

## **How does the superconcept: postmodernism relate to Psychology?**

A superconcept is a concept that may be developed in a discipline but has wider applications in describing the processes of many topics, disciplines included. The superconcept: postmodernism has six key features. These are the rejection of grand narratives, the prioritisation of utility, the search for a new legitimising principle, the use of language games to describe disciplines, an ironic commitment to truth and a level of interdisciplinarity. All of these features are linked by an underlying epistemological rejection of objective truth. Psychology relates to postmodernism because these key features permeate the discipline for better or worse.

A key feature of postmodernism and one that resonates in postmodern psychotherapy is scepticism of grand-narratives. Historically, grand-narratives had two functions. The first was to provide the hope that subjugated members of society would one day become free or face improved standards of living, the second to evaluate all aspects of the universe in a comprehensive theory. Through these functions, grand-narratives gave legitimacy to norms of social conduct. In the classical period pagan myths - one form of grand-narrative - legitimized the ritual slaughtering of animals. In the modern period, the truth-seeking goals of political rationalisation, capitalism, Marxism and democracy became the legitimising grand-narratives of the day. Respectively, each was considered the ultimate state of human existence.

However, in the postmodern context, singular theories which legitimize actions through their claim to truth are rejected because their 'compulsive deontology' has failed in the past. Marxism, especially, is viewed in this way. The proclamation of its irrefutable worth and its imposition on Soviet Russia neither raised standards of living nor provided a compelling and unitary theory of the universe. This is one reason why grand-narratives at large are not trusted; they have failed so publicly. Likewise, Psychotherapy began in the modernist vein. In 1879, Wilhelm Wundt's psychological laboratory was set up to find the objective truth behind human behaviour. On the psychotherapist couch too, Freud's truth seeking theories were thought to free people from their troubles and improve their standards of living. Success was limited in both cases and, in many instances Freud's singular and standardised approach to rehabilitation failed patients. The failure of grand-narratives to reveal objective truth has caused postmodernists to place emphasis on the efficacy of various little narratives, instead.

In the postmodern school of psychotherapy, each patient or group is considered unique - with particular rules which govern their actions. This reflects the postmodernist emphasis on little-narratives. The use of 'integrative psychotherapy', which places the needs of particular patients at the forefront of treatment as opposed to the truth of a particular theory, is evidence of this. No longer are patients to be treated as reflections of the truth of a particular theory. Instead, patients are to be considered isolated cases. They may be diagnosed with the aid of theory but should not have the methodology of a dominant theory imposed upon them. Thus, the current discourse on psychotherapy does not recommend one true therapy but stresses contingency in its use of the most effective therapies for the individual from the range of available theories. This reflects the postmodern society's understanding of open-ended contingency alongside its desire for efficacy. Finality, as predicted by grand-narratives is rejected in the postmodern context for an open ended contingency with no set future.

Rejecting the grand-narratives of modern times, a defining feature of the postmodern condition is society's attempt to find a new legitimising principle. One principle has gained prominence, though its limitations are noted and alternatives sought. Utility, efficacy and appropriateness are all words used to describe this new legitimising principle. Ultimately, they give rise to the notion that theories are only good or 'true' if they meet their set objective. This reflects the historical switch in emphasis from means to ends. In modern times empirical methodology was the only received way of finding the ultimate truth about human behaviour. This is why psychological laboratories proliferated in Europe and the United States during the

19<sup>th</sup> century. However, in the postmodern world the ends can, often mistakenly, justify the means. This change raises ethical issues because some people believe that there is not a 'right way' to act: anything goes.

Thus, the benefits that come from an emphasis on results, not methods, are reflected in postmodern psychology, but so are its ethical issues. Postmodernist psychotherapy in particular offers greater plurality of methods and solutions. Regarding solutions, postmodern psychotherapy is designed with the central aim of meeting the clients desired outcome not a preordained 'ideal' outcome of 'happiness' for instance. To this end, postmodern psychotherapy offers multiple 'perspectives' or methods of approaching the clients desired outcome. If a client wants to understand how childhood issues continue to impact upon their behaviour the psychodynamic perspective might be deemed most appropriate to use by a psychologist. Alternatively, if a client wants quick relief from grief, one of the cognitive approaches might be most effective. For example, someone suffering from grief might be given a prescription for drugs to cure the symptoms.

However, the societal focus on effectiveness is of some concern to those who believe it will lead to an unethical society. This concern is expressed in the use of the phrase 'cure the symptoms'. After all, it may not be healthy, in the long run, for a society to avoid its problems by taking prescription drugs. Indeed, the prioritisation of effectiveness without due concern for 'ethics' could be disastrous. Noting the recent rise in the prescription of anti-depressant tablets in the UK it is conceivable that NHS budget constraints, not patients' needs, are the primary factor behind the prescription of drugs. Indeed, the private healthcare industry may also have some incentive to prescribing what are euphemistically called 'tablets'. This feature of postmodernism may lead humanity into dangerous territory if ethics or, in their absence, a wider view of actions is not taken. After all, if the legitimisation of society is only based on utility, any ideology could become hegemonic.

Formerly, grand-narratives were strongly related to the legitimization of ideas and actions. In the postmodern context, however, many factors legitimize actions. Legitimation refers to the types of knowledge and actions that are given priority and the reasoning for that prioritisation. In the pre-modern period religious orders, with their appeals to God, legitimized the forcible taking of land. In the modern period grand-narratives, with their appeals to historical necessity, legitimized the actions of tyrants such as Stalin. In the postmodern context, however, the 'compulsive deontologies' of the past are eschewed. The faith in God or belief in historical necessity which were taken as obvious justification for action, are now all considered linguistic illusions. In the postmodern period, ideas are no longer legitimized by these 'apparently natural' causes. For the many competing disciplines, legitimation is now a function of those ideas with the best argument, the most influence or which is best at manipulating the public. This is why the wealth of nations is measured in real-GDP, not by the Happiness Index as proposed by psychologists, because economists' theories are considered to posit the best arguments regarding a nation's yearly accomplishments. Here again, utility sits at the heart of society's governance. In the absence of a naturally legitimizing entity such as God, society must decide what its interests are. In the postmodern context utility has become a very important societal interest, which is often appealed to.

Furthermore, in the postmodern context it is now realised that those ideas, which have a monopoly on the three types of legitimization noted earlier are likely to hold disproportionate influence over society. This is the logic behind why the Church held such power in the past: its ideas were convincing to laypeople, it was inseparable from governance and through the use 'agents of God' it could manipulate and coerce members of society. This process operates in psychology too. Many people in society will have heard of Sigmund Freud. His ideas form the basis of much we know about the subconscious and - despite flaws - his ideas have perhaps permeated through the public consciousness because they offer the clearest argument of a bad bunch. Moreover, the continued printing of Freud's outdated theories on the pages of 21<sup>st</sup> century psychology textbooks mean that Freud's ideas still have the power to influence. In the postmodern context, there are many ways to legitimize one's ideas and we now realise, there always were.

Another key feature of postmodernist condition is viewing disciplines as 'language games'. The term, 'language games' was misappropriated from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* by Lyotard (1984). In its adapted form, the term describes how groups or disciplines within contemporary - as opposed to all - society communicate within their group using different sets of internal rules and assumed values. These rules and values might not apply in other disciplines. Furthermore, individuals who remain mono-disciplinary may not be aware of the contingent use of their form of communication. For instance, despite having a singular and negative connotation linguistically, the term 'depression' is used differently by economists and psychologists. This represents the chance nature of different language games using language in the same way. Economists use 'depression' to describe a reduction in an economy's output whilst psychologists use 'depression' to describe the reduced output of dopamine from the thyroid gland or alternatively symptoms of the condition.

The psychological example highlights the ways in which the issues of language games can operate within disciplines as well. For instance, Ivan Pavlov claimed that his behaviourist therapy was the best because, following its internal rules - which demanded the use of empirical study, he found seemingly conclusive proof, through the study of dogs, that patients could be trained out of phobias. (McLeod, 2007) Pavlov's theory garnered much criticism from psychologists. In the postmodern context, however, such disagreements are considered senseless. This is because postmodernists believe that 'we [only] understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief'. In short, we can only understand a type of methodology if we know what it is trying to prove. Thus, disciplines constructed with different aims and rules, which constrain the types of methodology that can be used within them, cannot judge the findings of other disciplines without bias.

This postmodernist understanding plays into the emphasis that is put on utility. In postmodern psychology plurality of methodology is considered beneficial not unfocused. This is because postmodern psychologists recognise the restrictiveness of being mono-disciplinary. So, postmodern psychologists of the 'integrative school' promote specialisations within psychology such as neuroscience or cognitive psychology. Additionally they teach psychologists about their inherent biases towards one theory or another to help them choose what is most effective method for each patient. This is done to eventually reach the goal of eradicating mental health issues.

However, it must be noted that interdisciplinarity is the outcome of this avoidance of mono-disciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity is inherently postmodern as it prioritises efficacy as its legitimising principle and samples from many different areas of knowledge. As described above the integrative model of psychology reflects the new interdisciplinary approach. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this approach causes knowledge to be sought for its 'use' alone; it is not an end in itself anymore.

That language alone gives structure and meaning to the world is the underpinning of ironic commitment to truth. It gives rise to the popular phrase, 'perception is reality.' Postmodernists do not believe our knowledge mirrors objective truth because without language as a means to describe reality, our reality would not exist. Owing to this, Rorty (1989) suggested that there must be an ironic commitment to disciplines as truth. That is to say that in the absence of objective truth, we must recognise that the conclusions of disciplines are not objectively true but only contingent. Simultaneously, we should not allow our knowledge about the construction of reality divert our attention from the goal of seeking 'truth'. In the postmodernist sense of the word, 'truth' has become interchangeable with 'effective'. So an ironic commitment to truth, in which it is implicitly understood that truth is not 'out there', is simply an acknowledgement that all disciplines should seek the maximum effectiveness. This is reflected in modern psychology. In Neuroscience, a branch of psychology with a scientific methodology, it is recognised that when brain scans are coloured - to highlight the areas of the brain that are more stimulated than others - the colouring is a social construction to suit our aims and does not represent objective truth. Despite this,

neuroscientists and disciplines in general are still considered essential because the causal links that they propose through their various methods are useful in achieving the aims that humanity has set for them.

In conclusion, psychology relates well with the key features of the superconcept: postmodernism. By rejecting grand-narratives, prioritising utility, seeking a new legitimising principle, viewing truth ironically, acknowledging language games and by favouring interdisciplinarity psychology is now inherently postmodern in its outlook. However, psychology's adaptation of utility as a societal interest may yet have unforeseen consequences. Still, the main reason that psychology relates to postmodernity so well is because it reconciles the view that truth is a linguistic illusion with the societal need for disciplines which address the tasks that humanity has set it.

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