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Some Implications of Postmodernism for Social Work Practice

John T. Pardeck, John W. Murphy, and Jung Min Choi

In an editorial entitled "Words Create Worlds," Hartman (1991) introduced postmodernism to the field of social work and suggested that this philosophy has important implications for social workers. Her focus was primarily social work education. The aim of this article is to expand her discussion of postmodernism. *Postmodernism* is a linguistic theory that proposes that the social world cannot be treated as an objective system. As a result, the traditional focus of intervention must be rethought. Specifically, practitioners should become aware of the way in which reality is linguistically constructed by individuals or groups.

Postmodern Culture

As noted by Hartman (1991), a specific theory of language is central to postmodernism. This language theory was pioneered by Wittgenstein (1963) and later advanced by Lyotard (1984); all knowledge is understood to be derived from "language games." Language is no longer thought merely to convey information but is believed to thoroughly mediate everything that is known. What is recognized as social reality, therefore, is a matter of definition and conceptualization. This reality is not obtrusively objective but is fully interpretive. Lacan (1977) captured this sentiment nicely when he wrote that truth is a product of language use rather than something that is objective and universal.

Because of this inability to avoid the influence of interpretation, the traditional concept of culture as an all-encompassing system is defunct. Often culture is assumed to consist of rules, laws, mores, and expectations that are not subject to much interpretation. In fact, order is preserved by discouraging interpretation. The work of social philosopher Emile Durkheim (Alpert, 1961) epitomized this viewpoint, especially when he claimed that morality can be preserved only by norms that exist sui generis. There may be various cultures, but according to this outlook each one consists of objective indices that form a unified whole.

Clearly postmodernists reject this notion of culture. Rather than being understood to revolve around traditionally objective standards, culture should be viewed as invented or created. Human values, beliefs, and commitments, taken together to form praxis, are the core of social existence.

Some critics of postmodernism have argued that culture is destroyed because of this theoretical démarche. As a result of the persuasiveness of interpretation, culture is not substantial and is thus insignificant as a means for ensuring social cohesiveness. Postmodernists, on the other hand, claim that just the opposite is true. Given the interpretive character of social existence, values, commitments, and expectations become valuable for substantiating reality. Accordingly, understanding the interpretive cement that sustains certain norms holds the key to explaining behavior.

Intervention does not escape postmodernism unscathed. Knowledge, social imagery, and conceptions of the client, which are all vital to social work practice, are changed as a consequence of this philosophy. Their usual status as empirical entities must be rethought, given the adherence of postmodernists to the thesis that reality is interpretively constructed.

Knowledge

Usually social phenomena such as health, illness, and normalcy are identified strictly in empirical terms. Demographic, physiological, or other so-called objective indicators are used for this purpose. But from a postmodern perspective, facts are not simply objective. Something as complex as mental illness or criminality, for example, cannot be explained with respect to biological, psychological, or social markers (Murphy & Pilotta, 1987).

What is overlooked by these approaches, according to postmodernists, is how people or communities construct the dimensions of normalcy through the use of language. Through the exercise of "discursive practices," writes Foucault (1989), a distinction is made between fact and fiction, truth

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and error, and normalcy and abnormality. Postmodernists contend that this is a linguistic demarcation, and not one that can be associated automatically with any specific empirical referent. Normalcy, in short, is a product of conceptual schemes that are taken for granted. In this regard, normalcy is a linguistic habit.

Does this mean that there are no facts? Postmodernists are very clear about this point when they declare that facts are "local" or regional (Lyotard, 1984). According to catastrophe theory (Murphy, 1989), facts are understood to reside in limited interpretive domains. In a more sociological vein, facts are embedded within customs, myths, and other assumptions about reality that are not necessarily universally accepted. To know what is factual, therefore, a practitioner must learn how these disparate frameworks are constructed through accurate interpretation. In this way, intervention can be culturally appropriate.

Society

Interaction is often described in structural terms. Specifically, roles are thought to be related reciprocally to one another. If all people perform their roles adequately, interaction should proceed smoothly. In fact, difficulties are believed to arise when people do not adhere closely to role expectations.

According to this functionalist theory, a client and practitioner will not violate each other's position if they remain within their respective roles. The question is whether interaction can be equated with fulfilling a set of role requirements. As might be suspected, postmodernists say no, because of the significance of interpretation.

Postmodernists contend that structural metaphors are not useful for describing the interaction that is at the heart of intervention. Instead, they recommend that interaction be envisioned as discourse. Their point is that becoming competent at interaction is possible only when people learn to play the language games adopted by a community. And working within the strictures imposed by the so-called professional role will not necessarily lead to this insight. Gaining entrée to the reality constructed by a community is not a part of acquiring technical competence.

Rather than following role guidelines, a more cogent strategy for intervention is to read correctly a client's linguistic acts. This is why postmodernists have compared people and events to texts. In this regard, Barthes (1985) wrote that interpersonal understanding occurs when an individual learns to read in the manner intended by an author. When the practitioner becomes an informed reader, dialogue is achieved, and the interpretive world of a client is entered.

Key to successful intervention is communicative competence, claim postmodernists. This kind of skill is operative when a clinician recognizes the inextricable link between language use and reality and thus begins to understand that norms are imbued with interpretation (Murphy, 1989). Once this understanding is reached, interaction with clients is possible on their terms. Thus, clinical judgments can be made that are in tune with their construction of reality. This attunement opens the door for making a sensitive assessment of a problem not bound to the usual taxonomic designations.

Self-Concept

Social work practitioners often understand self-concept as a critical variable resulting from a psychodynamic process or as a creation of interaction with the social environment. Postmodernists argue, however, that these traditional social work views suggest that self-concept is conceived in an "essentialist" manner (Flax, 1990). The negative consequences of essentialism are that often traits and characteristics of people are viewed as intrinsic or socially inculcated. Consequently, certain groups may be viewed as inferior. For example, from a psychodynamic perspective women might be understood to have traits that relegate them to what is perceived as an inferior status (for example, women are more passive than men). Likewise, if one concludes that behavior is a result of interaction with the environment, one simply moves the creation of the self to a systems level of interpretation, an orientation that often misconstrues problems because of its abstract nature. Postmodernists view the psychodynamic and interactional perspectives as grounded in essentialism and ultimately as orientations that impede the development of a beneficial therapeutic relationship.

Postmodernists reject an essentialist version of the self. The rationale for this decision is that the self is believed to be thoroughly linguistic (Barthes, 1986); in short, the self is an interpretive construct. Barthes (1985) and Foucault (1979) proposed that the self is the culmination of "saying I." Through the application of various labels, definitions, and other means, an identity is formulated and instituted. A resulting image may be

derogatory, however, if a psychiatrist or someone else in power is given the latitude to demean an individual or group. Nonetheless, the traits that are ascribed to a person do not have inherent meaning but are legitimized by personal volition, power, tradition, or a combination of those factors. At this juncture, Sartre's (1947) proclamation is relevant; a person's identity is invented.

What are the implications of this portrayal of the self for social work practice? First, the self should not be approached as an explanatory variable but as something that must be interpreted correctly. Second, typical character, ethnic, or cultural traits should not be linked automatically to a person's self-image, for these factors may not be accepted as important by the client. And third, altering a client's self should not necessarily be understood as a core clinical goal; such an approach is too mechanistic for postmodernists to accept.

Focus of Intervention

At one time, intervention was directed at pathological individuals. This orientation, however, is reductionistic, because the political, economic, and environmental factors that contribute to a problem are overlooked. To correct this situation, systems theory was introduced (Hartman, 1970, 1976). As was intended, a more comprehensive style of intervention was encouraged by this shift in orientation. Indeed, gradually the term "holistic" became de rigueur.

Nonetheless, postmodernists insist that neither individuals nor systems should be the target of intervention (Vega & Murphy, 1990). They argue that both of these foci are easily reified and, thus, misconstrued. As a result, postmodernists offer a new focus of intervention. Social work practice, stated simply, should be community based. Yet in this case the community is not defined in racial, ethnic, demographic, or geographic terms, as is often done. Instead, a community is a domain where certain assumptions about reality are acknowledged to have validity. This linguistically developed reality is fragile, as opposed to moral absolutes, but is sufficient to unite people.

Given this intimate association between interpretation and norms, some writers go so far as to say that clients should be allowed to direct their therapy (Vega & Murphy, 1990). This idea has been recognized as valid at least since the passage of the Mental Retardation Facilities and Community Mental Health Centers Construction Act in 1963. What is new about the postmodern approach is that clients are not merely consulted through the use of individualized treatment plans, for instance, but supply the interpretive context that is required for determining the nature of a presenting problem, a proper intervention, or a successful treatment outcome. This is true client-centered intervention.

Phenomenologists have popularized a poignant term for describing a community; their choice is the *Lebenswelt*, or lifeworld (Husserl, 1970). The claim is that a client's world consists of a web of meanings, created and sustained linguistically. And according to postmodernists, an intervention must be introduced into this milieu. Furthermore, an insensitive therapist who ignores the premises of a client's lifeworld may never reach him or her, let alone be effective.

Postmodernism has exposed the elusive nature of reality, along with the difficulty of maintaining an intervention. Postmodernists assert that the identification and remediation of problems are not as easy as empiricists and functionalists seem to think. Contrary to these two viewpoints, practitioners are supposed to be aware of how culture is operative in every facet of an intervention. Clearly postmodernism is consistent with this aim, because of the importance that is attributed to the linguistic construction of reality. Therefore, practitioners should not find the suggestions made by postmodernists foreign or too difficult to appreciate. ■

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***John T. Pardeck, PhD, ACSW,** is professor, Department of Social Work, Southwest Missouri State University, 901 South National Avenue, Springfield, MO 64804. **John W. Murphy, PhD,** is professor, Department of Sociology, University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL. **Jung Min Choi, MA,** is a doctoral student, Department of Sociology, York University, Downsview, Ontario, Canada.*

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