

‘Postmodernism’ and ‘Modernism in psychology: A critical and historical investigation

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“To be at the beginning again, knowing almost nothing...the smallest variation blows prediction apart... The future is disorder. It’s the best possible time to be alive, when almost everything you thought you knew is wrong. (Valentine talking about Chaos Theory, in Stoppard’s *Arcadia*, 1993:47-48).

“Science has attained so much power that its practical limits begin to be apparent....billions of us live in one small world, densely packed and intercommunicating. But science cannot help us decide what to do...our world starts to seem polluted in fundamental ways—air, and water, and land—because of ungovernable science” (Ian Malcolm in Crichton’s *Jurassic Park*, 1991/2006:312).

“The confusion and barrenness of psychology is not to be explained by calling it a ‘young science’...in psychology there are experimental methods and conceptual confusion...” (Wittgenstein, 1953:§232).

“...psychology doesn’t have really anything to say about the human capacity to reshape and change what exists...to make history...[we need to] include the study and practice of human transformation, the study and practice of becoming, and the study and practice of the relationship between being and becoming...how do human beings produce becoming, and what helps and what hinders this process?” (Holzman, 2004).

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Summary

Like Marmite, the whiff of ‘postmodernism’ leaves a distinctive ~~stench~~ aroma in social psychology. Guided by Gergen’s (1973, 1985, 2001) critique of ‘modernism’, I explore how ‘postmodernism’ as an alternative mode of thought has informed discourse analysts in social psychology (Edwards, Ashmore, & Potter, 1995; Potter, 2000; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), discussing how its theoretical and practical arguments have been appropriated and contested. Throughout the essay I draw on thinkers like Wittgenstein and Foucault, arguing that discourse, culture, society, morality, argumentation and reflexivity shape the undertones of psychological inquiry. I conclude that postmodern thinking greatly enriches social psychology, not only by constructing alternative forms of knowledge, but by emphasising construction and choice – thereby embracing and facilitating social change.

‘Postmodernism’ as a mode of thought

“Hell hath no fury like a coolly received postmodernist.” (Wallace, 1989:208)

Postmodernism has an infamous reputation. One need not look far to find critics presenting postmodernism as a jump down Alice’s proverbial rabbit-hole, casting away prevailing ethical and moral standards (Dennett, 1998) political integrity (Parker, 1998) and religious conviction (Hulse, 2002) along the way. Such writers see postmodernism as a failed attempt to subvert the cream of human achievement (primarily Enlightenment rationality) and, therefore deserves to be ridiculed for such obscenity (Kirkby, 2006).¹ Supporters, however, reject such characterisations and contend that postmodernism cannot be defined in such restrictive terms (Radhakrish, 1983:33; Giri 1993:2130). Postmodernists challenge how language defines controls, determines, restricts, closes, and insists, constructing ~~neutral~~ situated knowledge’s, asking “Whose history gets told? In whose name? For what purpose?” (Marshall, 1992:4).

By challenging the construction of ‘history’, postmodernism also positions itself in a story-world with its relative, ‘modernism’ (Appignanesi & Garratt, 2007:4). Although implying ‘before’ and ‘after’, postmodernism rejects such dichotomies (Barnes *et al.*, 2014:1452), instead constructing “stories...about deconstruction and dispersion” (Parker, 1998:603), its internal shape being uncertain and unstable as it friskily constructs different versions of itself and ‘modernism’ (Giri, 1993:213; Parker, 1998:604-609). Within this modern-postmodern narration lies an alleged epistemological *war*, perhaps stemming from sowing the seeds of

objectivism, individualism, and realism during the spring of the ‘Enlightenment’ (Hicks, 2004:i). In this dispute, postmodernists assert a need for reflexive thinking and the end-of-knowing to break down oppression in psychology (Newman & Holzman, 2000).

Having situated a ~~definition~~ version of ‘postmodernism’, I will trace how it has influenced social psychology historically and contemporarily. I discuss how this alternative *mode of thought* challenges modernism to answer how realities and truths are constructed and legitimised (Gergen, 2001; Foucault, 1970; Potter, 2000; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wittgenstein, 1953). This discussion will reject “totalising narratives” and instead use moral analysis (Powers, 2007:24), to question ‘modernist’ aspirations to study humans as abstracted information-processors as a “scientific study of people, the mind and behaviour” (British Psychological Society, 2015; also Eysneck & Keane, 2010; Hogg & Vaughan, 2013).

Quandaries in modernist psychology

Since 1898 social psychologists have studied “the relationship between the individual and society” (Chrysochoou, 2004:xvi). This focus straddles psychology and sociology, situating the structure-agency as central to understanding how people create and organise their social realities (Moscovici, 2000; Kim, 1999). However, many psychologists, whether studying alleged behavioural, unconscious or mental processes, focus on uncovering their underling organisation and function in the ‘mind’/‘body’ (Viney, 1993). Embracing modernist doctrines of Truth, Reality, and ‘progress’, psychologists endorsed the adoption of a ‘scientific’ psychology aligned with universalism in attempts to reside among established scientific disciplines (Gergen, 1973; cf. Kuhn, 1962), suppressing ‘unscientific’ alternatives (Holzman & Morss, 2000:17). However, this movement has since fragmented, sustaining criticism from an increasingly sceptical public as much as from radical and critical psychologists (Hoffman *et al.*, 2005; Kolb, 2012:8; Kvale, 1992; Parker, 1998). The key *postmodern* questions here are that as psychology has attempted to grow and write its own history (as a quest for truth), what were its underpinning and what have been the implications?

Psychology’s history is scarred by its commitment to modernism and its many row of attempted coup d’état. Beginning as an empirical ‘crisis’ in social psychological research in the 1960/70s (Gergen, 1973), doubts abounded concerning the increasingly trivial, artificial, fragmented, reductionist and isolated nature of inquiry (Kim, 1999). Hypothetico-deductivist logic dominated these debates, centred upon the eye-watering minutiae of control conditions,

interval durations, contrast ratios, demand characteristics, and social desirability, continuing even to the present day. Doubt morphed into conflict during the 1980s/90s when the ‘paradigmatic wars’ (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Silverman, 1997) between competing quantitative and qualitative advocates retrenched divisions as question begun challenge the epistemological motivations of psychologists rather than their methods (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This legacy remains problematic even now as seemingly ‘hypermodern’ (cf. Augé, 1995) perspectives critique ‘old-fashioned’ modernists for undermining replication studies (Bakker *et al.*, 2012), artificially favouring positive (hypothesised) findings (Simmons *et al.*, 2011), and endorsing flawed measures of research ‘impact’ (Curry, 2012; Seglen, 1992). These never-ending conflicts arguably prompted the construction of increasingly specialised, insular, and self-regulated sub-disciplines (Billig, 2012).

The implications of this history, conversely, are far deeper than academic divisions *per se*. Maxwell’s (2000) critique situates modernism in a broader context of ‘scientific practice’, attacking an indulgent focus on *ontological* questions (i.e. on the nature of the universe’s objects) to the neglect of *epistemological* questions (i.e. on the relationship between ‘accepted’ knowledge and reflexivity, morality, and power). For Maxwell, this neglect contributed towards disasters (e.g. environmental degradation, genocide, war, oppression, poverty) unfolding on unfathomable levels. While psychologists did not produce the nuclear bomb, electroconvulsive therapy, lobotomies, IQ-tests, fear/obedience conditioning, Ritalin, (gay) conversion therapy, water boarding, and more besides have been pioneered and supported under similar circumstances. Embraced by government departments, health providers, and businesses owing to their ‘discoveries’, such psychologists utilised their inventions in society’s attempts to manage its ‘deviants’, whether criminal, ill, antisocial or terrorist (cf. Foucault, 1988/1965, 1970, 1973, 1998/1978, 1979). As a discipline, psychology constructed “a caricature of historical progress and a repression...which justifies...that it is modern” (Parker, 1998:602-613). In-so-doing, the mask of modernism legitimised oppression by neglecting the identities of psychologists as fellow human-beings (Wittgenstein, 1953:§571). While psychology is hardly ‘evil’ in nature (Harré & Secord, 1972; Newman & Holzman, 2000; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), being concerned with helping to understand the antecedents of evils so as to prevent them reoccurring (Asch, 1951; Haney *et al.*, 1973; Milgram, 1974), the use of a ‘scientific’ guise legitimised human suffering as natural and inevitable (Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997). Gergen (1973, 1985, 2001) has been particularly influential in challenging this modernist façade.

Looking back: the modernist canon

Gergen's (2001) analysis of the modernist story in psychology argues that by embracing principles of *individual knowledge*, *objective world*, and *language as carrier*, psychologists have sought to cement ('soft') metaphysical phenomena into the realm of ('hard') science, imposing psychology as a bastion for scientism, naturalism and oppression (Parker, 1998). Indeed, Gergen argues for an alternative, historically-grounded psychology reflexively aware of its power rather than a universalist institution imposing knowledge (Gergen, 1973, 1985).

Individual knowledge as a doctrine developed between the 17th–19th centuries, emphasising that individual minds were appropriate objects of theoretical inquiry (Gergen, 2001). Questions abounded about how the mind stored and organised information of the perceived world (Viney, 1993). This question made rigorous, controlled inquiry vis-à-vis experiments an aspirational endeavour (Gergen, 2001:803). However, postmodernist thinking and the role language in shaping 'forms of life' (Wittgenstein, 1953), problematises self-contained rationality because language pre-dates and outlives human lives as a self-contained system that structures meanings (Gergen, 2001). Similarly, across time and space, we construct and interpret different meanings according to power relations (Foucault, 1970), interpretations of genre (Bakhtin, 1981), and context of interactions (Goffman, 1967; Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984) in different cultures (Geertz, 1973). Thus people's thoughts and meanings are *situated* in society, engaged in endless argumentative debates (Billig, 1987).

The notion of an *objective world* developed from a Descartes' distinction between the 'private' inner mental world and 'observable' material world (Potter, 1996). This idea prompted the assumption that mental processes causally aid behavioural action in the 'real' world can be thought of as adaptive heuristics (Gergen, 2001:804). The implication here is that inquiry could be conducted objectively by psychologists, 'detached' from the subject matter – other people (*cf.* Wittgenstein, 1953:§571). However, this is a reflexive problem as an objectivist case can't be made without semiotic actions interpreted vis-à-vis "the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (and themselves)" (Gergen, 1985:266). 'Objectivity' is just another product of consensual knowledge and commonly shared human practices (Gergen, 2001; Geertz, 1973). Even objects in 'physical' reality like 'rocks' require categorisation and particularisation (e.g. natural/geological, size, function, and value) like human phenomena (Edwards, Ashmore & Potter, 1995:30).

The *language as carrier* principle draws on the correspondence metaphor (language is seen as reflecting ‘reality’, transferring ideas between people; cf. Lackoff & Johnson, 1980). For modernist psychology, it has been crucial: scientific observations describing the world are subjected to falsification/vindication through iterative observation and measurement (Gergen, 2001:805). Again, postmodernists have challenged that words can and should only describe real states-of-affairs, for they also *do things* (Austin, 1962) and gain meaning through their deployment in particular ‘language games’ (Wittgenstein, 1953). Words categorising subjects (e.g. criminal, ill, anti-social, lazy, promiscuous) are constitutive of particular versions of events and legitimised *through* their evocation of socio-moral orders (Foucault, 1970), shifting across contexts (e.g. compare ‘homerun’ for Baseball and young men ‘at the pub’ (Gergen, 2001:805; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Gergen (1973:315) makes a similar point on the feedback loop of psychologists’ terms integrating into societal discourses (e.g. ‘reverse-psychology’, ‘denial’, ‘extravert’) which are used to justify people’s opinions.

Postmodernism in action: interpretive repertoires

To critique modernism, postmodernists have chiefly employed *discourse analysis* (DA), an ~~ambiguous~~ approach for both seeing and analysing the social world (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Such ideas were inspired by thinkers beyond psychology writing critical theses of power and oppression in discourses of knowledge (e.g. Derrida, 1997/1967; Foucault, 1970; Lyotard, 1984). Methodological works in micro-sociology also played a part (Garfinkel, 1967; Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Sacks, 1995) by stimulating ways to bridge the gap between radical theory and practice (Parker, 2012; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). As a result, DAs in social psychology have problematised taken-for-granted dualisms between cognition (e.g. memory) and social action (Edwards & Potter, 1992), emotion(s) and subjectivity (Edwards, 1997), and attitudes and behaviour (Potter, 1996), instead viewing how social life is constructed by participants (Augoustinos & Tileagă, 2012; Johansson & Phillips, 2002; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wooffitt, 2005; Wood & Kroger, 2000). Asking epistemological questions concerning how reality is constructed, warranted and legitimised during inter-subjective sociality entails that research also lends itself towards situating the inquirer on moral and reflexive ground (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985; Shotter, 1993a, 1993b). In postmodern tradition, DA involves:

“... attend[ing] to the way practices are oriented to action, are situated and co-constructed...and are given sense through the categories, formulations, and orientation of participants.” (Potter, 2000:34)

A key component in DA is the ‘interpretive repertoire’: “culturally familiar and habitual line[s] of argument comprised of recognizable themes, common places and tropes” (Wetherell, 1998:400). Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) coined the term when analysing the accounting practices of scientists constructing two competing chemistry paradigms. Scientists’ practices were managed using two complementary repertoires: the fruitful/succeeding paradigm was constructed as theoretically-sound, methodologically-standardised and competently-executed (*empiricist* repertoire), whereas the ‘dead-end’ (disproven/unfashionable) paradigm was constructed as subjective, methodologically-flawed, and lacking efficient/robust execution by researchers (*contingent* repertoire). The *empiricist* repertoire substantiated speaker positions/allegiances, whereas the *contingent* repertoire exposed and undermined opposition (Burchell, 2007).

Repertoires are often analysed in how themes of argumentation, dilemma, and ideological practice are organised and problematised (Billig, 1987; Billig *et al.*, 1988; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) by flagging “social significance and the social consequences” (Jorgenson & Phillips, 2002:127) of hegemonic ‘commonsense’ (Edley, 2001). Repertoires demonstrate that there are cultural discourses by which “...versions of actions, cognitive processes, and other phenomena” (Wetherell & Potter, 1988:172) can be invoked. This research spans many social-psychological domains, such as development (Hernandez-Martinez *et al.*, 2008; Keller & Kalmus, 2009), aging (Jolanki *et al.*, 2000; Lyri, 2012; Lumme-Sandt *et al.*, 2000; Rypi, 2012), prejudice and group-relations (Fraser & kick, 2000; Potter & Wetherell, 1989), diversity (Ostendorp & Steyaert, 2009), conflict (Baka & Dikaiou, 2011), and abuse (Croghan & Miell, 1999; Lindgren *et al.*, 2011). The most influential work remains Wetherell and Potter’s (1992) investigation of Pakeha New Zealanders discourse about repertoires of national identity, culture and belonging concerning Maori peoples. They studied how particular ‘maxims’ were used to legitimate repertoires of ‘race’, ‘heritage’, and ‘therapy’, constructing Maoris as biologically-different, quant/backward, and lacking the ability to cope in the ‘modern’ world (Wetherell & Potter, 1992:95). These maxims were overtly liberal and egalitarian values emphasising freedom, equality and individualism, providing a practical and flexible means of maintaining the status quo (*cf.* Augoustinos & Every, 2007:134-135; Jorgenson & Phillips, 2002:129-130). Here there was no ‘totalising narrative’, but rather, a variety of versions by which psychological and social issues were *made* real, important and/or accountable by people to construct national identity and ethnic belonging.

Debates, debates, debates: teleology, relativity, and insignificance

Postmodernism is widely criticised, not least for its obscure writers (Olsson, 2008).ⁱⁱ For example, Coulter (1999:163) criticises Potter (1996) and Edwards (1997) for drawing on “Cartesian residua” to study the “conceptual” properties of “speech practices” (something Coulter construes as distinctive) despite their opposition to cognitivist psychology. Here, another of Olsson’s (2008) concerns is possible in that postmodernism may just supplant Enlightenment meta-narratives with alternatives that rely on the same foundations it critiques (*cf.* Jahoda, 2013). However, a key aspect of postmodern DA is its systematic and iterative analytical procedure (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). It is ‘rigorously subjective’ insofar that it seeks to understand transferable meanings and practices *within* a dataset (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Thus analysts might draw on similar research to inspire them and contribute towards a contextually-grounded and robust analysis based on intuitive findings (Goodman, 2008). Such procedures challenge theological commitments to Truth and Reality (Gergen, 2001), showing how ‘mini’ or ‘multiple’ truths and realities make sense of social life (*cf.* Bird, 1987). Even if “theorist...reifications” occur during this process (Coulter, 1999:169), the postmodern focus on relativist claims-making in relation to rigorous, reflexive and practice-oriented analysis is able to revisit analysis without jeopardising epistemological values.

Another criticism is that postmodern thinking entails relativistic and nihilistic free-for-all (Olsson, 2008; Parker, 2000). The aim of “dismantling...normal ways of thinking” (Zeeman *et al.*, 2002:96) is seen as a polemic and provocative ploy to subvert otherwise practical and progressive movements (Parker, 2012:230). Dennett’s (1998:1-2) (made-up) story of postmodernists unleashing a devastating virus in a postcolonial nation despite their “best intentions” (they ‘educated’ that science was a defective “colonial imposition”) similarly displays dubiousness to those questioning epistemological foundations. Parker (1998:616) is also cautious that without “material context”, postmodern critique paralyses itself in a web of rhetoric. Similarly, Hammersley’s (2003:751) criticism of DA for evading paradigmatic commitments (i.e. not theorising an “actor” ontology and refusing to analyse people’s talk as having referential quality) similarly lends to a denouncement of postmodernist rejections of a ‘broader picture’. However, such ripostes only stand if postmodern thinking *always* leads to slash and burn tactics. Postmodernist in psychology argue that psychology “should start to study what people do...[by] research[ing] people’s situated practices” (Potter, 2000:36). This involves a *methodologically-relativist* shift towards situated actions:

“what does the ‘memory’ do in some interaction? How is a version of the past constructed to sustain some action? Or: what is an ‘attitude’ used to do? How is an evaluation built to assign blame to a minority group?” (Potter, 2000:35)

Similarly, Potter (2003:791) adds that *not* having a predefined model of the human actor allows “broader and more culturally embedded set[s] of possible constructions and relevancies to be identified”. Looking at contextualised actions (“examples...of language expression”: Ribes-Iñesta, 2006:110) circumvents theological theorising, grand meta-narratives and theoretical reifications because they are focused on understanding how phenomena are constructed, which does not deterministically prescribe inclusions or exclusions (e.g. materiality; Nightingale & Cromby, 1999). It involves acknowledging that truth-claims are context-dependent, the researcher’s subjectivity, positioning, and *weltanschauung* shapes their theory-building, and that relativistic thinking is quintessential and necessary for analysing data (Edwards, Ashmore, and Potter, 1995:37). I concur with Newman and Holzman’s feisty (2000:269) reply to Parker (1998) that postmodernism’s *potential* to become dangerous or counterproductive does not necessitate its abandonment; for to exact meaningful change we must begin by reflecting on our innermost-valued concepts and consider reshaping them to make better things (Gergen, 1985).

A final critique regards the complaint that arguing social life is constructed nullifies or trivialises it (Gergen, 2001). Gergen eloquently argues how social life is not dulled by this; if anything it is strengthened because it promotes alternative interpretations (*cf.* Edwards, 1997:9). It also prompts the possibility of changing and modifying our constructions. While many of our moral, emotional and reflexive constructions of profound human experiences (e.g. birth, death, love, loss, freedom, oppression) are inherited, we can still *change* our sense-making. That some ritualised actions and events operate under specific sanctioned sociohistorical conditions (Bourdieu, 1990) while others fade is testament to this possibility.

Conclusions

In this essay I have hopefully demonstrated how postmodern thinking informs a critical consideration for how humans construct their social worlds (Gergen, 2001; Potter, 2000). Postmodernism may not be needed or wanted (according to some), but it is still *useful* in questioning the legitimacy of knowledge and promoting alternative views of taken-for-granted phenomena through systematic analysis of social action. This is why it will continue to challenge modernist psychology by arguing for reflexive reappraisals of human inquiry.

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Footnotes

ⁱ Indeed cultural artefacts often now twist, merge, and smudge modernist reality. While some argue that this is “...the level to which postmodernism has sunk; a source of marginal gags in pop culture” (Kirkby, 2006), is this trivial? Consider the genre of film. When Morpheus in *The Matrix* (1999, see <http://tinyurl.com/pypq52c>) tells Neo about the nature of the Matrix, this is not only raising philosophical problems concerning consciousness, free will, and AI intelligence (Dupré, 2007) in the film, but also challenging the status of our own ‘worlds’. Similarly, as Magic Mirror in *Shrek* (2001, see <http://tinyurl.com/nnfs9dv>) provides a comedic reappraisal of Snow White, he draws on contemporary interpretations of gender, sexuality and morality to disrupt her immaculate persona as a Disney princess, problematising perceptions of unmarried cohabiting women.

ⁱⁱ See, e.g., Urban Dictionary (<http://tinyurl.com/k5j7cvo>)