

A Decade of Postmodern Psychology

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Armageddon: Comet hurtles toward earth; Bruce Willis, as (partner-less) father, represents the parent generation in sacrificing itself, manually inserting the fatal device into the body of the alien object, so that the children may live and (more importantly) procreate in appropriate pairings (i.e., attractive male with attractive female).

Independence Day: Invasion by aliens as (newly-widowed President-) father leads defense facilitated by cunning plan inspired by Jeff Goldblum's father; another father sacrifices himself to insert the fatal explosive device into the body of the alien object; the White House is rebuilt.

Deep Impact: Perhaps the least said the better but it's pretty oedipal stuff also.

Postmodernism seems very much of the 1990s. In some ways, very fin de siècle. Will it survive the millennium? What impact will we say that it has had? Will it be *Armageddon* or *Independence Day*, or will it be *Deep Impact*? Comet, alien invasion, tidal wave, or mere entertainment? And afterwards, will normal service be resumed?

Postmodernism did in many ways seem to arrive from outer space some time in the 1980s (for psychologists, that is; architects detected it as early as the 1960s.) There were discussions in the early 1980s (e.g., Toulmin, 19xx) on the significance of postmodernism for scientific thinking and, perhaps by implication, for social science; and

Lyotard's milestone *The Postmodern Condition* was published in French in 19xx and in English in 19xx. But then, and perhaps still, postmodernism was confused with an array of intellectual isms: structuralist and poststructuralist movements coming out of Paris '68; textual methods such as deconstruction; analytic philosophy of language; social-context psychology of development, to name a few.

Quite soon, postmodernism began to cast its shadow back through the twentieth century: Ludwig Wittgenstein was one of the more plausible proto-postmodernists identified by eager acolytes. Retrospective postmodernism reached back and joined hands with turn-of-the-century anti-scientism and the intuitionism of (first name) Bergson, jumped back more centuries like some time-traveling computer virus and merged with romanticism, and extended forward into all our perceptions of the future. The network was complete, the signal was synchronized between all the stations: "Checkmate," as Goldblum's *Independence Day* cliché put it. Goldblum, strolling effortlessly from Jurassic theme-park to space-opera, carrying his screen-bound expertise with him as lightly as his muscle-enhanced torso. Postmodernism sweeps all before it, defines everything interesting as being itself, displaces all other worldviews. "Checkmate." Is that it?

As we write this, it has been ten years since the advent of postmodernism in psychology was 'announced' at a 1989 conference in Aarhus, Denmark. There, a small group of psychologists held a symposium at which they discussed the implications of a

postmodern culture on their discipline. In 1992 Steiner Kvale, a Danish psychologist and one of the hosts of the conference, edited *Psychology and Postmodernism*, which contained the symposium presentations as well as essays written expressly for the volume (Kvale, 1992). With a decade of hindsight – and growing popularity of postmodern ideas in psychology -- it is worth revisiting how postmodernism and psychology were conceived “back then.”

In his introduction, Kvale describes the postmodern age and postmodern thought in ways that have become familiar to scholars: the loss of the Enlightenment belief that knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, would bring progress and emancipation, the blurring of the boundary between reality and fantasy, the break down of many of the dichotomies of the modern age – among the most relevant for psychology are objective reality and subjective interpretation; self and other; and cognition and emotion. As for the state of psychology at the beginning of the 1990s, Kvale noted two indications that its scientific foundations were beginning to disintegrate: a boredom among the general population with psychological knowledge out of the growing recognition that psychologists have less and less to say about the human condition; and the increasing tensions between academic psychology and professional psychological practice (Kvale, 1992, pp. 1-16).

Over the decade, psychology seems to have dug itself a deeper hole by clinging to (what many say are) ill-conceived and clearly outmoded scientific foundations in the face of a decreasing consumer base (at least in the US). This is the case for academic psychology, which has seen a decline in university courses and positions in the last ten years, and for psychological practice, which is fast being whittled away (and some fear

it's only a matter of time before its total demise) by HMOs, psychotropic drugs and the self-help movement.

At the same time -- perhaps adding to mainstream psychology's troubles, perhaps providing a way out of the hole -- postmodernism has become more widely known among psychologists. Initially introduced by theoretically and philosophically minded social psychologists eager to explore the implications of *postmodern culture* on their discipline, postmodern concerns are today expressed by voices in nearly every subdiscipline of psychology. Most of these concerns stem from how psychology views human beings and, very closely related, how psychologists try to study and help human beings -- that is, psychology's model, paradigm and method. More and more psychologists, most of whom accept the utility and effectiveness of the natural science model for the physical and biological sciences, are finding this model unsuitable and ineffective when it comes to human-social phenomena. This is especially the case when subjectivity, consciousness and intergroup relations are involved, as in psychological research and practice in cognition and learning, education, development, language and communication, counseling, psychotherapy and group/organizational dynamics. In addition, the postmodern perspective adds a foundational (philosophical) dimension to social/political dissatisfaction with the way the mainstream paradigm approaches gender, ethnicity and culture, sexuality, religion and spirituality, and many other contemporary topics.

Postmodern critics of psychology point out that the dominant psychological model of human beings (and how to study and help them) distorts not only the complexity of human life but also its unique self-reflexivity and sociality. Further, the

modern science model brings with it the philosophical-methodological bias of modern epistemology, i.e., that truth, reality, objectivity, causality and duality are necessary premises of understanding. This bias, postmodernists contend, locks psychology into methods that systematically prohibit pursuing avenues of inquiry that might prove extremely fruitful. Finally, the model does not take into account what many psychologists take to be the human need and capacity for positive and qualitative growth or what others see as the essential relationality of human life as lived.

The proliferation of new interdisciplinary journals and Web sites devoted to postmodern psychology and therapy, narrative and narrative therapies, social constructionism, philosophy and psychology, etc., suggests that a postmodern sensibility has arrived on the psychological scene. After over a decade of theoretical writings on its potentials and pitfalls, it has not only spawned research and counseling, therapeutic and educational practices, but also begun to recognize and re-look at existing alternative practices with a postmodern eye. At this historical juncture, it seems possible and timely to evaluate the impact of postmodernism in psychology on the discipline and on the broader culture -- to survey it, interrogate its impact on practice and outline possible contours of its future influence.

Thus, this book, which brings together a group of highly respected contributors to the postmodernism conversation within psychology. Their chapters reflect on the achievements and limitations of attempts to develop postmodern approaches in psychology in general and within specific areas of research and practice. The authors have, between them, authored or edited nearly forty books on social, developmental, educational and clinical psychology, the most recent of which focus on postmodern

concerns. They represent different points of view, from the cautious attitude of Marxist and feminist psychology (which remain suspicious of what is perceived as postmodernism's playfulness and relativism) to the more celebratory attitude of social constructionism, and beyond -- to the anarchism of the deconstructionists and the anti-paradigmism of the radical activity theorists/social therapy practitioners. For the most part, the authors are conversing with their respective traditions and, occasionally, with each other. We have not asked them to do a lot of work contextualizing their discussions because we wanted to preserve (and show) the conversations they are currently engaged in. Our task, as editors, is to help them converse with you, and we hope that this introductory chapter and our running commentary throughout this volume invite you to come in, in whatever manner you choose.

Even more to this point (and something that gives us great pleasure) are the voices of response that dialogue with and address the issues and concerns set forth by the contributing authors. These guest commentators have varying levels of familiarity with the postmodernist movement, but none are ideologically committed to postmodernism. Their comments are meant to add a degree of accountability and self-reflection.

Postmodern Psychologies, Societal Practice and Political Life addresses contemporary issues of controversy for psychology, among them multiculturalism, culture and psychological functioning; the “reality” of psychological phenomena; identity and identity formation; language, communication and discourse; the potential and dynamics of human development; and the role and status of psychological research in today’s world. Specific chapters provoke readers to think anew about the objects of study and methods psychology has been invoking and employing for decades. Concepts

such as performed activity, developmental performance, relational responsibility, dialogically structured understanding and social epistemology are introduced as new possibilities for social-psychological practice. In this way, the book provides an up-to-date, rigorous assessment of postmodernism in psychology and, at the same time, offers resources for further exploration of alternative ways to engage in the psychological study of human life as lived.

In June, 1997 the East Side Institute for Short Term Psychotherapy, a research and training center “for human development and community” based in New York City, hosted a conference/retreat “Unscientific Psychology: Conversations with Other Voices.” The idea was to gather a small and diverse group of interested people – practitioners, scholars and nonprofessionals – to talk together about whether and how post scientific and postmodern psychology can impact on the social and political issues facing the world’s people. The 140 people in attendance were a diverse group in several ways. They were academics, practitioners, faculty, students and people with no other credentials than a feeling that the topic was interesting and of some importance. They came from 17 countries--from the US with its well over 100,000 psychologists to Azerbaijan which has a mere handful. Among the practitioners were those who work with inner-city young people from Brooklyn, Harlem and the Bronx, war-ravaged refugees in the former Yugoslavia, children and families in a being-reconstructed South Africa, poor communities in the cities of Venezuela, women and men who have been psychiatrically

institutionalized, people in drug treatment programs, and others who seek help (or are said by authorities to need it). Researchers and students came from universities and institutes all over the US and Canada, as well as Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Sydney, Leipzig, Vienna, Caracas, Manchester, Glasgow, and other cities from New Zealand to Scandinavia. Most participants identified with one or another progressive and/or non-mainstream traditions, among them postmodernism, social constructionism, deconstructionism, Marxism, feminism, radical psychology, narrative therapy, social therapy, cultural-historical psychology, activity theory and critical theory (in spite of a collective aversion to labels!).

The events of the two-day gathering focused on how to address postmodern and post scientific psychology and the related question of how to create “conversations with other voices.” In other words, the “how” referred equally and inseparably to addressing the topic of postmodern psychology and its relationship to societal practice *and* to creating environments in which this topic could be addressed. Could we *create* conversation, instead of *having* the same familiar ones we’ve all had before? Could we utilize new ways of presenting the work we do -- our beliefs, theories, findings, questions, doubts, hopes? Could we create a *cultural* event out of the conference on psychology that brought us together? How were we to perform together?

To heighten the collective exploration of these questions, the conference/retreat mixed the usual academic fare with experimental experiential/performatory activities. There were eight formal presentations, a performance workshop at which participants created and performed an improvised play based on their lives (led by Fred Newman and based on his “Performance of a Lifetime™ interactive growth theatre project), and three

simultaneous conversations on topics participants decided they wanted to pursue, followed by performances created out of these conversations that were shared with the conference body. Only the formal presentations have made their way in any recognizable form into this volume; they appear (in widely varying degrees of revision) as chapters by Erica Burman, Lenora Fulani, Kenneth Gergen, Mary Gergen, Lois Holzman, John Morss, Ian Parker and John Shotter. (Chapter 10 by Fred Newman was written expressly for this volume, as were all the commentaries of Part Three: Dialogue.)

Somewhere near the end of the process of completing this book, it occurred to us to ask each other why we were its editors. Was it merely a coincidence that we are both developmental psychologists? Developmental psychology, after all, has not exactly embraced postmodernism. On the contrary, one could make out a reasonable case that developmental psychology is the last holdout for the modernist psychological paradigm. This could, of course, be thought of as “resistance” if it is to be maintained that the field of human development is especially challenged by postmodern ideas. Certainly, it has been – by developmentalists already working in critical ways who, to varying degrees, have tried to take postmodern ideas on board (e.g., Erica Burman, Rex and Wendy Stainton Rogers, Valerie Walkerdine, and ourselves). .But challenging and transforming are very different things, and in spite of mounting criticism of the ideological and methodological biases of the orthodox notion of developmental change and of the damaging practices done in its name, psychology has thus far been successful in

defending the grandest of its grand narratives. As developmental psychologists with a postmodern sensibility, we feel it incumbent upon ourselves to carry the questions of postmodernism to the conservative heart of contemporary, firmly modernist psychology.

We also wondered whether our chosen title was misleading. For the implication to be drawn from the juxtaposition of “postmodern psychologies” and “societal practice” is that postmodern psychologies have, or should have, something to say about societal practices. But can they? Prior to postmodernism, the built-in dualism of theory/analysis and what it was “about” was taken for granted, but postmodernism is, if nothing else, a challenge to that dualism – in a socially constructed, relationally responsible, dialogically structured world of human performance, the distinction between subjective and objective loses its theoretical (and perhaps practical) force. As a challenge to grand narratives -- statements that come to be taken as facts (truths) about how the world is (e.g., the grand narratives of progress, modern science, evolutionary theory) -- postmodernism questions whether there is anything for them to be “about.” Mustn’t it wonder the same about itself? In other words, if postmodernism is to guard against becoming yet another grand narrative, can there anything for postmodern thought – in psychology and elsewhere – to be about? This is a fascinating question – raised, but ultimately (and fortunately, we feel) unanswered in this volume.

Nevertheless, some specific societal practices are addressed by our authors. Not surprisingly, it is scholarship itself that gets the most attention; after all, it is the societal practice they know best. Yet all venture out – deeply concerned with political life, psychological and educational practices, and practices that foster or hinder multiculturalism/diversity/ equality. They introduce new tools and new kinds of tools of

practical (some say practical-critical, or revolutionary) understanding, including *conversation, performance, spectacle* and *story*. They offer us ways to move forward without knowing where we're going – as John Shotter puts it, to “not become entangled in our own rules” and to be “more ‘at home’ in the complicated ‘landscape’ of human phenomena without the continual need to consult and puzzle over maps” (Shotter, this volume).

In the last few years, accounts of the postmodern in psychology have become fragmented. Many different orientations now co-exist. There are still the enthusiastic celebrants - not always the same people as before, but people newly discovering the sometimes heady excitements of postmodern talk. There are attempts to re-define postmodernism in more detailed and often more narrow ways that perhaps tap its power or, alternatively, accommodate it to the vicissitudes of the psychological establishment. There are attempts to retrospectively identify long-dead writers (e. g., Bakhtin, Vico, Vygotsky) as postmodernists (or pre-postmodernists) and thus make connections with movements that do not self-identify as postmodern. There are decisions by earlier adherents or fellow-travelers to distance themselves from it either because it is proving inadequate or proving too successful in its popularity. There are serious attempts to rehabilitate approaches that postmodernism seems to have outflanked, such as critique or neo-Marxism. And, as always, there remains the stubborn refusal in some quarters ever to take the idea or its proponents seriously.

It may be appropriate for the landscape of psychological postmodernism to be confused, noisy and full of unpredictable movements and re-positionings (at least, one might say, it demonstrates our mature distance from the bored stability of modernism, with its order and its calmly rational facade): but this is not of much help to the student or to the psychologist keen to learn about the relevance of these issues. Confusion and fragmentation might even at times seem to constitute a deliberate smokescreen, protecting those whose thinking is characterized more by vigor than by rigor. So what sense can and should one make of the contemporary scene, and the place of postmodernism in it? Does postmodernism make a difference? These are some of the questions that, in different but often complementary ways, the authors attempt to answer in the chapters that follow.

Whether any of this matters to how ordinary people the world over live their lives is the real subject of this book. The issue that drew the contributors to this volume and so many others to the 1997 conference “Unscientific Psychology: Conversations with Other Voices” continues to be in the forefront:

If social policy is to undergo a humanistic and democratic transformation, it is more important than ever that we examine the subjective constraints limiting our collective ability, not only to make these changes, but to move forward as a world--and, of course, the relationship between these and objective constraints. We want to address whether and how the new psychologies--which some call postmodern or post-scientific--can impact on the pressing social problems of the day. (Holzman, Invitation to “Unscientific Psychology” conference/retreat)

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