Article

Intersubjectivity, Hermeneutics, and the Production of Knowledge in Qualitative Mennonite Scholarship

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Abstract

In this article, the author explores the nature of interpretation as it pertains to qualitative methods of inquiry. He elaborates on the epistemological problems that occur in discussions of the nature of human and social sciences as distinct from the theoretical foundations of the natural sciences. The examination of Mennonite scholarship provides an interesting case study as to the requirements of a hermeneutical social science because of the range of scholarly frameworks and varying locations of identity of the scholars in relation to the broader Mennonite community. The author argues that Mennonite scholarship is novel in the manner by which Mennonite scholars contribute to and participate within broad Mennonite intersubjective understandings. By extension, Mennonite scholars are able to deal with common epistemological problems and dichotomies that arise in the context of the researcher and the object of study.

Keywords: Charles Taylor

Introduction

The relationship between researcher and the object of investigation necessarily adheres to certain ontological assumptions or implicitly assumes answers to ontological questions. For qualitative research in particular, and for scientific inquiry in general, these assumptions, or implicit answers to ontological questions, have epistemological implications. In the case of qualitative research inquiry, one such ontological question might be as follows: How is meaning created and negotiated in a particular culture or in a particular social situation? The epistemological implication of this question also can be posed as a question, as follows: How do I, as a researcher, properly represent this meaning in my research?

What has become evident in this postfoundationalist and postpositivist era is that the answers to these ontological and epistemological questions are constituted in the researcher's and in the research community's methods of inquiry. The meaning of our methods of inquiry do not exist on their own (that is, theoretically as "methodology"), nor are they the individual inquirer's appropriation having personal and professional significance; but these methods are knowable in and through the culture and social situation in which they are practiced (exist as modes of practices).

In this article, I examine the practices of qualitative research inquiry from the perspective of these broader questions, questions that, essentially, rely on what has come to be known as interpretation in the interpretative or hermeneutical sciences as "human sciences" distinct from the practices of the natural sciences. The interpretative sciences, or the sciences of hermeneutics, according to Taylor (1985), repose on an intersubjective understanding of meaning. Information, as it is commonly referred to, is then never meaning neutral but is always invested with historical, situational, and dialogic sense that requires understanding, and hence interpretation, in any and all methods of qualitative research. Hermeneutics, as a theory of understanding and interpretation characteristic of the human sciences, is, then, the broader framework wherein qualitative research must find its place. This broader framework of the circle or, better, spiral, of understanding and interpretation is, therefore, always the context for how qualitative research methods constitute the significance of how "information is produced" in social action, including our speech practices, and so dependent on, and constitutive of, social and cultural structures. The two subjects (researcher and respondent; text, person or group) come together in a meaning-shaping dialogue that reflects not only the individual significance of each subject's social practices but also the social-cultural reality that is reflected in and supported (re-created) in the process of the qualitative research dialogue. By privileging the relational and experiential process of understanding, this interpretative framework challenges the irremediable chasm between subject and object that is the epistemological cornerstone of the empiricist model of knowledge inquiry.

Goals for this article

In this essay, I will look at how current Mennonite qualitative research can be understood as a hermeneutical science that engages the researcher in a profoundly reflexive relationship with the object of study. Mennonite scholarship will present an interesting case study because of the varying positions that the researchers fill within the Mennonite community and the kinds of methodological frameworks they employ. Initially, I will look at Kaufmann and Dreidger's (1991) major sociological text on Mennonite identity to see if it meets the requirements of understanding as characterized by Taylor (1985). I will argue that this sociological text on Mennonite identity is a very important and detailed work, yet its foundational principles are more in line with an empiricist, foundationalist epistemology, which prohibits the discerning of intersubjective and common meanings. I will then look to other Mennonite qualitative inquiry, most notably by Winland (1988, 1993), that might meet the requirements for a hermeneutically based qualitative social science. I argue that this is a significant contribution to expanding the intersubjective understandings in which Mennonites represent identities in scholarship through an interpretive structuralist approach that examines implicit structuring meanings within the practical consciousness of Mennonites. I will then supplement my reading of Taylor with a broader discussion of intersubjectivity and its hermeneutic framework that will be able to add to the notion of an interpretive approach for qualitative research that engages the historical and socially constituted positions of the participants with categories sensitive to intersubjective meanings. Here, the sense of intersubjectivity that is developed will help to overcome a residual dichotomy of subject and object that has been instrumental in the production of knowledge in traditional empirical social research.

Intersubjectivity and the human sciences

Intersubjectivity is a term that both beckons to the empiricist foundationalist tradition of science and goes beyond it. Intersubjectivity is a concept that denotes the act of according meaning between two or more subjects and establishing the objectivity of a claim made in research. On another level, the meaning of intersubjectivity also carries with it inferences of an ontological category that points to the acknowledgement that all meaning lies in the social arena in which human actors are a part. This operational definition of intersubjectivity is one of the distinctions that, Schwandt (2000, 2001) indicated, exist within the intersubjective realm of social significance. The second distinction he described is the notion of a lifeworld in which subjectivity and selfhood are constructed. This description of intersubjectivity indicates that all of people's actions, behaviors, intentions, and experiences are constitutive of this lifeworld and cannot be separated from it or that all of human action (in the broad sense) at once constitutes and at the same time is constituted through these intersubjective fields of meaning. Here, I will elaborate on two implications of intersubjectivity. One bears on how meaning is socially constituted within fields of common meanings, which implicates the ontological basis of research. The second implicates the epistemological consequences for the methodological position of the researcher.

Taylor (1985) relied on the ontological notion of intersubjectivity to distinguish the epistemological claims of the human and natural sciences. This distinction, on which I will elaborate below, is required to establish the epistemological claim that qualitative inquiry, as a hermeneutical science of interpretation, must be concerned with the re-presentation of these intersubjective meanings that exist against the backdrop of common meanings in the social world.

Meaning is inherently social and constituted by the social languages that actors use in a given situation. Taylor (1985) has used three requirements that indicate that meaning is always already found in the social domain. First, meaning is always for a subject; the meaning of something never happens in and of itself but is shared by subjects, an individual or group of individuals. Second, he wrote that the meaning of something can be distinguished from that which elicited the meaning. More simply, meaning is always contextually specific: One action might have different meanings in different situations. Finally, things have meaning only within a field. Thought of linguistically, words have meaning only from the sentence within which they are born. To simplify by an example, Taylor used the word shame. The meaning of shame is bound to its antecedent actions, such as hiding, which itself cannot be understood outside of the situation that elicited the feeling of shame. Moreover, shame would have no meaning outside of the field of other feeling words, which also could not exist without shame. From this definition of meaning, then, one can infer that meaning pervades situations in which actors act, situations that cannot be understood outside of the social field of common meanings that are particular to a group of people, culture, and society.

To be sure, Taylor (1985) presented several layers of interrelated meaning. Take, for example, participation in a political demonstration. One can participate alongside many other people, carrying signs, shouting slogans, marching, and engaging in the various activities that happen at a demonstration: There is an intersubjective and experiential understanding that it is good to participate in this demonstration. Yet, even though there is this level of understanding, this does not account for the myriad reasons why people participate in a demonstration. These motivations can all be subjectively understood. Person A feels one way about a legislative bill, whereas Person B feels a different way about a certain effect that the bill will have once it is passed, so even though there might be consensus that the bill should not be passed, there are differing opinions, beliefs, and values leading up to this consensus. At yet another level, these subjective

meanings and understandings can be understood only against the greater background of common meanings as to why people are demonstrating. One person could be a Marxist and understand the effects of the bill in a different way from the way in which Mennonites might understand the consequences of the bill. These two groups of people might agree with the denying of the bill but disagree ideologically. As such, there are no common meanings (at one level) between these two groups. At the same time, however, there is a societal level of common meaning in which the notion of demonstration is understood; it is understood within the political, linguistic, and cultural ideologies that govern a society. Demonstrators, whether individuals or groups agree or disagree to protest, all understand the concept of protest, even if most people would not protest. In fact, it is entirely because of these common meanings that there can be disagreement.

As such, meaning is always in the social domain in which people participate. These intersubjective realities are predefined meaning situations in which understanding is situated. The elements of a given situation are distinct from the situation in which the elements exist—meaning and its substrate are different—yet these elements cannot be understood apart from the situation itself. In fact, these elements are constituted by the situation in which they arise. To use the previous example, the act of shouting slogans at a demonstration has significance within broader intersubjective understandings that encompass the situation and mean something entirely different from shouting similar things at a rock concert.

For qualitative inquiry, the epistemological consequences of acknowledging the spheres of meaning that happen outside the sphere of subjective intentions and opinions are that these meanings are in constant negotiation. Taylor (1985) would suggest that these meanings are understood perpetually hermeneutically through interpretation. Traditionally, what the human sciences have been concerned with is locating areas of research within the acts and the subjective opinions and beliefs about these acts, but not the broader intersubjective and common meanings from which the acts cannot be separated. These acts are correlated as intersubjective brute data in relation to institutionally defined values: looking at the agreement or disagreement to demonstrate rather than the conflict and perpetual negotiation of meanings that constitute the existence or absence of these acts. Qualitative research, broadly speaking, must be concerned with these meaning-bearing situations, in which actions and behaviors have meaning for people participating in different intersubjective meaning domains. The myriad methods and frameworks considered qualitative allow the study of meaning at many levels, from the subjective understanding of intersubjective meanings to the discursive analysis of broad common meanings. The question that could arise now would be if qualitative research is a hermeneutically guided set of interpretations of these myriad levels of meaning.

Hermeneutics

Taylor (1985) has provided a (potentially contestable) distinction between natural sciences and the human sciences that requires an epistemological understanding of the goals of each one as distinctly different. Since the time of Newton, the natural sciences have been based on the empiricist foundationalist stance that requires the finding of brute data that is beyond interpretation and contestation. The foundations of a natural science are built on the quest for data that exists outside of the realm of interpretation that allows for a greater sense of predictability through its findings. The process of understanding in this field is dependent on facts, further evidence, and a common social language in which variables, dependents, and correlations are controlled instances of a certain knowledge. What is left out of this form of inquiry is the background meaning in which actors participate. Taylor argued that it is logically implausible to produce adequate knowledge of people with the scientific categories that deems predictability as the sin qua non goal of the human sciences.

The methods of qualitative research must have their epistemological basis in the act of interpretation, as the ontological properties of the objects of research are fundamentally distinct from those of the natural sciences. The epistemological privileging of nomological empiricist science in the study of people and culture belies the understanding of intersubjective and common meanings, which should be fundamental to the human sciences. Because people are self-defining creatures, whereby definitions are dependent on the social realities in which people exist, knowledge of these definitions is also partly constituted by the language used to describe them. As such, representing social reality as definable through facts and data that exist beyond the realm of interpretation misses the contextually significant webs of definitions and meanings that exist at any one point. As self-defining beings, the language that partly holds these definitions change as people change their sense of themselves in their world. These changes in self-definition require a different language if we are to understand these new interpretations.

The representation of meaning in qualitative inquiry is active in the continual turning and interpretation of social and cultural meaning. As such, this interpretation is also a part of the intersubjective dialogue that helps constitute the fields of common meanings in which it exists. As a part of the dialogic process of understanding, qualitative inquiry is methodologically bound to a hermeneutical spiral wherein understanding is the constant reformulation of preunderstandings. Lindseth (1986) presented a useful analogy to describe this process of interpretation and understanding through the reading of poetry. When individuals approach a poem, they bring with them an understanding of poetry, a condensation of previous experience and the intersubjective understanding of what constitutes poetry and how one should read it. When they engage with a new poem, the understanding that they had of poetry comes under immediate revision. The expectations they had contain certain resonances right from the title, which, in turn, adds to this previous understanding. This kind of preunderstanding, what Taylor called proto-interpretation, allows one to edge into the work with certain expectations and understandings. As the individuals continue to "feel" their way into the work, this preunderstanding is inadequate to cope with the residual impressions and resonances that this new poem brings with it. As Lindseth stated nicely, "a poetic text speaks to me with a fullness of meaning which continually transcends my expectations so that I have to change my pre-understanding" (p. 66). As such, one's horizon of poetic knowledge is transformed and nuanced continually. If the individuals read the poem once again or years later, they might be struck with things not seen before or even a completely different impression, which then changes their preunderstandings even further. Consequently, understanding depends on these or proto-interpretations; that is, there can be no understanding without having first understood. The intersubjective and social pregiven meaning then allows one to understand in the first place.

Taylor's (1985) sense of proto-interpretation resonates with Gadamer's (1965/1976, 1971/1989a, 1965/1989b) hermeneutics, which also depend on a notion of preunderstandings that determine or limit subsequent interpretations of meanings. Gadamer employed the notion of prejudices that continually work as sensitizing presuppositions for any subsequent understandings. Prejudices, originally seen as entirely negative to scientific research from the Enlightenment forward, are fundamental to the process of understanding in general and therefore cannot be done away with by employing certain methods. As Gadamer (1965/1989b) commented, the social sciences must not suspend the subjectivity of the researcher—which would be impossible—but, rather, it must knowingly engage with his or her own prejudices in a continual meaning-bearing process. Challenging one's prejudices is done not to eliminate them eventually but to give them full play in their being challenged in dialogue. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics based on preunderstandings is not a methodological act in need of a new discipline but, rather, a given

within the act of interpretation that situates the knower in history and in relation to the tradition being understood.

Within Gadamer's (1965/1989b) historical understanding, then, one is constantly affected by all the previous prejudices and meanings that the tradition carries with it. The full meaning of tradition is constantly unfolding not only by the historian's lived participation in history but also by his or her continual interpretation of the tradition; that is, the streams of historical interpretations, including specialized methodologies that contribute to the tradition, help determine the direction of interpretation. Effective history is all the previous interpretations and meanings that culminate in both our interest in and our prejudgments of the historical object (Gadamer, 1965/1989b). Gadamer believed that understanding, as an ontological precondition of being human, means to be fundamentally predisposed toward participating in the flow of tradition. Interpretation is a self-reflexive process that takes into account one's understanding as a historically situated endeavor and willingly places at risk those elements of the tradition that allow the historian to interpret the object of interest. As Makaryk (1995) wrote, hermeneutical understanding was, for Gadamer, the "result of a dialogue between the past and our present which occurs when there is a 'fusion of horizons' between the two" (p. 91). Therefore, our hermeneutical situation is constituted as a work of self-understanding of our particular historical situation and its continuity with the past. This process is reflective of the hermeneutical circle. Because hermeneutics works in the same way as the unfolding of the process of understanding, and understanding works like the ratchet of history, so, too, must qualitative research unfold in a similar manner.

In the process of verstehen (Schwandt, 2000, 2001), then, notions of validity, legitimacy, and the role of the researcher all converge in ways that reflect back on the researcher's ability to interpret; that is, the vital litmus test of "good" hermeneutically influenced scholarship rests on the depth and adequacy of interpretation, which reposes on the researcher's ability to interpret rather than being dependent on objectivist notions of predictability and replication. Understanding and interpretation for the qualitative researcher is, therefore, dependent on a few factors that predispose methods to normative constraints adequate to the research. These normative constraints are reflective not of objective method but, rather, of the processes of history and understanding and might be considered principles of interpretation. According to Lindseth (1986), understanding requires that one participate in the research one is doing, such that using people as a means to an end in research is unethical. As well, this understanding requires openness. This openness must be quite profound, in the sense that one must continually and dialectically engage with one's own prejudices as part of the understanding process. Prejudices in this sense are not simply negative impressions of some group, person, or activity but, rather, constitute all that one has understood up to a certain time. This includes the entire gamut of historical and situational understandings that orient one to the world. The spiral of understanding requires the constant reformulation of one's horizon of prejudices. This constant reformulation of prejudices and proto-understandings also implies the notion of reflexivity. Reflexivity, however, is an awareness not only of oneself affecting the research but also of how one is participating in the continual negotiation of meaning. This dialectical process requires one to be personally transformed in the process of understanding and interpretation.

The "rules" of hermeneutics also reflect this extremely personal engagement with the research, which requires the researcher's empathic sensibilities and ability for self-reflection. These rules that Lindseth (1986) discussed, although extremely important, reflect the same structures that constitute understanding embodied by the structures of prejudice as well as structures of history. Thus, measures of validity and legitimation are not dependent on external rules that create intersubjective agreement (in the operational sense) that ensure the objectivity of a given claim.

Rather, they are intertwined with the dialogic engagement of these structures as the actual experience of understanding is taking place. Hence, "the rules themselves have a rationality arising immediately out of experience" (Lindseth, 1986, p. 80). Because the processes of understanding mirror the structures of prejudice and history, concerns of validity are dependent on the empathy and reflexivity of the researcher, deeper interpretations, and logical syntheses.

What does it mean to study something within this hermeneutical circle of experiential intersubjective meanings? Now, I will turn to a few significant writings within Mennonite scholarship that will make clearer this sense of interpretation through experiential understandings. Mennonite qualitative research will make an interesting example because of the variety of forms of scholarship, ranging from broad survey analyses to narrative histories and autobiographical scholarly writings. Mennonite scholarship has become a rich tradition in which issues of identity (expressed through both theo-ontological claims and reflexive self-understandings of cultural and ethnic tropes) are debated through highly critical and self-reflexively engaged writing. We can see in Mennonite scholarship the two streams of thought that Taylor (1985) discussed: that of human sciences based on empiricist foundationalist epistemologies and those guided by the structures of interpretation and self-understanding, wherein subject-and-object dichotomies drift to the wayside. The first illustration will provide a telling example of an attempt to understand Mennonites through the correlation of institutional values, expectations, and theological categories with the subjective domain of values, beliefs, intentions, and behaviors.

Mennonite scholarship

Kaufmann and Dreidger's (1991) study The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization is a sociological study in which the authors measured the belief systems of contemporary Mennonites against several independent measures of Anabaptist beliefs. There are a few interesting things to elaborate on in relation to this that relate to the explication of meaning that should be essential to the human sciences. This is a functionalist approach, in which the researchers attempt to understand the issues and complexities of Mennonite identities in the contemporary world. The authors correlate their understanding of contemporary Mennonite identities in North America within and against the broader North American culture. They correlate five indicators of urbanization in a constant dialectic of change with five indicators of Mennonite identity that lead to the transformation and erosion of identity. These indicators of modernity include urbanization, education, occupation, income, and mobility. The indicators of Mennonite identity are religiosity, community, family, institutions, and ethnicity. They describe the resulting dialectic as secularization versus sacralization, individualism versus communalism, and materialism versus peoplehood. The secularization and modernization of Berger and Luckmann (1966; see also Berger, 1967) provide theoretical guidance in this work, wherein the core values of Mennonites— communalism, sacralization, and peoplehood—are diametrically opposed to those of broader modern society—secularization, individualism, and materialism. The result is the accommodation and acclimatization of contemporary Mennonites toward modernity at an increasing rate: More people are leaving the church, church issues and discipline have become more lax and liberal, and there are further church separations and broader conference disturbances.

Although Kaufmann and Dreidger's (1991) study is a very important work for Mennonites, and they completed it with the hope that it could assist community leaders, such as pastors and elders, the authors were still unable to account for intersubjective meaning but, rather, defined intersubjective reality, following Taylor (1985), as brute data identifiable. Kaufmann and Driedger used broad North American institutional values signified by individual and subjective acts. The authors placed these correlates against Mennonite institutional values, which they also identify by objectified individual acts. These findings, then, presuppose that intersubjective

reality is, in fact, these acts and that subjective impressions are based on notions of consensus and disagreement. Where there is disagreement is where institutional change arises. Winland (1993) stated that this form of scholarship is a "functionalist teleology," whereby the "various components of group identity stand in a fixed relationship to each other," which implies "that meaning and identity are necessarily on the side of integration and order in the dynamic process of change" (p. 112).

The major critique of this form of Mennonite scholarship (similar to Driedger, 1988, 2000; Driedger & Harder, 1990; Kaufmann & Harder, 1975; Redekop, 1988, 1989; Smucker, 1988; to name only the most relevant) has been from Winland (1993). Her critique of the kind of scholarship that Kaufmann and Dreidger have done in The Mennonite Mosaic is similar to Taylor's (1985) critique of political science, wherein formulations of intersubjective reality as brute data identifiable "often detracts from the contextual sensitivity of identity perception and expression" (Winland, 1993, p. 123). Winland also conceded that this form of scholarship does not allow for the proper exploration of Mennonites' lived experience through interpersonal interaction but, rather, focuses on the "pronouncements of Mennonite scholars and leaders" (p. 123).

In her mixed-method research (questionnaire and survey, personal open-ended interviews, participation in everyday Mennonite interactions and activities, etc.), Winland (1993) used Bourdieu (1977) and the notion of habitus to inform her theoretical basis. From the basis of habitus, she examined the idea that what is meaningful for a particular group of people is quite often the hidden processes of intersubjective practices and actions associated with that particular group. This research was conducted in reaction against the Mennonite identity crisis debates that had taken place between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s. Here, she focused on the hidden and structuring intersubjective meanings through explicit behaviors considered as brute data, and the dialectic of meanings that constitute the sense of being Mennonite that cannot be reduced to either religious quotients or ethnic components. For example, most Mennonites have rejected some accoutrements of traditional Mennonite culture, such as plain clothes, head coverings, baking, and other traits, which mainstream Mennonite scholarship has recorded and interpreted as the movement away from cultural and ethnic identities. What Winland suggested is that this misrepresents, and even disavows, the symbolic significance of these cultural traits. She explained through her research how the participants responded to questions of identity in different ways depending on how the researcher framed the questions, situations, and contexts in which they were asked. The ambiguous and variable responses indicated to Winland that the way in which people express their identities as Mennonites and share their experiences as Mennonites depended on the social circumstance in which the participants were engaged. For instance, the participants talked about different aspects of being Mennonite depending on which group they were involved with, such as at work, school, or other situations. She suggested that Mennonites "display several different, situationally relevant but emotionally authentic identities" (p. 129). These variable identifications cannot be reduced to individual acts or subjective beliefs, or even a Mennonite's ability to make good zwieback but is constituted through the web of intersubjective background meanings through which people define themselves. As well, as opposed to the teleological fear of the withering of Mennonite identities in the face of secularization that a good deal of Mennonite scholarship exhibits (see especially Driedger & Harder, 1990; Redekop, 1988, 1989), Winland focused on the dialectical processes that constitute Mennonite identity in the lived relations of Mennonites that actually work to strengthen a sense of Mennonitism.

Winland (1993) commented on the particularistic leanings in much Mennonite scholarship: "[The] work of Mennonite scholars can . . . be understood as being based, to varying degrees, on premises informed by their own ideologies, particular motivations and interests." Yet, despite the

pitfalls of this form of writing, she has found that Mennonite scholars have remained very aware of, and even have raised the sensitivity toward, issues of accountability in scholarship: "Nonetheless, the search for a viable tradition has resulted in a critical and reflexive Mennonite scholarship" (p. 440).

Winland's (1988, 1993) writings are complex and allow for the interpretation of intersubjective meanings and conflicts that slip representation in the active participant. Winland's style of research could be called structural interpretivism, whereby she is able to examine the structuring yet hidden precepts of Mennonites self-understanding that resides within the practical consciousness of the people. As shown by her important contribution, these structuring meanings might be in conflict with official discourses of Mennonites and hence often belie scholarly representation. This form of scholarship is also a qualitative approach to the examination of the implicit ethnic understandings of Mennonites by the drawing out of a depth interpretation of people's lived inconsistencies and inherent contradictions at the same time being able to retain and represent Mennonite intersubjective meanings and understanding.

For authors and scholars Gundy (1996, 1997) and Kasdorf (1991, 1997), their creative writing and scholarship are based on and stem from their families and their own experiences of being Mennonite and growing up in these communities. There is a strong tradition of narrative histories and autobiographical responses to the scholarly representation of Mennonite identities. Gundy is one author who has blurred the boundaries of scholarship, as he has drawn on poetry, personal experience, and family history as significant expressions of Mennonite identity. In her essay "Bahktin, Boundaries and Bodies" (1997), Kasdorf has produced a very personalized, almost allegorical, critical response to the discussion of Mennonite identities. Because she is both a well-established poet and a scholar writing both to those in Mennonite worlds and to those outside, she is able to blur the lines of the researcher-participant and insider-outsider dichotomies. Kasdorf's essay is a strong contribution to Mennonite cultural studies, because in it, she has drawn on the issues and historical contingencies of Mennonite sociological and historical scholarship that reflects the broader discussions of Mennonites.

To reflect on the identities of Mennonite communities, Kasdorf (1997) used the metaphor of the physical body, in which there is an inherent biological understanding in the creation of metaphors. Hence, the Mennonite community is a body, also considered the corporate body of Christ, and has similar issues of boundaries and borders as would our own physical bodies: "The physical experience of our own bodies shapes metaphoric ways of thinking, and that a culture's most important values will be aligned with the metaphorical structures of its fundamental concepts" (pp. 171-172). Kasdorf believes that Mennonites are a paradoxically embodied people; despite issues of repression and internal conformity, they can still express themselves in myriad cultural and spiritual traditions, such as choral singing, quilting, poetry, and art. More precisely, she has stated, through performance of these identities by various forms of Mennonite expression, the performers, in effect, write the unity of themselves into their performance. For Kasdorf, the unified performance is a metonym for a larger unity of the inherently fractured and social self.

Although Tiessen (1998) has critiqued this essay for its "naive" use of binary terms, she has not given Kasdorf's (1997) critical discussion of the insider-outsider correlative pair enough credit. To explicate her understanding of issues about the borders of Mennonites, Kasdorf has explored a dialogical model as something in which, even though there is a creation of the self and the maintenance of the boundaries of this self, the self is in constant negotiation, disruption, and recreation by others through language. She extended the idea of a dialogic system of meaning and significance to the notion of community. As such, community has similar qualities to our own sense of self where communities, like people, can define themselves only in relation to others and

through others. As well, she incorporated a personally reflexive and autobiographical account of how she has encountered the boundaries of Mennonites and the experience of Mennonite realities. A little disconcerted by the enclavic communities from which she has come, she has written of the significance of the social creation of self and community:

> If we understand boundaries to be the limits that form all living, changing organisms, and if we honor them because they give aesthetic shape to our lives and the lives of the communities we inhabit, changes will occur . . . Those in the community who challenge its norms (because of ethnic, gender, or sexual differences) would be valued as ones able to engage us in the conversations that help us determine the Body's shape—more than any writer of policy or theology. (Kasdorf, 1997, p. 188, emphasis in original)

Kasdorf challenged the traditional scholarly construction of the identity of Mennonites through static definitions raised against broader North American culture. She has understood that identity is formed through dialogic contestation, and as such, difference, or that which is not the same, should be valued as a part of the identifying process, not as an excluding and exclusive example of what the body should define itself against. I believe that the strength in this essay lies in her ability to assert by form and function what she has revealed in the content of her essay; that is, through the use of personal allegory, poetry, and critical thought in this essay, she blurs the lines of insider and outsider, scholarship and literature, while allowing the expression of a belonging as a self-proclaimed critical Mennonite. Kasdorf had engaged issues of identity creation and community maintenance that are understandable through intersubjective meanings and personal significances.

Kasdorf's (1987) contribution to Mennonite cultural studies represents an interpretive hermeneutical approach in several ways. She has attempted to explore these meanings through interpretation at different levels, through personal significance of these meanings, through broad metaphoric analogies, and through complicated theoretical analysis. As well, her critical interpretations are grounded through her experiential understanding of the issues of enclavity and difference that can be understood only through the web of intersubjective meanings in which these issues arise.

Dialogic intersubjectivity, hermeneutics, and Mennonite scholarship

Although there is a good deal of research that can also bridge the gap between the extremes here examined, these examples provide a good cross-section of the variety of forms of qualitative scholarship but also provide a sense of the issues debated within these differing epistemological stances. This account of Mennonite research and of hermeneutics is far from exhaustive. Yet, what I have tried to argue is how Mennonite scholars attempt to represent issues of meaning and constructions of identity. The production of knowledge in Mennonite qualitative scholarship takes a variety of forms stemming from different epistemological understandings. Because of the nature of a predominantly insider scholarship, Mennonite qualitative inquiry seems to be a special case that helps illuminate some of the personal processes involved in the act of representing meaning. The novel aspect of this scholarship is its participation within the broader intersubjective Mennonite experience and self-understandings. These writings must be able to attune themselves not only to the methods prevalent within Mennonite scholarship but also to how these methods are able to align themselves with broader intersubjective meanings and are able to interpret and represent this meaning properly. This form of reflexivity requires a constant reflection and contestation with prejudices and one's horizon of personal and social experiential understanding in a way that reflects Lindseth's (1986) idea of reflexive hermeneutics. Lindseth stated that

interpretations "unfold themselves in the dialogue between the message related by a particular state of affairs and the preunderstanding in terms of which we encounter this message" (p. 82).

To conclude

There has been a long debate in qualitative research on how researchers should approach their research. Terms such as contamination, going native, lying informants, and so on reflect the fading vestige of objectivity and the old separations between subject and object as mutually exclusive, yet, at the same time, these terms also point to the concurrent dismantling of this traditional separation. Hermeneutics is both an ontological and an epistemological theory of interpretation that philosopher's since the time of Kant have developed in relation to and in reaction against claims of knowledge acquisition based on the disengaged researcher. Unlike the first hermeneutical philosophers of the social sciences, who argued that hermeneutics is a methodological principle rather than a stance from which to base one's understanding of research, Taylor (1985) argued that what is essential to the study of the social sciences is the awareness that hermeneutics is fundamental to its epistemological underpinnings. This assumption contains several important points. Hermeneutics is the fundamental process of understanding and interpretation, and so should qualitative methods in methodological principles mirror this process. The relationship between researcher and the object of study is active and meaningful and is fundamental to the understanding of intersubjective meaning. Moreover, this relationship is historically and contextually placed and is the location of the production of knowledge. These implications for a hermeneutical qualitative inquiry also bear heavily on the interpreter. If understanding is dependent on a proto-interpretation that helps constitute self-definitions, and any antecedent interpretation is dependent on one's own understanding, then the act of interpretation is profoundly personal and dependent on the historical basis of the interpreter's previous interpretations and contingent identifications or prejudices. Because the researcher is engaged in an act of interpretation that is dependent on the intersubjective understandings and meanings, these interpretations also reflect the processes of history and prejudice. Hence, the spiral continues to wind its way.

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