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New Horizons for the Individual Research Consultation: Critical Hermeneutics and Habermas' Goal of Intersubjective Agreement

To understand anything at all requires having an angle on it, a perspective, an interpretive slant, in the absence of which we would just not understand, period. A neutral and disinterested understanding is pretty much a blank, unknowing stare. It is the look you see on the faces of students with a writing assignment without the least idea of what they are going to do. Their problem? No slant, no angle of entry, no interpretation. The facts you find are a function of the interests you have [...] a disinterested understanding has never got a term paper written. (Caputo, 2018)

The evolution of Individual research consultations (IRC) in academic libraries within the last four decades can be viewed as a microcosm of the changes and challenges that have taken place within library and information science (LIS) as theory meets practice. In particular, critical theory has broadened the horizon of social responsibilities undertaken by librarians and the policies they have embraced. The ALA's "Core Values of Librarianship" (2004) stated:

ALA recognizes its broad social responsibilities. The broad social responsibilities of the American Library Association are defined in terms of the contribution that librarianship can make in ameliorating or solving the critical problems of society; support for efforts to help inform and educate the people of the United States on these problems and to encourage them to examine the many views on and the facts regarding each problem. (para. 14)

Central to these responsibilities are the library's provision of reference and information literacy services. As such, librarians should become more aware of the power structures that may put up barriers between them and the students they are trying to reach. Understanding how linguistics impacts the power differentials between librarian and student is a first step in learning new ways to empower students to take a more active role in the research process.

Habermas' critical hermeneutics offers a way forward in bridging this gap through intersubjective agreement. It asserts that the dissatisfaction does not emerge because of the inability to procure relevant research material for the user, but that it comes as a result of inadequate use of dialogue or *intersubjective agreement* that brings about a fruitful fusion of horizons between librarian, user, and scholarly texts. Habermas' theory of intersubjective agreement proposes that rational communication and understanding can lead to a consensus among individuals. In practical terms, this means that individuals engage in communicative action to reach mutual agreement on an issue or topic through dialogue, discussion, and negotiation. In an academic library this specifically

means that a student is able to access the resources that they require. Habermas suggests that for intersubjective agreement to occur, individuals must engage in discourse with each other free from coercion, domination, and manipulation, whether it be from an individual or cultural setting. This requires open and honest communication, where all participants have equal opportunities to speak and be heard with an awareness of how the sociocultural setting may impact how open or closed an individual may feel. To facilitate this process, participants can follow certain communicative norms, such as respect for others' opinions, willingness to listen, and the use of evidence-based arguments.

Critical hermeneutics calls into question many of the positivistic assumptions of modernity, particularly its claim to value-free inquiry through empiricism, yet it does not wish to abandon itself to the anti-realism so often associated with post-modernity. Furthermore, critical hermeneutics is a critique of any claim to universality, even if it is hermeneutics itself, such as was suggested by Gadamer (Dostal, 2022). Gadamer defined hermeneutics as the art of understanding and interpretation. For Gadamer, understanding is not just a matter of decoding the meaning of a text or a symbol, but rather involves a process of fusion of horizons between the interpreter and the object of interpretation. Interpretation involves a dialogue between the interpreter and the object being interpreted, which results in a mutual understanding of both.

On the other hand, Habermas sees hermeneutics as a critical social theory aimed at uncovering the hidden dimensions of social structures and practices (Thompson, 1983). For Habermas, hermeneutics involves the critical examination of the structures of society and the ways in which they shape our understanding of the world. This involves a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of our social norms and practices, with hopes that a more just and equitable society can be created. While both Gadamer and Habermas emphasize the importance of interpretation and understanding, their definitions of hermeneutics differ in terms of their goals and methods. Gadamer's approach is more focused on individual interpretation, while Habermas's approach is more focused on social and political critique that takes place during the process of understanding. It is here being recommended that Habermas' critical hermeneutics be used as a source for intersubjective agreement in order to create fruitful dialogue and build the communication skills necessary for a more effective IRC.

Early Horizons in the IRC

Early stages of library science and the IRC were primarily occupied with "the practical organization of a library, provided that they are based on sound principles and reducible to one supreme principle [namely, that] a library must be arranged in such a way as to render speedily accessible whatever books are required

to fill every literary need” (Schrettinger, 1829, as cited in Hjørland, 2018, p. 234). As such, within some segments of library studies there was a tradition rooted in labor and underpinned by the positivism of modernity, where the “vocational-technical skills” of *how* to select, acquire, organize, store, maintain, and retrieve documents/artifacts occupied the prime concern for the organization and dissemination of knowledge in library studies (Miksa, 1988, p. 249). Hansson (2005) suggests that during these early stages “there was an extraordinary dominance of attempts to meet the requirements of positivist theory of verification (or falsification) and the subsequent formulation of general utterances regarding the archetypal ‘information seeker,’ the nature of emerging information needs or optimal requirements for query formulation in document retrieval” (p. 103).

However, as the field has grown (or not grown) with the demands put on it in an increasingly pluralistic, technological, and post-structuralist society, it has had to struggle to move beyond its positivistic roots and critically reflect on its current embeddedness within a historical horizon somewhere between modernity and post-modernity. Unfortunately, the reductionist tendencies to *know-how* espoused by Schrettinger, reinforced by the pressures of late-capitalism, continue to waylay a constructive fusion of horizons between critical theory and practice *in* and *about* LIS in general, and the fruitfulness of the IRC in particular.

The language of structuralist criticism relies on objectivist rhetoric, where meaning reflects a belief in independently existing objects and “the aim of discourse is to organize the instrumental use of it objects” (Grady & Wells, 1985, p. 33). Whereas, poststructuralist criticism is rooted in subjective rhetoric where meaning arises only in the communicative discourse as a state of probabilities in which participants acquiesce. As Cohen (1993) suggests, if reference and the IRC are to overcome either of these static paradigms, a new language must emerge and take seriously the problems of meaning. Habermas’ critical hermeneutics with its emphasis in intersubjectivity has the potential to overcome the pressures and injustices of late-capitalism and infuse IRCs with meaningful dialogue that bridges the divide between the modernist project of bibliographic instruction and the post-modern injunction for socially just interpretive strategies embedded in the ALA’s policies on information literacy.

Intersubjective agreement attempts to bring an end to the isolation and warring of the structuralist and poststructuralist camps by taking seriously the possibility of rational negotiation among responsible and autonomous individuals “who must mediate the opposing values of clarity and self-expression, readability and stylistic interest, effectiveness and truth” (Grady & Wells, 1985, p. 33). Habermas’ intersubjective agreement is a critical-hermeneutical task that when undertaken in the IRC can open up new avenues of dialogue and research for librarians and library patrons. Habermas (1973) stated:

The mediation of theory and praxis can only be clarified if to begin with we distinguish three functions, which are measured in terms of different criteria: the formation and extension of critical theorems, which can stand up to scientific discourse; the organization of processes of enlightenment, in which such theorems are applied and can be tested in a unique manner by the initiation of processes of reflection carried on within certain groups towards which these processes have been directed; and the selection of appropriate strategies, the solution of tactical questions, and the conduct of the political struggle. On the first level, the aim is true statements, on the second, authentic insights, and on the third, prudent decisions. (p. 32)

The IRC is a relatively new addition to the myriad of reference services provided by academic librarians, but it has already gone by many names such as “term paper clinic,” “term paper counseling,” “personalized research consultations,” “individual library research clinic.” Despite the proliferation in terms, they all share a common core of elements. Bergen and MacAdam (1985) first summarized this core as having three essential elements: one-to-one interaction between librarian and student; consultation tailored exactly to the student’s research topic; and in-depth interactions where the librarian provides substantially more time and specific courses of action (p. 334). Such services have grown as a result of the rapid increase in college composition courses resulting from increasingly “open” admissions processes that began in the 1960s (Nystrand et al., 1993). Bergen and MacAdam (1985) analyzed the initial proliferation of these programs, noting that “while reference and bibliographic instruction seem to divide the world of user assistance between them, programs blending elements of both services are beginning to emerge in their own right” (p. 333). Bergen and MacAdam’s work reinforced the ideals of an assumed “ideal user” and the pre-defined set of objectives that produce “the right book [source].”

Hernon and McClure’s seminal 1986 article concerning “the 55 percent rule,” which states that “staff generally answer 50-60 percent of the questions correctly; make infrequent referral, either internal or external, to the library; fail to negotiate reference questions; and conduct ineffective search strategies” (p. 37) also impacted IRC evaluation. Their study also demonstrated that more time with the patron did not produce more accurate source retrieval, which called into question the essential elements of the term paper clinic. In light of Hernon and McClure’s findings, the term paper clinic would have to adjudicate with the inability of the librarian to assume that they have accurately met the perceived needs of an assumed or ideal user who knows what they want but simply lacks the ability to know how to get it. Nicholson et al. (2019) highlight that the problem with positivistic notions of “accuracy” and the “ideal user” is that it “seek[s] to remove individual students from their own histories and trajectories, to erase those histories and control those trajectories [...] which dissociate students from their

history and academic libraries from their institutional and historical contexts, in order to remove uncertainty from and already know our future [...] and, in so doing, seeks to ignore politics and power” (p. 65).

In the years that followed Herson and McClure’s (1986) findings, Charles Bunge sought to introduce a compromise that helped to address the disparity between accuracy and user satisfaction. Using the Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation Program as a more holistic source for quantitative and qualitative evaluation, Bunge determined that the level of agreement between librarians and users on the usefulness of a source was more telling of the overall success of the library/user interaction. He states, “In academic libraries, the data indicates that there is a positive relationship between the number of sources consulted or suggested and patron perceived answering success” (Bunge, 1999, p. 127). Likewise, the seminal work of Marie Radford (1996) arrived at the same conclusion and stated:

Library literature suggests that interpersonal communication between librarians and those seeking their help is not always satisfactory and can lead to expressions of dissatisfaction and frustration. Even when the appropriate information is obtained, the user may still leave the interaction with a negative impression of the librarian and of the library experience in general. Clearly, the relational needs of users have to be met along with their informational needs. An understanding of the relationship between interpersonal communication processes and librarians’ and users’ perceptions of the reference encounter will provide a basis for articulating problems as well as possible solution. (p. 125)

These revelations in reference would help pave the way for future evaluations and implementations of the IRC, especially as the age of information began to take hold, and the need for information literacy would eclipse the usefulness of bibliographic instruction alone.

Despite this early call to information literacy, it would be another decade before it was given primacy of position in the IRC. In a relatively short period of time, libraries were forced to acknowledge that a majority of information was now to be found outside the bounds of its physical collections and would have to be accessed electronically. Thus, a reevaluation of the IRC began within the academic writing of LIS professionals.

Nearly a decade and a half after Rothstein’s (1990) work laid out the parameters of the IRC, or term paper clinic, Hua Yi (2003) would redefine those boundaries and update its. Her focus remained embedded in the idea that building competency skill for the successful retrieval of sources was of the utmost importance and paid little attention to the social impact of those sources on the individual information seeker. She states, “In the past decade, library instruction has evolved from traditional one-shot session to multi-phased and multi-leveled

information literacy program; from teaching specific tools and sources to teaching broader skills of information searching and evaluation” (p. 342). The shift from the accuracy of source retrieval to evaluating the usefulness/truthfulness of a source and viewing the IRC as a teaching process helped to embed the user and librarian in the information life cycle. It continued to predetermine and assume the questions that the user had by using the research topic as the starting point for the IRC rather than the initial dialogue with the student. Yi’s research reaffirmed the importance of evaluating the success of the IRC within a qualitative framework that incorporated the perceptions and teaching function of the librarian as a basis for the overall effectiveness of the meeting. However, her focus on teaching in the IRC versus viewing it as a dialogue would prove problematic in light of the findings of future studies. A major drawback to Yi’s research is that by encountering students at their point of need, she assumed a greater level of understanding of the research topic—and the jargon associated with it—on the part of the student than was actually warranted. Her research also indicated that 90 percent of the librarians involved in the study adequately “covered the information research process” (p. 347), which would also prove a bit misleading for later studies that looked at the satisfaction rate of librarians in how the information they taught was perceived to be received by the individual in the research consultation.

The studies of Gale and Evans (2007) and Attebury et al. (2009) followed along the same basic lines as Yi and placed the IRC within the teaching function of information literacy and moved away from the older model of source provision whose goal was the production of a bibliography. However, they continued to focus on the preliminary research done by the librarian concerning the research topic of the upcoming IRC, which predetermined the direction of the conversation and assumed the satisfaction of its outcome by meeting those predetermined talking points. By focusing on teaching information competency skills but ignoring the critical reflection required to assess them in light of their political and social impact, these studies only accomplished half of the recommendations laid out by the ALA’s initial report. In effect, they didn’t consider how “this discourse erases questions of power, politics, and history, and works against social justice. In describing what the future *is*, rather than what it could or should be, this discourse [...] erases our ability to shape our futures, and our responsibility for so doing” (Nicholson et al., 2019, p. 69). Subsequently, it would be some time before the IRC would be influenced by critical thinkers like James Elmborg (2006), who argued that “by developing critical consciousness, students learn to take control of their lives and their own learning to become active agents, asking and answering questions that matter to them and to the world around them” (p. 193).

In the decade that followed, two important developments would take place within the academic literature concerning the IRC. The first was that a more concerted effort was made to understand the perceptions of students and librarians

concerning the effectiveness of the interaction in both its accuracy and meeting the felt psychological needs of the participants. This meant paying closer attention to the language being used by the librarian and evaluating how that language impacted the desired outcome for effectively teaching the information competency skills. The research done by Kathy Butler and Jason Byrd (2015) showed “that communication, specifically vocabulary, influences the teaching outcomes of the consultation and contributes to perception of effectiveness” (p. 86). Their study found that students only understood about 60% of the skills being taught, but that those students were still satisfied with the consultation. Their research also indicated that library professionals suffered from “provider pessimism,” which indicated their awareness that there were problems with the communication taking place. However, the pessimism they felt did not account for the overall satisfaction felt by the student concerning the interaction. They concluded that “research consultations provide teachable moments if the participants speak the same vocabulary and use communication skills to verify learning” (p. 86). Their research suggests the need for a linguistic turn in the IRC that pays closer attention to the dialogue taking place, if it is going to fulfill its goal of teaching information literacy competency skills. The second development that took place was the ALA’s (2015) release of the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, which reiterated the need for library professionals to bridge the gap between its historical focus on competency skills and incorporate a greater level of critical reflection that engaged the student on an ethical level.

The ALA’s (2016) new Framework states, “Information literacy is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning” (p. 3). The new framework echoes the need for greater levels of reflective dialogue between librarian and student if those skills are going to be applied in ways that are ethically and socially oriented. Unfortunately, many of these studies seem to echo the conclusion made by Fournier and Sikora (2015) that “[future] research should address the need for more objective assessment methods of studies on the IRCs [...] with usage statistics and surveys, objective quantitative studies would yield a greater quality of evaluation for IRCs” (p. 256). However, this fails to incorporate much of the research that suggests that the faults in the IRC are qualitative and based in the communication between the librarian and user. Their call to a deeper entrenchment in the positivism of modernity speaks to the larger issue of the lack of a philosophical foundation in LIS and a failure in the ability to implement the ethical horizons of the ALA’s policies in information literacy.

Future Horizons: Infusing the IRC with Meaningful Dialogue

Habermas understood that hermeneutics itself can be a closed system that ignores the possibility of complicity with the dominant structures of power when it is not allowed to develop free from force. There have been other attempts by LIS scholars to integrate hermeneutics, of particular note is that of Benediktsson. He set the stage for the study of hermeneutics within Library and Information Science by illuminating the failure of a solely empirical program to cast a net wide enough to account for the interdisciplinary nature of LIS. However, Benediktsson (1989) is not suggesting that LIS abandon empirical research strategies as they have formed a significant backbone or rationality for LIS by providing analytics and metrics, but he emphasizes the need for those metrics/analytics to find their interpretive value or “linkage points” within one of “four major strands in contemporary hermeneutics” (p. 210). Unfortunately, he did not consider critical hermeneutics to be of immediate value and could not conceive of future where the ethical dimensions of LIS would become front and center in the age of information. His reliance on Gadamer’s universal hermeneutics did not take into account that language and its interpretation could be used as a medium for coercion by socially dominant powers. Ultimately, hermeneutics should be considered a strategy within LIS and not an alternative foundation for librarianship. Both Myers (1994) and Kelly (2016) emphasize the pragmatic aspects of hermeneutics that seek to integrate the normative standards derived from empirical research with “a critique of ideology within its ambit (but not its orbit), that we are likely to realize the best of all possibilities: a pluralistic understanding of the language-immersed interpretative schema which we inherit and contribute to and a well-formed objectivistic critique which is open to the contingent and practical requirements of information using communities” (p. 108).

Critical hermeneutics is ultimately a “language-immersed” philosophical critique of texts and the communicative action of social institutions and cultural traditions that produce them. It borrows from both Marx and Freud, as it is a relentless critique of texts, tradition, and institutions that seeks to penetrate beneath their surface-function to expose their role as instruments of power, domination, or social manipulation. Furthermore, it looks to the cognitive and moral development of the individual and society to assess the levels of communicative competence and barriers for intersubjective agreement by making conscious that which is unconscious through inter-reflexivity. Piaget’s theory of cognitive development explains how an individual is always constructing more meaningful models of the world. Most importantly, Piaget disagreed with the idea that intelligence was predetermined or fixed trait and asserted that cognitive development was a process that unfolded as a result of cognitive and environmental conditioning. It was Lawrence Kohlberg who expanded on this work. Kohlberg insisted that moral development unfolded in a similar fashion and occurred in stages during cognitive development.

Three stages defined moral development. The pre-conventional stage demonstrated how morality was externally controlled by the given authority figures in an individual's life and judged the rightness and wrongness of a decision based upon the judgments of those authoritative figures. The second stage is the conventional, where an individual's sense of morality is tied to the broader range of the personal and societal relationships they engage in. In this stage they continue to accept the judgments and rules of authority figures but also believe that those authority figures are necessary in ensuring positive relationships with their peers and in maintain the social order. Finally, the development of the post-conventional stage takes place when morality is defined through abstraction. Knowing which stage the user is operating from can help the librarian engage in more meaningful dialogue and help that user select sources that engage them their level of understanding but also help move them to a higher level of cognitive and moral development. The goal is to make visible the ways those institutions and traditions have been used as instruments of domination or control over the lifeworld and influence the prejudgments and pre-understandings that individuals take for granted.

Habermas' hermeneutics brings to consciousness the prejudgments or pre-understanding of the speaking subject and uses this self-referential position to focus on whether that natural language is open or closed. The pre-understanding of an individual places them within Piaget and Kohlberg's cognitive and moral continuum. Open natural language, or that which is not suffering from a social mechanism of control is both unlimited and restricted. Habermas stated:

It is unlimited because it can be extended *ad libitum*: it is restricted because it can never be completely achieved [...] language is not closed, but it allows the rules of application for any utterance to be determined *ad hoc*, commented on or changed; and metacommunication has to employ the language which itself is made the object: every natural language is its own metalanguage. This is the basis for that reflexivity which, in the face of the type-rule, makes it possible for the semantic content of linguistic utterances to contain, in addition to the manifest message, an indirect message as to its application [...] thanks to the reflexive structure of natural languages, the native speaker is provided with a unique metacommunicative maneuvering space. (p. 246)

The reverse of this open natural language is a closed bond with the linguistic tradition that confronts or inhibits their natural language, which can indicate coercion by systems of power through forced consensus. Positivism and empiricism force this consensus as they seek to remove the speaking subject from their lifeworld and delegitimize their ability to question or dialogue. Critical hermeneutics leads to an ascertainment of the truth only to the extent that the truth is to establish universal agreement for an unlimited community of interpreters. The

problem with positivism is that it uses its claim to neutrality or objectivity without a proper differentiation of the intentions or interests of the subject that made possible the impetus for the empirical study to begin with. It seeks to control those claims by technocratic means by placing it outside the bounds of natural language. The failure of those technocratic claims are often seen within late-capitalism when placed outside democratic control, and science becomes dominative over nature or marginalized people (Leckie et al., 2010).

Habermas' concept of the lifeworld further opens up the idea of preunderstanding in that it is the stage upon which communicative action takes place. It is made up of the pragmatic, or the taken for granted, social norms that make basic communication possible within a society. Much of what constitutes the lifeworld could be said to be the subconscious aspects of society, which are brought into conscious reflection only when they are broken or being critically evaluated for their usefulness or harm. These norms are shaped through their embeddedness in cultural systems like education, politics, religion, art, or law. For Habermas, the lifeworld has three dimensions: the empirical or objective world of science, the social world governed largely by its ethical or political boundaries, and the psychological or inner-life of the individual. In short, the lifeworld is a set of rational norms that are intuitively grasped, empirically verifiable, and made socially acceptable through the symbolic mediation of common language. Critical hermeneutics is a reflexive critique that brings to consciousness the assumptions of the lifeworld and opens up those assumptions to dialogue for intersubjective agreement, especially when those claims are accepted as universal. Gerard Fairtlough (1991) describes this mediation of the lifeworld "it helps to describe how groups make sense of the objective world of facts, of the social world with its ideas of right and wrong, and of the presentation by individuals of their inner subjective worlds, and how these groups reach mutual understanding about their situation and decide on what to do about it" (p. 556).

The IRC as Speech Acts

Habermas also understands that natural language may be altered by forced-consensus by pseudo-communication. This communication must be examined with depth-hermeneutics to determine whether it is pathological due to the individual (cognitively or morally) or the societal system in which the communication is taking place. Critical hermeneutics looks to the regulative principle of rational discourse to seek out this distorted communication, even when there is a fundamental agreement or scientific legitimation. Such distorted communication is often the result of positivism. Habermas utilizes Austin speech act theory to develop the basic principles of common language and uses critical hermeneutics to expose mechanisms of control that inhibit intersubjective agreement. A locutionary act, as

described by Austin, is the most basic verbal utterance that produces a meaningful exchange between speaker and listener. For a locutionary speech act to take place, it must be public or that which is able to be understood by all members of a linguistic community. It follows prescribed grammatical and lexical patterns that have as its goal metacommunication. The speaker must be aware of the difference between the categories of subject and object, which requires that the speaker is able to separate what is public knowledge and what is inner-dialogue. Habermas states, “the speaking subject becomes capable of distinguishing between reality and appearance to the extent to which language acquires for him an existence separate from the denoted objects and the represented state of affairs as well as from private experiences” (Ormiston, 1990, p. 258). Habermas also saw contradictions in the message of the utterance as part of normal speech, as far as those utterances are unintentional and indicate a need for clarification on the behalf of the speaker. The final component to locutionary speech act is that the intersubjective identities of those taking part in the communicative act are mutually recognized as independent and *irreplaceable*. An illocutionary act is accomplished only after the prerequisites of a locutionary act have been met and communicates a propositional intention on the part of the speaker and implies consequences of the commitments and obligations that accompany it. Perlocution is the effect of the locutionary and illocutionary speech, which may be irrespective of the initial speech acts. Within the lifeworld, successful communication assumes that the illocutionary act is successful if it elicits the desired perlocutionary response. However, critical hermeneutics reveals that such success can be parasitic and successfully realizing intention in others is less important than achieving mutual understanding.

A Practical Application for the IRC

Intersubjective agreement by means of critical hermeneutics within a library consultation would look something like the following. First, the librarian should listen actively to the student's needs, concerns, and questions. The librarian can encourage the student to provide more information about their research project, such as the topic, research question, and the sources they have already consulted. Second, the librarian can engage in a rational discourse with the student by asking clarifying questions, offering suggestions, and providing guidance on how to find relevant resources. The librarian can present evidence-based arguments, such as why a particular database or search strategy might be helpful for the student's research.

During the dialogue, the librarian should ensure that the student has an equal opportunity to participate in the conversation and express their opinions and ideas. The librarian should also respect the student's perspective and feedback. Intercultural communication can potentially complicate this process, but it can also

produce some of the most fruitful dialogue. Critical hermeneutics is a theory that emphasizes the need for interpretation and understanding of the social and historical context in which communication takes place. In the academic library setting described above, applying the principles of critical hermeneutics would involve a deeper analysis of the student's research needs, the context and cultural norms associated with the specific library, and the broader social and cultural factors that may influence the research process. To apply critical hermeneutics to the situation, the librarian could engage in a dialogue with the student that not only addresses their immediate research needs but also explores the broader social and cultural context in which their research question arises. This might involve asking questions such as:

- What are the underlying assumptions and values that inform the student's research question?
- What social, political, or cultural factors have contributed to the emergence of the research question?
- How might different interpretations of the research question impact the research process or the conclusions drawn from the research?
- Furthermore, it may require extra sensitivity in areas where students may feel vulnerable exposing their own life experience as it relates to their research questions. Try to assess whether, within their immediate context, the environment may be hostile to them, such as being LGBTQ+ within a conservative Christian school, needing an abortion, or exploring abortion options within a state that criminalizes abortion. Librarians can forget that the dialogue or intersubjective agreement isn't just taking place between a student, a librarian, and the documents/resources they need, but that the library as place is part of that social engagement. A student doesn't readily separate the academic library from the views or taboos of the institution or the state the institution is in. It us up to librarians to be aware of wider social power differentials that may cause a student to not fully engage in the information-seeking process out of fear.

By engaging in this deeper level of critical analysis, the librarian and student can work together to explore the complexities of the research process, including the social and cultural factors that may impact it. This approach can help the student to develop a more nuanced and critical understanding of their research topic, while also providing a more meaningful and engaging research experience. Moreover, critical hermeneutics also emphasizes the need to recognize and challenge power imbalances that may exist in the communication process. In the library setting, the librarian should be aware of their position of authority and actively work to create an environment where the student feels empowered to participate fully in the

research process. This will likely involve encouraging the student to ask questions, offering a range of perspectives and resources, and promoting an open and respectful dialogue that recognizes the diverse experiences and perspectives of all individuals involved in the research process. Once the student and librarian have reached a shared understanding of the research project and the resources needed, they can agree on a course of action, such as the best databases to use, the most relevant search terms, or the most appropriate sources for the research. Throughout this process, the librarian should facilitate an open and honest communication free from coercion, domination, and manipulation. The goal is to empower the student to engage in a critical and rational discourse to reach an intersubjective agreement that meets their research needs.

Conclusion: A Fusion of Horizons

If librarians hope to see the ethical dimensions of their individual research consultations flourish, they will need to have a more robust understanding of the critical components of dialogue. Habermas turns the IRC on its head by suggesting that intersubjectivity or intersubjective agreement is the goal of objective truth. For the librarian, then, objective truth is not realized through illocutionary force bringing about a desired perlocutionary response but is found in rational agreement. Positivism, empiricism, and rationalism fail because they Force the illocutionary act with an expected perlocutionary response. It replaces the “irreplaceable” other with a predetermined and coerced version of itself. When librarians begin to embrace critical hermeneutics as a methodology for intersubjective agreement in the IRC, there exists a greater potential for librarians and users to come to a greater level of satisfaction and accuracy in both source retrieval and in achieving the ALA’s ethical goals for information literacy through a fusion of the modern and post-modern horizons.

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