

CHAPTER 36

POSTMODERNIST PERSPECTIVES

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Key concepts

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This brief introduction to postmodernist perspectives in social inquiry is necessarily partial and imprecise. Words that refer to complex areas of human understanding cannot be reduced to unambiguous definitions. We can no more provide a straightforward definition of ‘postmodernism’ than stipulate the meanings of ‘love’ or ‘justice’ – these terms are perpetual foci of speculation and debate. Readers of research methods texts who are confused by this ambiguity and imprecision should heed Morwenna Griffiths’s advice: ‘If you ... can’t find one clear definition that works for everything you read, then you need to know that you can abandon the search. Instead, you need to develop an understanding of the range of use, and to be clear about your own understanding, as a result’ (1998: 43).

The concepts of *modern* and *postmodern* recur through fields as diverse as art, architecture, advertising, economics, literature, music, politics, popular media, science, social philosophy and theology. The term ‘postmodernism’ has been used to describe conceptual movements in many of these fields for more than a century.¹ In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard uses the term ‘modern’ to designate ‘any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse’ or that makes ‘an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth’ (1984: xxiii). Lyotard critiques what he calls ‘*grands récits*’ (variously translated as grand narratives, master narratives, metanarratives or metadiscourse): ‘Simplifying to the extreme, I define

postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives’ (1984: xxiv). As Cherryholmes explains:

The modern attitude is part of the Enlightenment tradition. It is concerned with rational control of our lives, beliefs, values, and aesthetic sensibilities ...

Modern, analytic, and structural thought seek rationality, linearity, progress, and control by discovering, developing, and inventing metanarratives, metadiscourse, and metacritiques that define rationality, linearity, progress, and control. Postmodern, postanalytic, and poststructural thought are skeptical and incredulous about the possibility of such metanarratives. (1988: 10–11)

The prefix *meta-* signifies ‘behind, after (*metaphysics*)’ or ‘of a higher or second-order kind (*metalanguage*)’² and is ‘used in the name of a discipline to designate a new but related discipline designed to deal critically with the original one’.³ Metanarratives guide a discipline by specifying rules and conditions for producing knowledge, such as the positivist metanarrative which extended a ‘story or set of rules characterizing positive knowledge’ (Cherryholmes, 1988: 9) from the natural to the social sciences. Postmodernism can be understood as a generic label for the erosion of trust in such metanarratives across various disciplines.

For example, in the physical sciences, the metanarratives of empiricism and experimentalism specified the rules and conditions for producing knowledge from Newton’s era until the late 1880s when the discovery of radioactivity began to undermine experimental physicists’ categorical distinctions between theory and observation. The ‘new physics’ did not result from direct observations of sub-atomic struc-

tures and processes but from physicists inventing new concepts such as sub-atomic particles to guide their enquiries. According to Joseph Schwab, by the mid-twentieth century most scientists were working in this post-positivist way: 'Today ... [a] fresh line of scientific research has its origin not in objective facts alone, but in a conception, a deliberate construction of the mind ... [this conception] tells us what facts to look for in the research. It tells us what meaning to assign these facts' (1962: 198). In effect, Schwab is describing the emergence of postmodernist perspectives in the natural sciences, which include treating the perceptions, interpretations and explanations that constitute our experience and understandings of 'reality' as meanings fashioned by human actors from the social and cultural resources available to them rather than as 'facts' (as modern science conceived them).

It is important to emphasize that understanding 'reality' (and our knowledge of it) as socially constructed is *not* an 'antirealist' position (as some critics of postmodernism argue). What is at issue here is not *belief* in the real but confidence in its representation. As Richard Rorty writes, 'to deny the power to "describe" reality is not to deny reality' (1979: 375); 'the world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not' (Rorty, 1989: 5). Representations of the world are effects and artefacts of *discourses* produced in a particular time and place by the *discursive practices* that regulate 'what is said and written and passes for more or less orderly thought and exchange of ideas' (Cherryholmes, 1988: 2). In Michel Foucault's words, a discursive practice is 'a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function' (1972: 117).

The term 'discourse' itself illustrates this specificity of discourses to particular times and places. Sara Mills notes that in disciplines such as sociology, linguistics, philosophy, literary theory and cultural studies, 'discourse' is 'common currency' and has 'perhaps the widest range of possible significations of any term', yet within theoretical texts 'it is frequently left undefined, as if its usage were simply common knowledge' (1997: 1). For example, some linguists use 'discourse' to signify an object of analysis, such as the context in which certain utterances occur (e.g. legal discourse, medical discourse) and assume that this understanding is 'common knowledge' within their

disciplinary community. This usage is different from (say) Foucault's, for whom discourses cannot be analysed in isolation because they are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (1972: 49) and can only be detected by what they produce as utterances, concepts or effects. For example, to paraphrase Foucault, in the first part of the twentieth century, atomic theorists systematically formed the objects of which they spoke as particles rather than as waves. One result of this formation is that we now represent the speed with which information can be transmitted through silicon chips as a function of how fast electrons move through semiconductors. If these same physicists had formed their theories using the concept of waves (which they soon found to be equally fruitful) then we might now be talking about indices of resistance and patterns of refraction rather than electrons and semiconductors. Asserting that electrons and semiconductors are social constructions does not deny the 'reality' of an information speed limit through silicon chips. The limit is no less 'real' for being social constructed.

Postmodernist perspectives in social inquiry are not a uniform set of shared assumptions but, rather, a loose collection of ways of thinking about how to go beyond modernist perspectives without producing alternative metanarratives. For example, Jane Flax identifies several Enlightenment beliefs that postmodernist philosophers 'seek to throw into radical doubt', namely that:

- 'language is in some sense transparent';
- there is 'a stable, coherent self';
- 'reason and its "science" – philosophy – can provide an objective, reliable, and universal foundation of knowledge';
- 'knowledge acquired from the right use of reason will be "true"';
- 'by grounding claims to authority in reason, the conflicts between truth, knowledge, and power can be overcome';
- 'freedom consists of obedience to laws that conform to the necessary results of the right use of reason' (1990: 41–2).

However, as Judith Butler writes, such doubts (and many other characterizations) 'are variously imputed to postmodernism or poststructuralism, which are conflated with each other and sometimes conflated with deconstruction' (1992: 4). Patti Lather offers a way of distinguishing between postmodernism and

poststructuralism that resists ‘fixing’ the meanings of either concept:

I generally use the term *postmodern* to mean the shift in material conditions of advanced monopoly capitalism brought on by the microelectronic revolution in information technology, the fissures of a global, multinational hyper-capitalism and the global uprising of the marginalised . . . The code name for the crisis of confidence in western conceptual systems, postmodernism is borne out of our sense of the limits of Enlightenment rationality . . .

I generally use *post-structural* to mean the working out of academic theory within the culture of postmodernism, but I also sometimes use the terms interchangeably. (1992: 90)

Implications for research design

Some of the methodological implications of postmodernist perspectives for research design can be appreciated by comparing social inquiry to the work of fictional detectives (Gough, 2002).

For more than a century, detective fiction has simultaneously modelled and critiqued culturally privileged forms of social inquiry, but even a superficial analysis reveals that social researchers have not necessarily kept pace with their fictional counterparts. Many social researchers still privilege scientific rationalism, but Sherlock Holmes and other heroes of the classic ‘logic and deduction’ detective story are no longer the dominant models of how we should obtain worthwhile knowledge of the social world. During the 1920s and 1930s the detachment and ‘objectivity’ of Holmes’s methods began to give way to a variety of more involved and subjective approaches. For example, Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple is more like an ethnographer: by closely observing life in St Mary Mead she produced grounded theories of human behaviour that she used to solve mysteries both within her village and elsewhere. ‘Hard-boiled’ detectives like Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe demonstrate another type of involvement and subjectivity by deeply implicating themselves as actors rather than spectators in the mysteries they try to unravel. Marlowe and many of his successors also told their stories in the first person, a change in narrative perspective that further problematized the role of the researcher in the dialectic of truth versus deception decades before interpretivist inquiry seriously challenged positivist social science. More recently, fic-

tional detectives have adopted socially critical standpoints such as feminism, exemplified by Amanda Cross’s Kate Fansler and Sara Paretsky’s V.I. Warshawski.

Some literary critics see the detective story as the characteristic genre of modernist storytelling. For example, Brian McHale argues that modernist fiction usually involves ‘a quest for a missing or hidden item of knowledge’ (1992: 146) and that ‘a modernist novel looks like a detective story’, centrally concerned with ‘problems of the accessibility and circulation of knowledge, the individual mind’s grappling with an elusive or occluded reality’ (1992: 147). The detective is the archetypal modernist subject, a quest(ion)ing ‘cognitive hero’, an ‘agent of recognitions . . . reduced synecdochically to the organ of visual perception, the (private) eye’ (1992: 147), seeking to understand a unified and objective world.

The postmodern turn in detective fiction (which may have preceded an analogous transformation of social research) is signalled by the emergence of ‘anti-detective’ stories that evoke the impulse to ‘detect’ in order to frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime. One of the most celebrated anti-detective stories is Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1983) which takes some well-known examples of generic detective fiction as its intertextual models, but – as Eco himself puts it – ‘is a mystery in which very little is discovered and the detective is defeated’ (1984: 54). In *The Name of the Rose*, Eco uses the form of detective fiction to deconstruct, disrupt and undermine the rationality of the models of conjecture conventionally provided by the form – which is why, as Eco writes, his ‘basic story (whodunit?) ramifies into so many other stories, all stories of other conjectures, all linked with the structure of conjecture as such’ (1984: 57). Eco provides a physical model of conjecturality in the abbey’s labyrinthine library but also demonstrates that his detective – William of Baskerville – cannot decipher the complex social milieu of the abbey by assuming that it has a comparably logical (albeit complicated) structure. Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Eco likens ‘the structure of conjecture’ to the infinite networks of a rhizome rather than to the finite and hierarchical roots and branches of a tree:

The rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite. The space of conjecture is a rhizome space . . . the world in which William realizes he is

living already has a rhizome structure: that is, it can be structured but is never structured definitively . . . it is impossible for there to be *a* story. (1984: 57–8)

Thus the anti-detective story not only subverts the rationality of the investigatory methods modelled by conventional detective fiction but also denies the defensibility of the dominant cultural expectations that animate such enquiries, namely ‘the longing for “one true story” that has been the psychic motor for [modern] Western science’ (Harding, 1986: 193).

Eco’s story of William’s ‘failure’ as a (modernist) detective is riddled with implicit and explicit references to postmodernist inquiry strategies, as in the following conversation between William and his ‘Watson’, Adso:

‘What I did not understand was the relation among signs . . . I behaved stubbornly, pursuing a semblance of order, when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe.’

‘But in imagining an erroneous order you still found something . . .’

‘What you say is very fine Adso, and I thank you. The order that our mind imagines is like a net, or like a ladder, built to attain something. But afterward you must throw the ladder away, because you discover that, even if it was useful, it was meaningless . . . The only truths that are useful are instruments to be thrown away.’ (1983: 492)

The Name of the Rose is itself such an ‘erroneous order’, which Eco emphasizes by using metafictional narrative strategies to expose its status as fiction and draw attention to the processes by which it is constructed both as a world to be explored and the means of its own exploration.

Thus the more appropriate models for postmodernist social researchers are not detectives like Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple, Philip Marlowe or Kate Fansler, but authors like Umberto Eco. Our work is to fathom the mysteries *we* inscribe.

Stories from the Field

Julianne Cheek

Postmodern approaches are about challenging, interrupting and interrogating aspects of reality that are so central or entrenched in our understandings of what is ‘normal’ that we can come to take them for granted

(Cheek, 2000). In the *Stories from the Field* that follow, I focus on two pieces of research which challenge aspects of the everyday reality of healthcare. As both have been published elsewhere I do not report the research findings per se in the way that we have come to understand such reporting – itself a discursive construct. Rather, I use the studies to give insights into how postmodern thought shaped the research at all points: from the questions asked to the analysis produced. In many respects what follows is as much about the research process itself as it is about the texts that form the product of the studies undertaken. Although the studies focused on aspects of healthcare, which reflects the location from which I research, the insights can be extrapolated to any substantive focus where the challenge and goal is to better understand how things came to be the way they are and what operates to sustain this.

One Sunday morning I was reading the local newspaper and discovered a section where readers’ comments about their role as parents were published. One response was from a parent who wrote: ‘I rang a hospital once at night to ask advice about my baby when she was crying and pulling at her ears, fearing that she had earache. The head nurse/matron said that the baby was too young to know if she had earache or not and her condescending attitude made me feel incompetent’ (*Sunday Mail*, 1996: 29). This comment intrigued me. What appeared to be going on here was that the point of view of the parent seemed to be able to be excluded by that of the nurse. Questions I began asking myself included: What enabled this exchange to occur? How was it that the nurse was able to say what she did? Why did the parent use the term ‘incompetent’? What assumptions were being made in this particular exchange about healthcare? My thinking about the comment, and when formulating these questions, was influenced by Foucauldian thought, particularly the idea of discourse, where ‘a discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organizes and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about’ (Kress, 1985: 7).

A comment in the local newspaper thus comprised the data for this study. Similarly, De Montigny (1995) reports exploring a specific textual fragment in social workers’ case notes about a client, namely ‘the apartment smelled of urine’ (1995: 209). He was interested in exploring what enabled a social worker to determine that an apartment did smell of urine in the first place, and the way that this became ‘truth’ or

fact in the notes, thereby precipitating a series of events that were only possible as a result of this truth – ‘the smell was inscribed into a professional code as a matter indicating potential failure and therefore as properly deserving social work attention’ (1995: 211). In the same way, in the specific textual fragment that was the focus of my study, I was interested in exploring what enabled the nurse to say what she did, and how that allowed the participants in the exchange to be positioned relative to each other.

What immediately struck me was the power of the health professional to determine what counts as knowledge and what experience is ‘real’. Drawing on dominant discourses of science and medicine, the nurse is able to exclude, or at least relegate to the margins, the parent’s understandings of the situation. Professional expertise premised on scientific/medical discourse about the ‘facts’ positions the parent as amateur and non-authoritative whose account is non-factual. In this instance an effect of power is the ability to claim presence (Fox, 1994), or as De Montigny puts it ‘Power is realised as social workers [read health professionals more generally] construct their accounts about clients’ lives and thereby appropriate for themselves the right to tell the story and to decide what gets counted as relevant’ (1995: 219). Thus it is a ‘fact’ that the baby is too young to know it has earache. Premised on this ‘truth’ a cascade of actions and events can follow. This includes the parent being positioned at the margins in terms of whose account and knowledge is afforded mainframe (or centre stage).

Yet it was clear that the parent did not simply accept this position. Writing the comment and sending it in to the paper is indicative of resistance on the parent’s part to the position created for them by ‘expert’ discourse. Thus I was as much interested in the fact that the parent wrote the comment at all as I was in the actual comment itself. It would be too simplistic to portray the nurse as having power and the parent not. Of interest to me was: Whose voice is heard? Whose is not and when? How this is able to happen? and what the effects of this are. In such an analysis, explorations of communication between health professionals and their clients are moved beyond focusing on content, turn taking and the need for ‘better’ communication, to highlight that communication itself is a discursive construction. The focus is on how texts represent rather than on what they represent (Starn, 1989).

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In the second ‘story from the field’, the substantive focus was on the way that a relatively new health phenomenon, toxic shock syndrome (TSS),⁴ was represented in print-based media between 1979 and 1995. Again Foucauldian perspectives informed the research, particularly notions of discourse and governmentality. In addition I approached this from the position of newspapers not being simply conveyors of information, but rather constructed by, and in turn constructing, understandings including those pertaining to aspects of health and healthcare. I was particularly interested in how understandings of TSS were constructed. How did knowledge about TSS become ‘stabilised, emerging as fact?’ (Guillemin, 1996: 42).

In this study the data were all articles published in four purposively selected print-based popular media – the purposiveness relating to choosing media with diverse readerships and likely to be information rich in terms of reporting of TSS (see Cheek, 1997). Frequency of reporting and a number of other features of the articles were analysed, and a chronology of the reporting of TSS in these sources was developed (Cheek, 1997: 188–9). At this stage the analysis remained at the descriptive level. I then applied a Foucauldian influenced lens to the articles to ‘examine the discourses competing to create meaning at the site of Australian press accounts’ (Lupton, 1994: 74). As I read each article I asked myself (drawing on Workman, 1996) what ‘are the discourses that shape the representation of, and understandings about, TSS, and ultimately discipline the dialogue about it? How is seriousness assigned, truth fixed, understanding domesticated and discussion routinized about the relatively recent health phenomenon?’ (Cheek, 1997: 191).

Three major discursive frames emerged from this analysis and questioning. They were the discourse of concealment, scientific/medical discourse, and discourse about individual responsibility for health. The discourse of concealment was largely framed by the unmentionable nature of menstruation and menstrual products. Tensions were evident in affording TSS mainframe (or centre stage) in terms of the public reporting of the syndrome, yet at the same time having to acknowledge its link with such unmentionables usually relegated to the margins. The impact of scientific/medical discourse in both defining TSS itself and in assigning seriousness of risk also was present throughout the period of the reporting. At the outset (1980) some medical authorities are quoted as

decrying TSS as ‘trivial’ and as ‘another American beat up to scare the nation’s females’ (see Cheek, 1997: 193). In later reporting TSS is established as a ‘legitimate’ disease, but only according to medical/scientific discourses – ‘the syndrome of toxic shock is based on a constellation of strict diagnostic criteria’ (Garland and Peel, 1995: 8).

With respect to the third discursive frame, namely individual responsibility for health, many early articles were about the need for hygiene on the part of individual women and girls. Thus ‘TSS early on is transformed into an issue of neglect of care for the self, and of carelessness on the part of individual women’ (Cheek, 1997: 196). The effect of this was to relegate questions about the manufacturing and testing of tampons to the margins. The problem is thus framed as one of individual hygiene, not production processes. Olesen (1986: 57-8) notes that ‘the toxic-shock phenomenon poses critical questions in the definition and construction of the issues’. My research confirmed this.

Both ‘stories from the field’ presented here enable different possibilities and ways of viewing health and healthcare practice to emerge. Thus research informed by postmodern approaches enables us to open to scrutiny and contestation understandings of any aspect of reality. For me it has been to open up to scrutiny aspects of healthcare that previously may have seemed innocuous and neutral. This is the subtext from these ‘stories from the field’. None of this is to privilege the position that I have constructed in writing this text, nor is it necessarily to argue against particular healthcare practices. Rather it is to open up possibilities, new ways of looking at practices

that may be so familiar to us as to be invisible in terms of where they came from, the assumptions they make and the effects that they have.

In concluding I need to acknowledge that these stories, and the understanding of the ‘field’ that they employ, reflect a position that I-as-researcher have adopted in relation to postmodern thought. What position(s) a researcher takes up in the somewhat fluid and diverse understandings that can be broadly called postmodern shapes and frames the research undertaken, and is therefore as much a part of the story from the field as the methods employed or the analyses done.

Notes

1. For example, Charles Jencks credits British artist John Watkins Chapman with using ‘postmodern’ in 1870 to refer to painting after Impressionism (see Appignanesi et al., 1995: 3).
2. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*.
3. *Webster’s Seventh Collegiate Dictionary*.
4. The specific causative agent of TSS is the bacterium staphylococcus aureus. It usually affects menstruating women and is linked with tampon use (although this is disputed).
5. Rosenau suggests that decisions to hyphenate postmodernism (or not) might signal a position: ‘The absence of the hyphen has come to imply a certain sympathy with post-modernism [*sic*] and a recognition of its legitimacy, whereas the hyphen indicates a critical posture’ (1992: 18).

Annotated bibliography

Appignanesi, R., Garratt, C., Sardar, Z. and Curry, P. (1995) *Postmodernism for Beginners*. Cambridge: Icon Books.

An illustrated introduction to key players and events in the history of postmodernism in Western culture that traces its multiple genealogies in popular and academic arts and disciplines. It also includes brief accounts of Islamic and ‘Third World’ postmodernisms.

Cheek, J. (2000) *Postmodern and Poststructural Approaches to Nursing Research*, 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

A clear account of how Foucauldian analyses of power/knowledge and critical discourse analysis can inform health and nursing research. More than half the book focuses on case studies and examples.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. [1987] *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze and Guattari contrast modernist 'arborescent' thought, organized systematically and hierarchically as branches of knowledge grounded in firm foundations, with postmodernist 'rhizomatic' thought. *A Thousand Plateaus* 'walks the talk': it is written as a rhizome.

Foucault, M. [1980] *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, trans. C. Gordon. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Foucault's guide to Foucault. These accessible essays and interviews demonstrate how his investigations of prisons, schools, barracks, hospitals, factories, cities, families, social justice and the history of sexuality contribute to understanding the mechanisms through which power pervades our discourses, learning processes and everyday lives.

Gough, N. [2002] 'Fictions for representing and generating semiotic consciousness: the crime story and educational inquiry', *International Journal of Applied Semiotics*, 3(2): 59–76.

A detailed elaboration of the intertextual connections and parallels between crime fiction and social inquiry and their implications for designing and doing educational research.

Rosenau, P.M. [1992] *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Traces the disciplinary histories and applications of 'post-modernism'⁵ and shows how postmodernist critiques of rationality affect such academic fields as anthropology, economics, geography, history, international relations, law, planning, political science, psychology, sociology, urban studies and women's studies, and how it has inspired alternative political, social and cultural movements.

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