysis and psychoanalysis were employed in the readings of Batman and Superman texts in order that no single theoretical orientation dominated interpretation, thus allowing the logic of the world illustrated and as experienced to be shown. The role of the analyst/interpreter

is therefore central to any sense that is made of the text. I will now briefly outline what I take from these three interlocking areas of theory before offering an example reading.

Narrative analysis allows the general features of a plot to be explored and the particular narratives of the characters to be emphasized, and so I employed narrative analysis to focus on surface features of stories to be examined. Narrative also enables intertextual links to be highlighted, as narrative relates to other narratives, especially in the superhero canon. Discourse analysis was used to identify key themes beyond the salient narrative features. A Foucauldian approach allows emphasis on representation and meaning, which made its application to hybrid texts appropriate. Finally psychoanalysis was employed through the readings derived from discourse and narrative. Two broad areas, the Oedipus complex and the structure of fantasy, as described by Lacan, were focused upon. These two interlinking aspects of psychoanalytic theory enable issues of subjectivity to be explored and look to the relationship between the intersubjective and the intrasubjective. In this dimension the connections between the social and the individual are paramount, and these are grasped through an understanding of fantasy as a screen for desire. This goes beyond the internal logic of the text and includes the subjective position of the analyst/reader.

Each of these areas of theory could be employed independently, yet together they enable analyses to combine different perspectives so that meaning is not closed down through the application of a particular theoretical frame. As such the eclectic analysis I offer moves from post-structuralist, or radical, hermeneutics to psychoanalysis.

**Example reading**

Superman first appeared in the first issue of *Action Comics* in June 1938 and, much to the surprise of the publishers (McCue, 1992), was an instant success. Less than a year later, in issue twenty-seven of *Detective Comics*, D.C. Batman had his debut. Although both characters have certain similarities -- caped costumes and secret identities -- it is the contrasts that provoke fascination. As a comic book author and illustrator put it '[t]heir primal, complementary qualities have given rise to the entire field [of superheroes] and, arguably, have defined its parameters' (Gibbons, 1992: Introduction to *World's Finest*). These can be grasped clearly through the origin stories for the characters. These stories provide a psychological backdrop for the motivations of the characters, offering accounts as to why young orphaned boys would take up the fight against crime or injustice while dressed outlandishly. Superman's origin story was told with his first appearance, and Batman's was told six issues after he debuted. Since then the stories have been repeated many times in different contexts. The retellings allow for different interpretations of the characters, yet also delimit the possible range of character representations. The origin stories might then be said to provide an immanent textual surveillance of the characters, conferring authenticity on the figures represented and so guaranteeing that a genuine Batman or Superman is illustrated.

The example reading is from *Superman and Batman: World's Finest* (Gibbons and Rude, 1992). It is a two page spread that contrasts the origin stories for both heroes, and as such it highlights some of their structural similarities. Two main factors have influenced the selection of the text. First, it is not from the mainstream continuity of either character, but was from a special edition three part series. The appearance of the

characters deliberately harks back to the early Shuster and Kane versions and so recognizes the nostalgic appeal of the characters and their longevity as it pays homage to the ‘team-up’ titles of the 1940s and 1950s. Secondly, the juxtaposition of the two versions of the origin stories does some of the analytic work for a critical reader by illustrating the opposition of the characters in a complementary fashion.

The general approach I used is based upon Eco’s semiotic reading of comic strips (Eco, 1987), but not in order to search for the meaning of the text so much as to look at the way that meaning is signified. A panel by panel description highlights relationships between verbal and visual elements in the text, which in turn enables links to be explored. The sequence of panels selected here show Batman and Superman dreaming. Following Clark Kent’s and Bruce Wayne’s attendance at a fund-raising event for an orphanage both sleep fitfully, recalling their origin stories in parallel. This device reminds us that both characters are orphans and that they passed through a traumatic event that makes sense of their superheroic actions. The panels are juxtaposed, with Superman’s origins being shown in tepia coloured panels on the left-hand side of the page and Batman’s in inky-blue on the right-hand side. Reading the sequence over the two pages the break-down of the central edge of each panel can be seen. Rather than simply offering a straight edge to the panels’ contents the panels also represent meaning. Here a jagged pattern that becomes stronger through the sequence can be seen, indicating increasing agitation and disturbance on the part of the dreamers until they wake in the final two panels. As such, these origin stories are shown to be disturbing and powerful and maintaining an influence on the characters actions.

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The first panels show concerned and caring parents and the actions they take to protect the children, placing a child in a rocket to escape destruction or pushing him out of the way of a gunman. On the second page the first two panels depict the moments in which the course of the characters' lives are irrevocably altered with the launch of the rocket and the pulling of the trigger. The subsequent panels contain the consequences of the freeze-framed irreversible moments. A small child is held in the arms of a woman while a man behind her fights to put out a fire; a young boy is led away by a policeman while another searches for a pen and readies his notebook. Visible in the background of each panel is what has been lost by the characters, their biological parents. In the foreground are indications of their future roles. Such dreams are disturbing. Bruce Wayne and Clark Kent wake.

The sequence depicting the origin stories appears early in the story, once we have been introduced to the cities and main protagonists. We know that the heroes are different, fighting different problems. The unwitting recollection of the origin stories implies a more complex relation and reaction to the orphanage than mere altruistic concern. There is an identification between the heroes and orphans in the loss of parents, and it is the circumstances of this loss that have led to the adoption of vigilante identities and distance from family life. The description of the text is the first stage of interpretation, which can be refined through the three theoretical terms to show how they can be employed in the analysis of the sequence.

The repetition of the origin stories is a key plot point showing motivation of the characters and tying them into the emotional development of the story as the heroes



make an identification with the orphans -- an important aspect as the orphanage plays a key role in the events of the story. The orphans need care and protection. The juxtaposition of the two stories shows them to be equivalent yet different: one a superpowered alien the other a determined human. Further, the origin stories also tie the characters back into the superhero narratives that return to the late 1930s. Looking discursively, the importance of the family comes to the fore. Loss of biological parents is contrasted to an ideal of a caring and protective family life. A discourse on family helps to make sense of the character's actions as they seek to protect people from social threats. Further, a discourse of the lone hero might be discerned in this as individual figures emerge from the traumatic loss of parents, showing them to be alone, even when they have the support of others. This points to the social/individual divide, whereby individual roles and actions are constructed from a social loss, that of family. This can be understood through psychoanalytic theory. The origin stories can be understood as *primal scene fantasies* as they are concerned with the origins of the superhero subject. The conflation of *primal scene* and *primal fantasy* alludes to the manner in which an important originary moment for the subject can be understood as not necessarily having taken place for them to be psychically effective, but that is interpreted by the child as an act of violence by the father toward the mother. This can be grasped through Freud's elaborations of the Oedipus complex. First, the origin stories relate a crisis in the Oedipal situation in which the child is wrenched from the familial support network through an act of supreme violence. The adoption of the superhero role, then, is an attempt to resolve a crisis caused by the failure to enter into full symbolic relationship with the other. Second, Freud argued, in *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 1913), that the Oedipus complex was a repeat of a much earlier clan transgression that took place in pre-

history. Without accepting Freud's claims, this idea of pre-history can be applied to the use of origin stories for the two heroes. The origins are re-enacted or re-imagined in their pre-history in dream-like time (Reiff, 1963). The origin stories describe two imagined and fantasized single events that took place in a pre-history and that constitute the hero identity in the present. The scene from the past becomes what it always was. As such we can see the way that origin stories can be repeated and give a coherence to the multiple versions of Superman and Batman.

The reading offered here is not unproblematic. The analysis was based on how to approach a hybrid text, with a particular concern with how the individual and social combine. Central, here, is the role of description, and not just for the way it supports interpretation. Description enables analysis to start, and so links between prior knowledge of the characters, the text and theory. As such, the description is important for the reflexive turn. Knowledge of characters and of theory influences the conclusions that are made.

From this brief analysis the hermeneutic process whereby narrative, discourse and psychoanalysis come together to show the functioning of a text has been illustrated. Narrative has highlighted how key events can be grasped and described, discourse analysis has shown how immanent features help to make sense of the narratives, and psychoanalysis has brought these two aspects together to offer an account for the importance and repetition of the origin stories as 'genuine' representations of superhero identity.

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This book offers detailed discussion of practitioner research carried out in the context of masters and doctoral degrees. It focuses in particular on hermeneutic enquiry in which reflective writing generated by the researcher builds towards an assertion of professional identity through which professional demands are mediated.

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