

Postmodernism, Phenomenology, Experimental Social Psychology, and Intellectual Humility

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Phenomenology and postmodernism each warn against a particular flavour of intellectual complacency; the former at the level of stereotype and apperception and the latter at the level of formal rationale and text. Both challenge the ontological basis of empiricism in a fundamental way. Each is sceptical of the natural human tendency to take the various objects of perception, language, and thought as literal, real, and tangible in themselves, and to ignore their consensual constitution.

The tendency toward naïve realism is central to the efficient accumulation of knowledge and it is therefore pervasive throughout the full range of sensory, motor, and cognitive systems. It is efficient, and therefore essential, in the sense that the history of a perception, belief, reflex, or skill can be discarded once it has yielded a serviceable product. This is a good thing indeed because history goes all the way back to the beginning of time, and there is an intractable amount of information involved there which would otherwise have to be encoded and retained as a part of the simplest actual function. We do not need to be aware of the luminosity and boundary gradients of our visual field, much less the evolutionary history of the sensory and cognitive systems that produce and interpret them, in order to recognize our mate or to distinguish food from shelf in our refrigerator. This same requirement for tractability calls upon us to take seriously our apperception of such increasingly abstract realities as money, marriage, professional identity, happiness, the quality of a theory, or postmodern phenomenology.

The practical success of any artefact is the only test of its adaptive value, and we should expect that to be the only standard for the elements of our own psychology, intellect, or theoretical orientation as well. But it is well to recognize that practicality will tolerate any untruth, inconsistency, or error that does not impinge excessively upon the circumstances in which it is actually tested. For this reason, novel circumstances naturally expose weakness in the constitution of things. Scholarship and psychotherapy both demand a critical deconstruction of their subject matter; scholarship in the pursuit of truth and psychotherapy in the relief of oppressive perspective. Phenomenology and postmodernism each encourage a re-examination of affairs within a more comprehensive framework; phenomenology within the framework of immediate personal experience and postmodernism within the framework of language, culture, and society.

Although phenomenology and postmodern social constructivism highlight and dismantle similar social/psychological/theoretical artefacts, the two traditions seem to strive in opposite directions; phenomenology away from reductive analysis and social construction decidedly toward it. By pointing to the social construction of knowledge, postmodern critique frames its reduction largely in the terms of social psychology. At any rate, the postmodern perspective certainly permits me to read the text in this way (or in any other way that I like for that matter), and this interpretation conveniently highlights our present focus on scientific social psychology.

The aim of social psychology is to delineate and characterize those artefacts of perception, cognition, and behaviour that can be attributed to the systematic interaction of individuals (McGrath & Tschan, 2004; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994; Tesser, 1994). The aim of the social constructivist is to account for as much of this territory as possible in terms of social and cultural elements that can be regarded as external to the individual, *even though these very elements may be “nothing more than” the aggregate, emergent product of individuals in active ongoing relationship*. All social and cultural artefacts take on a life of their own by means of a coordinated network of symbolic representations that become embedded in the language, literature, and institutions of a culture. When the focus of interest is upon these social institutions themselves, then specialized disciplines such as economics, linguistics, communications, military and political science define the relevant territory. When the focus is on the individual, then this is the province of social psychology.

In his essay, *Psychological Science in a Postmodern Context*, Kenneth Gergen takes pains to avoid any claim that the postmodern perspective itself is anchored in any universal foundation, or that it represents any universal truth (Kenneth, 2001). This disclaimer is necessary in order to avoid the deadly embrace of a self negating argument, but in its own very practical terms the argument loses no weight by this admission. Every theoretical argument or social value labours under (or is freed by!) the same unavoidable constraint. Like any other communicable idea, the medium of postmodern critique is pre-negotiated and culturally fixed language, which is itself founded in the strictly local activity of what Wittgenstein refers to as the “language games” that are ongoing among individuals, and which literally constitute the meaning of language (Wittgenstein, 1953). Such local logic is unavoidably anchored in some fundamentally limited history, context, and pre-established language. The central value proposition of postmodern criticism seems to be intellectual humility which, I think, is but a short step from the related value of social responsibility that seems to clearly mark this field of discourse. This is only a truly empirical honesty, in my view.

Gergen also takes pains to illustrate that, although this sceptical perspective is often mistaken as antithetical to the scientific method, in fact it only casts experimental results (and the associated theories) within their proper context; within which they remain perfectly valid and “true”. In fact, *experimental verification remains the only possible method of confirming propositions of local truth, no matter how historically, or even arbitrarily rooted those propositions might be*. The traditional experimental methods of social psychology are therefore directly applicable to the purposes of postmodern social constructivism. In fact, they provide its only verifiable terms. The theory that results only need remain humble in the scope of its claims.

Humility is therefore the meta-message of postmodern social critique, and the associated professional value for psychology is an appreciation for the value of propositions put forward by any theoretical system that is not self-contradictory. This does not, as it might seem at first, involve the necessity to compromise any theoretical claim beyond the demands of the scientific method itself, operating locally. There is no

need to give up any truth or value. Rather, it simply calls for a recognition that the terms of meaning in which other perfectly valid systems are constituted may be fundamentally different and, hence, not directly comparable.

The implications of postmodern critique for psychological theory are clear. In order to be complete, any theory must forgo claim to universality and articulate its principle assumptions in social and institutional terms, which are inherently value laden. Theorists thereby lose the cloak of objectivity and become accountable for the social consequences, as well as the roots, of their theories. The implications of postmodern critique for clinical practice are also clear (although not nearly as original). Individuals each stand in the role of theorists in their world view, and although they are not motivated by theoretical rigor, when their working propositions lead them into difficulties it is generally by means of some ontological deconstruction of their perspective that they can find relief.

References

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