Understanding Experience

Psychotherapy and Postmodernism

Edited by Roger Frie

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Understanding Experience: Psychotherapy and Postmodernism is a collection of innovative interdisciplinary essays that explore the way we experience and interact with each other and the world around us. The authors address the postmodern debate in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis through clinical and theoretical discussion and offer a view of the person that is unique and relevant today.

The clinical work of Binswanger, Boss, Fromm, Fromm-Reichmann, Laing, and Lacan is considered alongside the theories of Buber, Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and others. Combining clinical data from psychotherapy and psychoanalysis with insights from European philosophy, this book seeks to fill a major gap in the debate over postmodernism and bridges the paradigmatic divide between the behavioural sciences and the human sciences.

It will be of great interest to clinicians and students of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis who wish to come to terms with postmodernism, as well as those interested in the interaction of psychotherapy, philosophy and social theory.

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Preface

The rise of postmodernism in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis is generally considered new and radical. Yet many of the theories implicit in the postmodern turn were developed much earlier by continental European philosophers and literary theorists. Postmodernism in philosophy and literary theory was initially characterized by the wholesale dispersion and dissolution of the human self. This idea along with many others has since been questioned and revised. But in contemporary psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, the postmodernist dispersion of the self is still in its ascendancy. As is so often the case, disciplinary boundaries between clinical practice and other fields of inquiry stand in the way of a productive and timely exchange of ideas. By combining clinical case material with theoretical discussion, this book seeks to overcome the disciplinary divide and examine the challenges of postmodernism for the contemporary clinician and theorist alike.

I have written this book in order to demonstrate the ongoing interaction that exists between clinical practice and philosophical thinking. Having been academically trained in clinical psychology and continental European philosophy, and having taught in both areas, I am continually struck by the connections between these disciplines. But I am also saddened by the lack of cross-disciplinary dialogue.

In Europe there is still an intellectual tradition of freely combining insights from psychology and philosophy. The authors in this book align themselves with this approach in order to explore and elaborate the nature of human experience. Academic and clinical training, particularly in North America, is often guild-like in its attempt to shut out different ways of thinking or styles of practice. As a teacher, my aim is to help my students think outside standard disciplinary boundaries. As a clinician, I find that my philosophical background helps me to appreciate and

endeavor to understand the nature of experience. To my students and my patients, whose experiences of life are so rich, I owe a debt of gratitude.

I would like to thank my colleagues, many of whom are good friends, for contributing their time and effort and making this book possible. Kate Hawes, the senior commissioning editor at Brunner-Routledge, took on and supported this project with enthusiasm. Intellectual reflection is rarely a solitary pursuit. For inspiring conversations, dialogue, and critical readings of my work, I wish to thank Betty Cannon, Cynthia Field, Jon Frederickson, Jon Mills, Jai Ramaswamy, Bruce Reis, and Kirk Schneider. I also owe thanks to the institutions with which I am affiliated. The William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis, and Psychology has provided an intellectual home where interdisciplinary dialogue is welcomed and supported. Working at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center has enabled me to experience a wealth of clinical styles and allows for innovative teaching and discussion.

It is ultimately one's personal experience that makes an intellectual pursuit worthwhile. I wish to thank my parents and my sister, Louise Frie, for their continued support. I am indebted above all to Emily, my best friend and most valuable critic, and to our daughter Elena, whose birth and development over the past two years has been a joyous experience .

Contents

Between modernism and postmodernism:

Rethinking psychological agency

Roger Frie

This collection of interdisciplinary chapters seeks to explore the human capacity for experience. The authors address the postmodern debate in contemporary psychotherapy and psychoanalysis through clinical case discussion and theoretical exegesis. They elaborate new perspectives on the embodied self and its role in communicative and therapeutic contexts and reconsider such basic experiences as agency, authenticity, freedom, and choice. In the process, the authors develop a constructive critique of postmodernism and present a view of the person as an active, responsible, embodied being. In the present intellectual climate, so dominated by medical psychology on the one hand and postmodernism on the other, this book provides a way to retrieve the personal and offers an approach for understanding psychological agency in the clinical setting.

Experience is not easily described and always exceeds our attempts to define it in words or concepts. Psychotherapists and psychoanalysts can be very astute practitioners who are attuned to the nature of experience. But they have not usually developed their conceptual thinking about experience. In fact, many clinicians feel that this is a task best left to philosophy. Philosophers, for their part, need to move beyond their reliance on concepts in order to recognize that we can have direct access to our experience. Unfortunately, few people think to link these two disciplines, which are usually seen as separate or opposed.

The authors in this book are a unique group in that they are practicing psychotherapists and psychoanalysts as well as philosophical scholars. Training in the mental health professions, often driven by political and economic forces, has become overly narrow and technical in focus. Most clinicians in the contemporary mental health professions identify themselves within a framework of the natural sciences, which seeks empirical verification for their work. As a result, the fact that every psychology rests on a set of theoretical assumptions about the nature of human

experience is generally overlooked. By combining clinical data from psychotherapy and psychoanalysis with insights from European philosophy, this book seeks to bridge the paradigmatic divide between the behavioural sciences and the human sciences.

The aim of this initial chapter is to set out the book's interdisciplinary objectives. The chapter begins with a consideration of the issue of agency as a key problem within the postmodern debate. It then examines the development of postmodernism in clinical theory and practice. The chapter shows the way in which philosophical ideas have been applied in the clinical setting in order to challenge traditional theory and technique. Finally, it introduces the historical and contemporary contexts within which to understand the clinicians, thinkers, and ideas examined in this book.

The challenge of postmodernism

The practice of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis is at a crossroads. Gone are the fixed concepts and universalist assumptions that informed the work of Freud and his followers. Enlightenment themes such as individuality, objectivity, rationality, and truth are being questioned and revised. With the advent of postmodernism, the unity of the individual mind, the notion of an objectively knowable world, and the view of language as the carrier of truth have all been implicitly or explicitly rejected. In place of the ego, the postmodernist speaks of momentary selves to refer to the way in which the self is relationally generated and maintained. In place of objectivity, the postmodernist turns to social constructionism. And in place of language as truth bearing, the postmodernist asserts that meaning in language is inherently unstable and that truth is open to multiple interpretations.

The postmodern turn in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis consists of different voices and outlooks. Yet a central theme is the subordination of the individual person to larger organizing structures that are outside of our awareness and beyond our control. The person is seen as embedded in social, linguistic, and historical contexts and as having no natural or intrinsic organization. As a result, such notions as freedom and choice, which comprise the activities of personal agency, are altogether dismantled. In contrast to the modernist emphasis on the autonomy of the individual mind, postmodernism asserts that the person, or subject, is not only shaped, but also subverted by the contexts in which it exists. More radical versions of postmodernism deny the very existence of a person with the capacity for reflexive thought and self-determining action. In

place of the person as an active, responsible being, they herald the so-called death of the subject.

Most psychotherapists and psychoanalysts rightly welcome the postmodern themes of difference and uncertainty as refreshing changes from past adherence to sameness and universality. Postmodernism has demonstrated the degree to which we are all socially and culturally embedded. It has made us aware of the realities of ambivalence and otherness in therapeutic and communicative settings and has freed us from the strictures of a one-person psychology that views the mind in essential isolation from others. The reliance on the analytic neutrality and objectivity that defined classical psychoanalysis has given way to a therapeutic relationship based on mutuality, in which traditional assumptions about authority and reason yield to ambiguity and uncertainty.

The dilemma facing postmodernism, in my view, is not its embrace of difference, multiplicity, or embeddedness, but its denial of the individual person or subject. Psychotherapists and psychoanalysts who endorse the basic tenets of postmodernism seek to overcome the technical and theoretical limitations that characterized classical psychoanalysis. More often than not, however, these same clinicians continue to adhere to a concept of the experiencing individual person, which is precisely what postmodernism rejects. The problem with the postmodern denial of the subject is that the ability to organize experience and pursue a course of action is dependent upon a person for whom that experience takes place. Once the concept of the person is altogether subverted, the notion of personal agency is similarly undermined. And without a psychological agent who develops, changes, and learns, the therapeutic process appears to lose its meaning.

An unqualified embrace of postmodernism thus gives rise to a number of important questions. If there is no person for whom experience takes place, then who can be said to experience anything at all? How do we explain individual change, innovation, or creativity if the person is subverted? And how do we account for the determination of meaning or the ability to choose one course of action over another without a concept of personal agency? When postmodernism collapses the subject into intersubjective, relational, and linguistic contexts, when it rejects the person as agent, it undermines the basis of human experience. In the process, reductionistic versions of postmodernism seem to endorse relativism and skepticism because there is no longer any autonomous ground on which to stand, no one perspective that can reasonably be compared to any other. Nor can there be any theory of truth, since truth, like the subject, is said to exist only in a state of constant and continual flux.

Given the problems intrinsic to the rise of postmodernism, a re-evaluation of the nature of human experience is urgently needed. The contributing authors in this book combine insights from clinical psychology and philosophy to offer new perspectives on the person as an active, embodied being. They critique postmodern reductionism and argue that when the subject is viewed only as a linguistic or social construction, some of the most central aspects of subjective life are overlooked. In contrast to the antisubjectivist attitude of postmodernism, the authors call for a reconsideration of the human subject. Their aim is to formulate a conception of the human being that accounts for our psychological agency and individuality without succumbing to the modernist themes of essentialism, sameness, and universality.

In order to navigate between the obstacles of modernist thought and postmodern reductionism, this book will turn to a relatively neglected but very influential intellectual tradition known as existential-phenomenology. The term refers to a group of European psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, and philosophers whose work bridges existentialism and phenomenology and generally spans the decades between the 1920s and 1960s. Included under the banner of existential-phenomenology are psychoanalysts and psychiatrists such Ludwig Binswanger, Erich Fromm, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, Medard Boss, and R. D. Laing, who developed their approach in reaction to deterministic and mechanistic theories of human behavior. They drew on the work of philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Buber, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, all of whom sought to counter materialistic, positivistic, and Cartesian traditions of thought.

The ideas espoused by these clinicians and thinkers set the groundwork for postmodernism in contemporary psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. European psychoanalysts and psychiatrists in the existential-phenomenological tradition introduced the concept of a socially and historically constituted person; they rejected internalized drives and emphasized the interpersonal and embodied basis of human experience; they questioned the myth of analytic neutrality; and they introduced the notion of a two-person psychology. Yet in contrast to reductionistic versions of postmodernism, they also sought to develop a theory of the psychological agent that was true to our lived, embodied experience and would account for progressive change and understanding. The existential-phenomenological tradition thereby provides an alternative perspective on human experience and psychological agency that avoids the current bifurcation between modernism and postmodernism.

The postmodern turn

The rise of postmodernism has clearly given way to much discussion and debate. For some observers (Gergen 2001) the postmodern notion that meaning is derived less from a single mind than from interdependent relationships implies that theory, research, and practice in psychology must all be revisited from a postmodern perspective. For others (Martin and Sugarman 2000), the stridency with which postmodernism attacks psychological agency is anathema to the very practice of psychology. The ideas underlying the debate over postmodernism may strike some readers unaccustomed to the world of theory as complex and confusing. This overview of the main ideas of the postmodern turn aims to help guide the reader through the debate.

Western culture has traditionally celebrated the individual mind as the locus of reason and knowledge. The foundation for this approach was developed by Rene Descartes, whose famous dictum "I think, therefore I am" championed the human ability to reason and ushered in the age of the Enlightenment. By positing a self-sufficient subject and a separate world of objects, Descartes substantiated the Platonic distinction between a subjective "internal" world of the mind and an objective "external" world outside the mind.

Postmodernism is a direct reaction to this Enlightenment belief that meaning is the creation of an isolated mind. Descartes's belief that the knowledge we have of our own minds is not connected in any essential way to the world around us raises a number of intractable problems. If our minds are really the only thing we can be certain of, then the external world, other human minds, and even the existence of our own bodies must be in doubt. For Descartes, skepticism ultimately led to a proof of God's existence. Today, skepticism is rather less convincing. It is precisely the dilemmas inherent in Descartes's reasoning which form the basis of the postmodern turn.

Postmodern theorists seek to decenter or deconstruct such foundational or objective concepts as truth and knowledge in an attempt to account for the heterogeneity, multiplicity, and difference of our time. Postmodernism operates within diverse disciplines and does not constitute a coherent body of thought. In general, however, its proponents view the self not in isolation, but as a product of history, culture, and language. Postmodernists reject outright any concept of the self or subjectivity that is not understood as discursive or interpreted.

According to poststructuralism, developed in the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan during the 1960s and