

Response

A HERMENEUTIC PERSPECTIVE ON SUPERVISION SCHOLARSHIP

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In "Toward a Scholarship of Practice," Arthur Blumberg points out that attempts to fit the study of supervision into the procrustean bed of science—or "scientism" as Sergiovanni has characterized much of this work¹—have proven inadequate to portray the complexity of practice. Coming from a researcher who has approached the study of supervision using strategies of the empirical science that he now decries, his position is especially interesting.

But as a scholar working to articulate alternative approaches to inquiry in the field of supervision, I am concerned that Blumberg misses an opportunity to ground his argument in an already existing tradition of interpretive or hermeneutic inquiry and scholarship in supervision.² His omission makes him guilty of contributing to the very isolation of scholars in the field of supervision that he argues against. Principles informing a hermeneutic or interpretive perspective on supervision would enrich Blumberg's argument and would also help place it in the "scholarship of practice" he seeks for the field of supervision.

The first principle is that the hermeneutic perspective seeks "understanding" as its goal.³ This understanding evolves from involvement in and language

¹Thomas J. Sergiovanni, "Science and Scientism in Supervision," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 4 (Winter 1989): 93-105.

²Elliot Eisner, "An Artistic Approach to Supervision, in *Supervision of Teaching*, ed. Thomas J. Sergiovanni (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1982), pp. 53-66; Noreen B. Garman, "Reflection, the Heart of Clinical Supervision. A Modern Rationale for Professional Practice," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 2 (Fall 1986): 1-24; Patricia E. Holland, "Keeping Faith with Cogan: Current Theorizing in a Maturing Practice of Clinical Supervision," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 3 (Winter 1988): 97-108; John Retallick, "Clinical Supervision: Technical, Collaborative, and Critical Approaches," in *Learning about Teaching through Clinical Supervision*, ed. W. John Smyth (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 85-110; Thomas J. Sergiovanni, "Toward a Theory of Supervisory Practice: Integrating Scientific, Clinical, and Artistic Views," in *Supervision of Teaching*, ed. Thomas J. Sergiovanni (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1982), pp. 67-78; W. John Smyth, "Teachers as Collaborative Learners in Clinical Supervision. A State-of-the-Art Review," *Journal of Education for Teaching* 10 (No. 5, 1984): 24-28.

³Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), pp. 120-134.

about a work of human intentionality—supervisory practice. Hermeneutic understanding differs from the empiricists' notion of the term; it is grounded in the language or conversation that the individual has with the work under study, not in the isolation of variables. There is no separation between knower and known, rather what hermeneutic philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer has called a "fusion of horizons."⁴

While Blumberg's notion of "craft knowledge" may be considered a dimension of hermeneutic understanding, *craft knowledge* is more limited a concept than *understanding*. *Craft knowledge* suggests exploring practice as a self-contained phenomenon; *understanding* links considering the events of practice to rich linguistic and philosophic realms that add intellectual depth and rigor.

A second principle concerns the work of human intentionality that is studied. Conventionally, this work, even if not literary in form, is considered a text because it can be read and interpreted for meaning.⁵ Blumberg's chosen definition of theory reflects this notion of text. As theory is expressed and given a stable form in language, it becomes available as text for analysis and interpretation. The process of creating and variously interpreting the theories that explain supervisory practice, and giving details about the experiences of practice that support the theoretical explanation, has exciting implications for communication in the supervision community.⁶

While saying much the same thing as Blumberg, I'm trying to point out that he doesn't need to invent the concepts and language to explain these things. They are already available in the hermeneutic perspective. To be faithful to the hermeneutic perspective, however, Blumberg's own language is important because it is the process and product of his own understanding at a particular point, and as a text it becomes available to me and other readers for this kind of interpretive conversation. In the course of the conversation, a shared understanding and a shared lexicon is created that contributes to developing traditions of scholarship and communities of scholars.

Another principle is that through dialogue hermeneutics seeks what I have described above as a fusion of horizons, a shared understanding of the text or work under study. This view offers a way to resolve the schism that Blumberg describes between university faculty and school-based practitioners of supervision. Although his suggested agenda for meaningfully studying supervisory practice smacks of a university researcher's capitulation to the world of practice as the only way to escape from banal, trivial statistical research studies, he may be depicting a false dilemma. Granted, the re-

⁴Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 271–274.

⁵Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 147.

⁶John Smyth's recent work details the process. See John Smyth, "An Alternative Vision and an 'Educative' Agenda for Supervision as a Field of Study," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 4 (Winter 1989): 162–177.

searcher's emphasis on statistical studies has not yielded much that practitioners deem useful. From a hermeneutic perspective, however, the university researcher still has an important role, one that practitioners may find valuable—to create the text, to give language to practitioners' local theory and make it available to the larger community of supervision for analysis, interpretation, and understanding.

The university researcher also may use the text to bring to conscious awareness discrepancies in practice between practitioners' espoused theory and their theory-in-action.⁷ Here again the text promotes dialogue or conversation and a fusing of horizons for understanding. This perspective enlarges our concept of a community of scholars to include practitioners in professional dialogue. It enriches the possibilities of communication by allowing us to study and consider all the possible interpretations of the events of practice. The university researcher's tasks reach far beyond isolating and testing variables. The notion of the text greatly expands what we consider the material and methods of scholarly research.

One final point: These notions are not new to supervision. They are grounded in processes and concepts of clinical supervision—not the clinical evaluation that is passing for clinical supervision in so many places today. These notions—part of an interpretive or hermeneutic perspective embedded in Cogan's original rationale for clinical supervision—continue as a line of inquiry in supervision.⁸

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⁷Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, *Theory in Practice. Increasing Professional Effectiveness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974), pp. 29–41.

⁸Patricia E. Holland, "Keeping Faith with Cogan: Current Theorizing in a Maturing Practice of Clinical Supervision," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 3 (Winter 1988): 97–108.

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