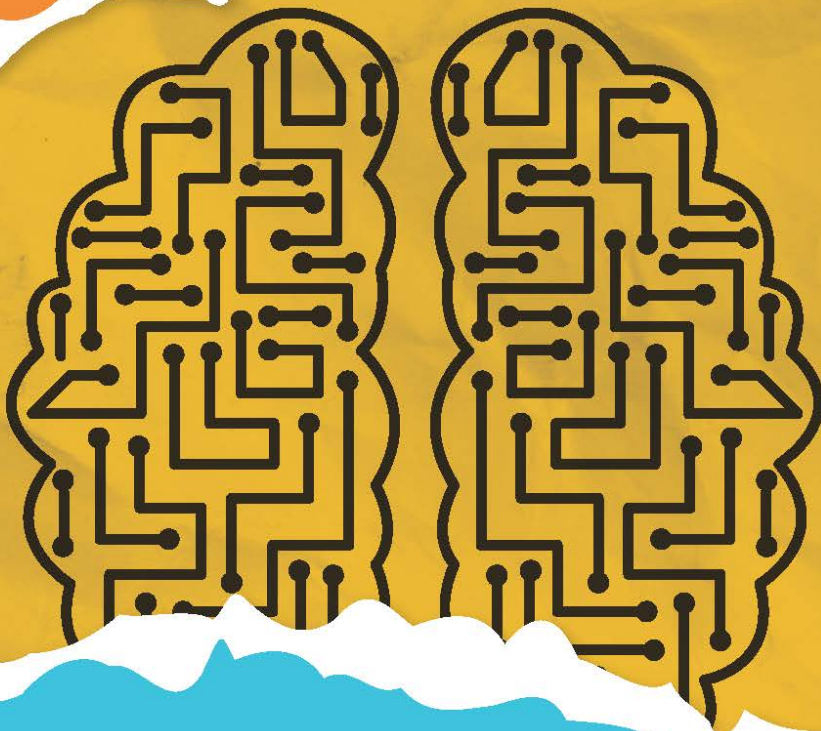


# Reimagining South African Higher Education

Towards a Student-Centred  
Learning and Teaching Future



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# CHAPTER 10

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## ACHIEVING STUDENT-CENTRED ADVISING USING HERMENEUTIC THEORY: IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVISOR TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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### Abstract

Advisors need to be responsive to students' needs and their changing context in order to address student success. Theory has a role to play in supporting advising practices and the induction and inclusion of theories in training and professional development is essential. The pandemic led advisors to re-imagine existing social science theories and explore hermeneutics as an alternative innovative, novel, and contextually relevant approach to advising. Incorporating hermeneutic theory in professional development training programmes creates a common knowledge base for advisors and adds to their repertoire of tools. However, a paucity of empirical studies exists on the application of hermeneutic theory in advising. In order to address students' changing needs during the advising process, the purpose of this study is to explore the application of hermeneutic theory in advising in the South African higher education context and its possible inclusion in advisor professional development. The argument advanced is for theory-led advising practices using hermeneutics as well as for hermeneutics to inform academic advising practices. A qualitative research design using hermeneutic phenomenology informs this study. In-depth interviews were conducted with eleven advisors who received training prior to and during the pandemic. This study enhances hermeneutics in advising by including evidence-informed advising, continuously monitoring student's progress, knowledge and effective communication and reflections by advisors and students. Taken to scale and through the incorporation of an evidence-informed hermeneutic theory approach to advisor professional development and training, this theory is able to create conditions for a student-centred future that foregrounds equitable student support in a reimagined higher education context.

**Keywords:** academic advising; hermeneutic phenomenology; hermeneutic theory; professional development; student needs; student success

## 1. Introduction

Advisors need to be responsive to students' needs and their changing context in order to address student success. Students' needs are identified during the advising process since advising typically involves guiding students through their university career with issues such as finances, curriculum planning, scheduling classes, understanding degree requirements, referral to resources and setting personal and career goals. Advisors' responsibilities are thus broad and include the entire university experience (Moosa, 2021). Advisors' ability to adapt to address students' changing needs is dependent on the repertoire of appropriate theories that they have to draw on to inform their knowledge base. Advising as a profession in South Africa is gaining momentum in part due to the efforts of the Siyaphumelela student success initiatives and ELETSA, a non-statutory professional association, which holds allied membership to the Global Community for Academic Advising (NACADA) in the United States. NACADA is devoted to spearheading the professionalisation of advising (White, 2020). In South Africa, no formal training exists, such as, a bachelor's or master's in advising, and advisors join the profession from different disciplinary backgrounds. In order to support the professionalisation of advising, training and professional development are essential. The University of the Free State is the only higher education (HE) institution in South Africa that offers a weeklong training programme in advising. This training programme is based on the NACADA professional development model and has been in existence since 2018. Advisor training and professional development are viewed as conceptually different, where training refers to activities undertaken in the first year of an advisor's employment and professional development refers to the ongoing education and learning of experienced advisors (Duslak & McGill, 2014). Both training and professional development are applicable within this study. Inducting advisors into their advising role is crucial for their development and retention. Advisor training and professional development expose advisors to different social sciences theories that may inform advising practices, such as, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, Marcia's ego identity development, and Chickering's theory of identity development (CTL, 2019). Emanating from the humanities, Champlin-Scharff (2010) proposes Heidegger's hermeneutic theory as a theory that could add value to advising. Hagen (2019) also argues that it is necessary to explore hermeneutics in advising. However, a paucity of empirical studies exists on the application of hermeneutic theory in advising in the South African context. Consequently, guidance on how to incorporate hermeneutic theory in advisors' training and practice is lacking. In order to address this, this study provides an overview of the theory, advisors experiences addressing students' needs and a conceptual model for using hermeneutic theory in advising.

The problem informing this study is that most theories are based on international studies with students and contextual issues that may differ from those found in South Africa. Additionally, advisor training and professional development have only recently been formalised in South Africa. A variety of theories should thus be made available to advisors, not only those emanating from the social sciences.

This study focuses on the importance of hermeneutic-informed student-centred academic advising practices in order to address students' changing needs as well as the benefit of including hermeneutic theory in advisor training and professional development. In order to address students' changing needs during the advising process, the purpose of this study is to explore the application of hermeneutic theory in advising in the South African context and its possible inclusion in the training and professional development of advisors and to contribute to enhancing advisor training and professional development. The argument presented is for theory-led advising practices using hermeneutics as well as for hermeneutics to inform academic advising practices. The research question posed in this study is: how might experiences with hermeneutic theory be used during advising to understand students' needs and changing context and inform advisor training and professional development?

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Hermeneutics is described as the interpretation of meaning (Butler, 1998). Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic philosophy presents an opportunity to conceptualise an understanding of students' needs during the advising process (Champlin-Scharff, 2010). This study focuses on a contextualised interpretation of Heidegger's hermeneutic theory in advising as operationalised by Champlin-Scharff (2010), which includes interpretation, connectedness, being-in-the-world, time, context, ongoing investigation, and advisor reflections.

### **2.1. Interpretation and context**

According to Heidegger, human beings (Dasein) use the conditions of their existence to understand and make sense of experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). As such, interpretation shapes our identity, our understanding and how we make meaning (Butler, 1998). Butler (1998) argues that interpretation involves construction, conflict, and ambiguity. Understanding students' needs is thus crucial. Champlin-Scharff (2010) argues that the advisor is the interpreter who listens to students' needs and subsequently makes meaning and tailors advice. For Heidegger, existence is contextualised, and meaning is derived from the social and historical context in which humans find themselves, which is subject to change (Champlin-Scharff, 2010). Context shapes the meaning of events and how experiences are interpreted in particular spaces (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). A student's everyday context is something that an advisor should be aware of. Contextualised, tailor-made advice is preferable to prescriptive generic advice (Champlin-Scharff, 2010). A student's context is thus central to any advice generated in consultation sessions and advisors should allow students to share their contextual realities.

### **2.2. Connectedness (being-with-others)**

Heidegger stresses the importance of connections with others (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Interpretation in relation to others or connections to others as members

of a group, assists individuals to make sense of their experiences. Butler (1998) argues that connections are able to facilitate setting and achievement of goals. Family and friends would influence students' decisions due to the connections that are established even before the student connects with an advisor. Connections and disconnections with others (McGill, 2021) in the context that students find themselves in, affects how they make sense of things. Advisors are thus able to facilitate connections between students (McGill, 2021). McGill (2021) argues that advisors are able to connect students to the purpose of attending a HE institution, a programme, a career, and the associated values.

### **2.3. Being-in-the-world**

According to Heidegger, humans construct reality from their own beliefs and experiences (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). For Heidegger, the nature of being and understanding is complex, and being-in-the-world involves a variety of social actions (Butler, 1998). Personal awareness is important (Reiners, 2012); therefore, the advisor should be in a "reflective state of understanding" (Butler, 1998, p. 288). Hermeneutics relies on interpretation and prior knowledge (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). However, advising is not objective: the advisor brings their background and experiences into the advising process, which, in turn, influences the advisor's interpretation and understanding. Advisors should not negate their prior experience of the world or students, and therefore, bracketing experiences and biases does not come into the advising process. Meaning-making occurs through consultation between the student as the narrator and the advisor as the interpreter. In Heidegger's framework, interpretation and meaning are shaped by where an individual is located contextually. For Heidegger, context is broader than location, it includes the historical and social context in which an individual is located (Butler, 1998). The implication of this for advising is that the advisor needs to acknowledge that a student's framework is multi-faceted. The importance that a student places on certain issues is thus shaped by their connections and experiences in their context over time.

### **2.4. Time**

For Heidegger, time is not a chronological issue; it relates to a significant phenomenon and being in a particular space where time connects the past, present and future (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Time is central to understanding changes in an individual's life, connections, and world (Sloan & Bowe, 2014), and advisors should be cognisant of this. In their relationship with students, advisors should be aware that grief and the loss of a loved one, represent a change in connection or a possible disconnection and affect performance and what is considered important for a student to accomplish in a particular semester (Champlin-Scharff, 2010). Students' needs change as their world changes over time. Champlin-Scharff (2010) argues that interpretation, connectedness, time, and being-in-the-world are thus interrelated when advisors use hermeneutic theory.

## **2.5. Ongoing investigation**

McGill (2021) argues that advising facilitates conversations. Continuous conversations in sessions with students are recommended, in order to understand students' context (Champlin-Scharff, 2010). These could be logged and referred to, but the essence of gathering such information is for advisors to use contextual information during the advising process. Hermeneutic theory is a tool to understand students during the advising process and through story telling advisors are able to use hermeneutic theory to better understand students in their changing context (McGill, 2021). Additionally, hermeneutic theory enables a continuous process to understand, interpret and make meaning of students' needs within their context over time (Champlin-Scharff, 2010). Continuous investigation is thus advocated when using hermeneutic theory in advising.

## **2.6. Advisor reflections**

Understanding students' context is important when drawing on hermeneutic theory in advising, and advisors should engage in self-reflection and understand their own contextual backgrounds. Reflections on how advisors conduct their advising sessions, how they promote an understanding of students' context, and how they interpret how students make meaning is encouraged when using hermeneutic theory (Champlin-Scharff, 2010). Hermeneutic theory enables an understanding of the continuously changing situations that students find themselves in, while emphasising the advisor's subjectivity. This subjectivity necessitates reflection because the advisor brings their context and experiences into the advising process. The benefit of advisor reflections is more effective advising (Champlin-Scharff, 2010).

## **3. Research Context and Methodology**

In order to institutionalise advising at a research-intensive university, in 2014, advisors received initial training primarily on how to support and refer students who were identified as being at-risk. When national training became available in 2018, advisors volunteered to attend a professional development training programme at the University of the Free State. The training programme focuses on various components; however, the conceptual component is of particular interest, since it focuses on theories and provides a common knowledge base across the HE sector. Advisors are thus able to provide improved support to students, and theory serves to strengthen the professionalisation of advising within HE (Pasquini & Eaton, 2019). Participants used hermeneutic theory in their practices, and the operationalisation of hermeneutics as a viable theory in advising will be elucidated in the next section. This study thus attempts to produce an argument for a theory-led advising practice using hermeneutics, as well as for hermeneutics to inform academic advising practices. As such, hermeneutics is proposed as a theory to inform advising practices and is also used as a theoretical lens to understand advising practices.



A qualitative research design using hermeneutic phenomenology according to the philosophical perspective of Heidegger (Sloan & Bowe, 2014), formed the basis of this study. Phenomenology enables a researcher to understand the common meaning of a phenomenon that several individuals ascribe to their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on creating meaning located in text and understanding the subjective consciousness of human beings (Cohen et al., 2002). The phenomenon in this study is the application of hermeneutic theory in advising by advisors in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic at a research-intensive university in South Africa. The purposively selected sample (Creswell & Poth, 2018) consisted of eleven advisors, two male and nine female who all experienced the use of hermeneutic theory in their advising practices. Advisors were informed that ethics was obtained and participated in the study voluntarily. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), interviews are appropriate for a phenomenological study. Due to the lockdown, electronic semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams. Participant advisors were introduced to the theory of Heidegger's hermeneutics and used hermeneutics in their advising practice. Advisors read literature on Heidegger's Hermeneutics as well as its application in practice (Spanos, 1976; Schmidt, 2016; Warnke, 2016; Sayapova & Arsenteva, 2014; Lafont, 2015; Clark, 2011; McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). The researcher was thus able to enquire about participants' experiences using hermeneutic theory in advising during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to address students' needs. The interview schedule included questions such as:

- Based on your experiences during the pandemic, what would you say were the most important student needs that you addressed?
- In your advising practice during the pandemic, how were you able to make use of hermeneutic theory?
- How did the various aspects of hermeneutics allow you to address students' needs?
- Given the remote context that you are working in, how would you characterise the advice that you gave to students?
- In your experience since we went into lockdown, were students' needs constant in the four terms?
- What role did the performance dashboards play in your advising?

Interviews were recorded on an independent recording device to assure participants' anonymity and confidentiality and were transcribed verbatim. An abductive approach, which combined a deductive and inductive approach, was used to analyse data (Bryman, 2016). The deductive method involved using hermeneutic theory to interpret the data, and the inductive method, allowed original themes to be derived from the data. During the data collection and analysis process, the researcher's personal views were not bracketed, instead they were employed in the interpretation of the transcript text in which advisors' experiences were located. Evidence provided in the findings thus reflects a first-person, verbatim account of how participants communicated and how the researcher interpreted advising experiences.

## **4. Findings**

The findings highlight themes related to hermeneutic theory in advising, such as, interpretation, being-in-the-world, context, connectedness, continuously investigating students' needs, and time. Unique themes that emerged include continuously monitoring students' progress, knowledge, effective communication, and advisor and student reflections.

### **4.1. Interpretation and making meaning**

Interpreting and making meaning of students' changing needs during the COVID-19 pandemic was an issue which advisors were confronted with. During consultation sessions, students posed "difficult questions" and communicated issues related to not having "data, connectivity, and electricity" to challenges with "learning online", "returning to campus", as well as, "financial issues" (Interview 8). Advisors needed to make meaning of students' context and as such, understand students' context-guided advice. Comments from advisors included, "I'm just gonna assist the student just to get an understanding of what their thoughts exactly are, of what the situation really is" (Interview 8). One advisor reported making "inferences" while interpreting students' needs (Interview 5). Making meaning is dependent on how students express themselves, and this was expressed by an advisor as not giving students "standard responses", but "delving deeper, putting yourself, you know, in the students' shoes" (Interview 2). Most advisors tailored their advice to students' "particular needs" and "particular circumstances" (Interview 1). This included "having a sense of empathy towards their situation and just being invested [and] curious about what else could be going on" (Interview 2). Generic advice was frowned upon because students' "context and background differed" and the success of advice or an intervention was dependent on contextual factors (Interview 5). One advisor stated that, the "factors that contribute to that can never be the same for any student ... then you address according to their own challenges, not a generic kind of advice" (Interview 7). An advisor thus stated that, "one advises in a tailored approach" (Interview 10) according to students' individual circumstances, others used "generic advice" such as referral to university support structures (Interview 9). It must be noted that some generic advice could still be tailor-made to students' needs even though students may need to be referred to student support structures. Making meaning of what students said based on their context was regarded as "the most critical" advising skill, which was acquired "over time" (Interview 9).

### **4.2. The world of the student**

Awareness of the multifaceted context of the student's world allows advisors to gain an understanding of their world and to draw on their own experiences, age, context, and educational background to address students' needs without feeling the need to bracket these aspects. Due to the pandemic, students experienced deaths in their families and communities and needed to mourn the deaths of their loved ones. Advisors noted with concern that "the number of emails relating to



bereavement were overwhelming” (Interview 4). One advisor reported looking “at the students’ needs” and respecting “how students wanted to deal with their loss” (Interview 7) as important considerations. Making the various support options available to students assisted with meeting students’ needs. Advisors tried to, “just understand [students’] thoughts ... where they are, ... align the kind of thinking they had at that particular time, try to motivate them, and to really not give up” (Interview 8). It was important for advisors to allow students to “take time off to mourn and to heal after sorting out their academic issues” (Interview 3). The advisor’s understanding of the “academic space and that assignments, lectures, and tutorials continue” even if the world of a student changes, was an asset in advising students (Interview 3). While “containing situations” was crucial, most advisors felt that “understanding the boundaries of the advising role was important even if they were trained as psychologists who were now working as advisors” (Interview 2). One advisor noted that advisors sometimes need to, “act as psychologists in that particular moment although our job is not being a psychologist ... in advising” (Interview 7).

### **4.3. Connectedness**

Connections were formed between advisors and students including peer-advisors. Advisors are ideally placed to form connections with students. One advisor stated that, “as a peer-advisor and as an advisor, you make connections with students” (Interview 10). The pandemic limited the process of establishing connections with students. Due to “limited internet connectivity and data”, consultations with students took place “after hours” putting a strain on advisors (Interview 3). Advisors commented that they made an “effort to connect with students” and “introduce themselves to students in a manner that would indicate that they were approachable” (Interview 11). Forming connections also enabled students to go on a “discovery journey” (Interview 11). Some advisors encouraged students to “form groups with their classmates and friends” in an attempt to create connections between students especially in the context of online learning (Interview 3). Advisors also formed connections with peer-advisors. These “very positive relationships” (Interview 3) enabled peer-advisors to become “the main contacts for students” (Interview 7). Advisors viewed peer-advisors as “not only the first port of call for students but that peer-advisors shared the advising workload” and that they “were an integral component of the advising team” (Interview 1).

Strong connections also existed between students and social structures such as their families and communities. Advisors felt that family had “a lot of influence in terms of students continuing their degree”, but that students were also “able to exercise their agency when they experienced challenges” (Interview 10). The negative influence that family had on students related to which degree parents would fund. One advisor’s experience was that a student persisted in the degree because the “family was like you have to do this degree and complete this degree, we will only fund you if you do this degree” (Interview 10). Communities also had expectations of students since students would sometimes “be the only actuarial

science person”, so they could not “drop out” (Interview 8). Advisors reported that some students who were “the first in their families” and may even have been “the first in the community” to enrol for a certain degree, experienced pressure from their communities (Interview 3). The expectation from families and communities was for the student to succeed because they carried the hopes and dreams of their family and community. Advisors felt that these students “find themselves trapped, trying to please their parents whereas they’d like to do something else” (Interview 3). The “pressure” placed on the student related to earning potential and changing family situations, by getting “enough income to come back and change the situation at home” (Interview 3).

#### **4.4. Continuous investigation of students’ needs**

Students use their agency to identify their own needs. Most advisors felt that they were in a position to identify students’ needs because they drew on their “previous experiences” but that “understanding the students’ context, understanding their needs obviously does come from the students themselves” (Interview 1). Advisors recognised that students had multiple needs and that, “it’s not only one subject, it’s multiple subjects and multiple like social issues as well” (Interview 1). Investigating students’ needs within their context was required on a continuous basis due to changes in students’ individual situations. External changes in the lockdown levels also necessitated continuous interaction with students to address their needs.

#### **4.5. Change over time**

Time, in the context of the pandemic brought with it its own challenges. What the students needed over time, from one semester to the next, differed as their environmental context changed. One advisor was of the opinion that some first-year students did not consult because “they would still think that they are the best things since sliced bread” (Interview 5). Another advisor reported that students “come late in the year” (Interview 10), making it extremely difficult to assist them. This happened during the pandemic despite the “extension of advising hours” that were afforded to students (Interview 8). One advisor reported that students’ “emotions were not that high, they got used to the new normal” (Interview 3). Extensive notes were taken, and advisors reported that they “refer back to the notes” when students attended follow-up sessions (Interview 9). Time was also an issue for students who were on conditions because they needed to “catch-up with all the courses that they did not do well in, in the first semester” (Interview 8). Advisors thus noted that students’ needs over time were not “stagnant” and that “whatever phases that our students are going through” were dependent on the time of year (Interview 3).

#### **4.6. Continuously monitoring students’ progress**

Advisors used the student persistence dashboard to monitor students’ academic performance throughout the year. Some advisors used it to gauge how COVID-19 was affecting students’ “academic performance” (Interview 1). The dashboard

provided data on which students were “at risk, highly at risk and those who were borderline” (Interview 3). The dashboard was also able to identify those students who were “performing well” and who needed to be acknowledged for their excellent academic performance (Interview 4). Regarding monitoring academic progress, one advisor outlined this process as, “we identify like what are the causes and then, you know, you suggest what you possibly can do and then the student goes and tries to do that” (Interview 10). The intervention site dashboard served as a case management tool to allow advisors to log the various aspects undertaken during advising. Advisors reported capturing data on the quick capture portal, and although they “didn’t find it very difficult to use” some “didn’t use it a lot at the beginning of the year” (Interview 1).

#### **4.7. Knowledge and effective communication**

Knowledge about the university was regarded as essential for an advisor. A recently appointed advisor stressed the importance of “extensive knowledge about the university’s structures” because being new was “a little bit challenging to adapt especially in terms of, you know, certain rules with the university” (Interview 1). During the pandemic, the advising situation was “different to anything anyone’s encountered” (Interview 1). This necessitated being able to advise the student in a “holistic” manner that demanded “knowledge of the university structures, rules and regulations and different contact referral points” (Interview 7). Knowledge was also viewed as the basis for effective communication. Knowledge of “career options” and “how to use a degree”, was regarded by advisors as an issue that needed to be part of their communication with students (Interview 3). The pandemic allowed “different avenues of communication”, which were regarded as a means to “reach out to more students” (Interview 4), because students “just needed to be heard” (Interview 1). Communication and consultation with tutors were essential. Advisors mentioned that they listened to the tutors who “were very helpful because they are students ... so we were able to find out what other challenges we might have missed” (Interview 4). Communication with tutors revealed that student challenges were best identified by listening to the “students’ voice” (Interview 10). Communication with students also served to create a space where students were empowered. One advisor’s experience was that students said, “thank you for the conversations, they really helped me, they uplifted me” (Interview 10).

#### **4.8. Advisor and student reflections**

Advisors communicated their reflections regarding their advising practice, student reflections, and well-being during COVID-19. Upon reflection, advisors admitted that advising was not an easy task, especially during the pandemic. Reflectively, one advisor noted that a combination of theories could be used when advising, depending on the student’s context. This was phrased as, “I don’t think I adhere to one particular theory, but it depends on the circumstances and the challenges that the student comes with” (Interview 10). Reflection also allowed another advisor to reimagine advising in a “post-COVID period” (Interview 4). Reflection was

noted by one advisor as “something that was learnt on the training course and subsequently adopted as a practice” (Interview 1). This advisor saw reflection as, “something I definitely considered after the training and in my advising as well” (Interview 1).

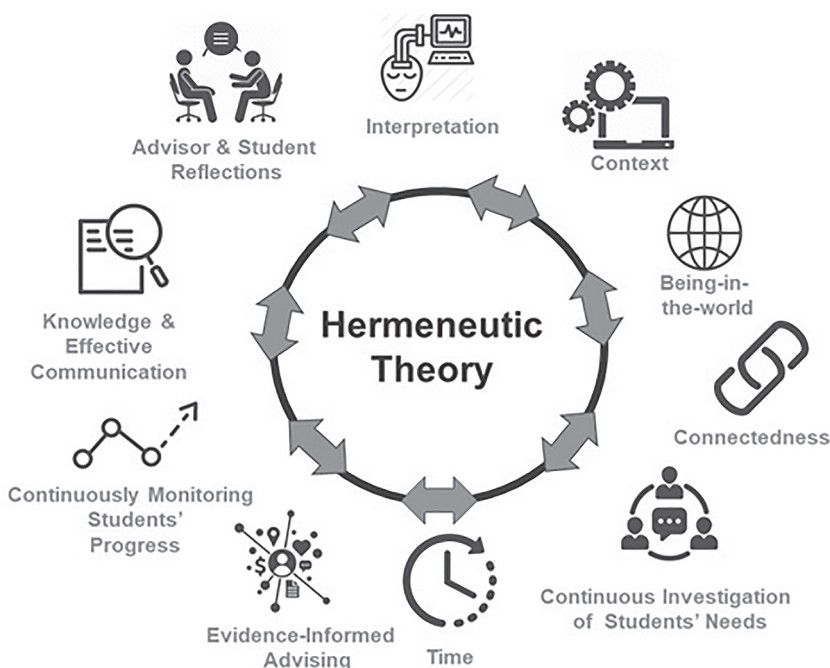
Using hermeneutic theory, one advisor created “space” in advising sessions for students “to just reflect” (Interview 2). This allowed advisors to gauge from student reflections, “if students have achieved what they wanted” (Interview 7). According to one advisor, reflections have “nothing tangible to show” (Interview 7). However, student reflections revolved around changes in their perspectives, approaches, and behaviour. This advisor added that reflections included “what they [students] needed to change” (Interview 7). An important reflection was that student reflections “can always turn into a developmental experience for students and make sure they come away having learnt something” (Interview 1).

## **5. Discussion**

The findings revealed the applicability of hermeneutic theory as a theoretical lens in advising and the emergence of a conceptual model from its incorporation in practice in order to advance hermeneutic-informed academic advising. The contextual realities of advising during the pandemic necessitated innovative, student-centred ways to address students’ needs. Evidence-informed advising and continuously monitoring of students’ progress, as the incorporation of hermeneutic theory in advising practice and in professional development are also important findings emerging from this study.

### **5.1. Applicability of hermeneutic theory in advising**

Advising as an emerging field was foregrounded in a special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). Obaje and Jeawon (2021) used cognitive-development theory and, de Klerk (2021) used social realism to reflect on their advising practices. However, none of these studies focused on hermeneutic theory. While Hagen (2019) acknowledges that theories from the humanities are not often used in advising, the applicability of aspects of hermeneutic theory in advising such as interpretation, context, being-in-the-world, connectedness, time, investigation of students’ needs, and advisor reflections were explored in this study during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The adoption of hermeneutic theory in this study indicates that it is a descriptive rather than prescriptive theory, and as such, processes are described without solutions being prescribed. As suggested by van den Wijngaard (2019), hermeneutic theory is able to enhance advising practices. The contextual framework that emerged in practice from this study incorporates evidence-informed advising, continuously monitoring students’ progress, knowledge, and effective communication and advisor and student reflections (see Figure 10.1).



**Figure 10.1:** Contextual model for using hermeneutic theory in advising (developed by the author)

Advisors are encouraged to interpret and make meaning of students' needs in context. Although the model is circular, advisors are able to draw on the various aspects depicted in the model at any point in the advising process. The impact on student success is that the application of theory from a student lens is addressed by allowing students to reflect on what their needs are and how they could be assisted. Student and staff reflections enable a journey to be undertaken which locates the student at the centre of the advising process based on the connections that advisors make with students, the knowledge and communication channels that are established, the continuous monitoring of students' progress and the evidence-informed approach that is undertaken to contribute to student success. This study highlights the application of hermeneutic theory and its ability to provide equitable student support by addressing students' needs. Using hermeneutic theory in academic advising enables a student-centred approach that proactively addresses students' needs thereby contributing to student success.

## 5.2. Evidence-informed advising

Advising is an evidence-informed practice, and hermeneutic theory is able to foster this. This study indicates the essential nature of data to support advising. Institutional data from course performance and feedback sessions all supported advising geared to meeting students' needs. Extant literature also highlights the benefit of using student persistence software systems and data-informed advising to promote student success (Moosa, 2021). Advisors used data to inform advising, before, during, and after the advising process to continuously improve advising practices (see Figure 10.2).

## Reimagining South African Higher Education: Towards a Student-Centred Learning and Teaching Future

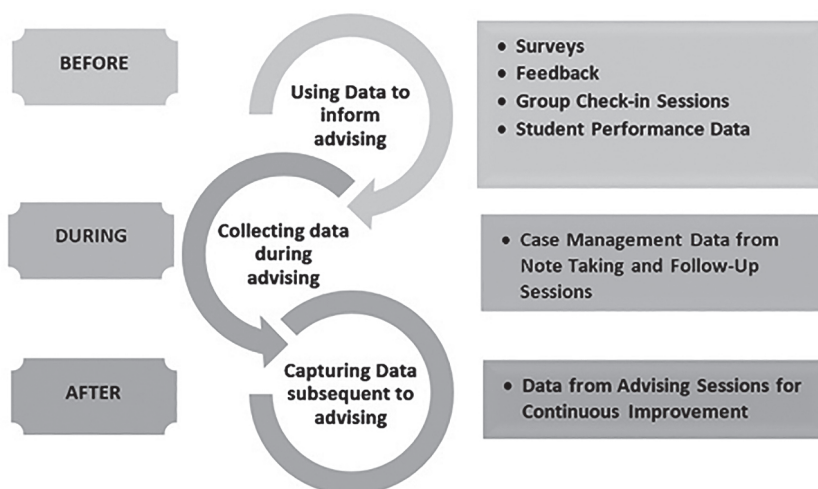


Figure 10.2: Evidence-informed advising process (developed by the author)

### 5.3. Advisor training and professional development

The professionalisation of advising is essential (White, 2020). Within HE, staff expertise is critical to the operations of a university (Blackmore & Blackwell 2003). As such, the effectiveness of advising is at the heart of training and professional development (Ford, 2007). Effective advising is also able to increase student success (King, 2000). Theory has a role to play in supporting advising practices. Blackwell and Blackmore (2003) thus argue that tools and artefacts, which include theories, are a means to support advising. De Rijdt (2011) contends that staff development is able to facilitate change. Hermeneutic theory in advising is able to influence how advising is conceptualised and practised. The inclusion of hermeneutic theory in practice and in professional development and training of advisors could benefit students and advising as a practice. This study indicates the usefulness of hermeneutic theory in advising and its appropriate incorporation into advisors' repertoire of tools. However, it is acknowledged that translating theory into practice is a complicated task for advisors (Creamer & Creamer, 1994). Hermeneutic theory can also be used in isolation or in combination with other approaches. Victoria (2019) argues that professional development involves objective reflections that nurture innovative and effective practices. Hermeneutic theory in academic advising, as gleaned from this study, indicates the importance of reflection. Professional development and training are reflexive practices (Victoria, 2019), which could contribute to student success. Hermeneutic theory provides advisors with a way of seeing and understanding students and their needs. Stebleton (2011) thus argues that advisors influence student success and retention. Hermeneutic theory also enables a student-centred lens to be applied, which creates conditions for student success. The inclusion of hermeneutic theory in practice and professional development and training of advisors could thus benefit students and advisors, but advisors need to be exposed to it. This study indicates how advisors used hermeneutic theory to better understand students'



needs. The benefit of training and professional development should be for those who offer it as well as those who partake in it. This study thus reveals the ability of hermeneutic theory to enhance advisor training and professional development.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this study, scholarly work using hermeneutic theory has contributed to the development of a theoretical base, which includes a theory that academic advisors are able to draw on in their student-centred advising practices. Hermeneutic theory in this study contributes to its application in advising by addressing students' needs through the inclusion of evidence-informed advising, continuously monitoring student's progress, knowledge, and effective communication and reflections by advisors and students. Hermeneutic theory provides advisors with a way of seeing and understanding students and their needs. Advisors are able to use hermeneutic theory as a stand-alone theory or in combination with other theories and approaches in times of disruption and beyond. This study indicates that hermeneutic theory is conducive to advising in general and in the South African HE context. The pandemic led advisors to re-imagine existing social science theories that inform their practices and explore hermeneutic theory as an alternative innovative, novel, and contextually relevant approach to academic advising. Taken to scale and through the incorporation of an evidence-informed hermeneutic theory approach in advisor professional development and training, this theory is able to provide a critical lens to address students' needs in context and to create conditions for a student-centred future that foregrounds equitable student support in a reimagined HE context.

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