

APPLICATION OF MODERNISM/POSTMODERNISM AND DISCUSSION/DIALOGUE TO COLLEAGUE INTERACTION

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Difficult interactions with academic department colleagues regarding an MSW research requirement are assessed in the context of two theories: modernism/postmodernism and discussion/dialogue. From this assessment, the author discerns five areas for personal change he believes will enhance his effectiveness with department colleagues.

My students are generally startled when I relate this observation: Working with people experiencing difficulty need not be exhausting. To the contrary, it can be nourishing if clients are assisted, in a spirit of co-creation, to discover and use their own strengths and resources to respond to their unique challenges. What may be exhausting, however, is that in order to have credibility with clients, practitioners must live this same responsible strategy, often bringing personal growth by way of humiliation, regret, apology, reconciliation, and confrontation, along with fear of change and loneliness. I think of this personal journey as walking in clients' footsteps in order to become increasingly authentic with them.

Recently, I was challenged to personally practice this conviction. Our department of social work, a group of exceptionally talented people with impressive educational and professional backgrounds, addressed an emotionally laden question: Should we require the continuation of a research project for our MSW students that had traditionally leaned in the direction of quantitative data analyzed by way of the scientific method? Or, should we consider other strategies to fulfill the research requirement?

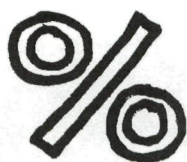
Our faculty revealed divergent positions. Discussions were heated. Ultimately, a valued colleague resigned, a significant loss to the program for she is a very capable educator

and researcher who had rendered valuable service to our department. Her position on the matter, however, in my opinion, was no more or less correct than the convictions held by those who disagreed with her.

Recognizing that such political debates are commonplace in academic institutions, and acknowledging that they sometimes mask personal differences, I was tempted to disregard the matter and withdraw to protect myself from such "messy" matters. Yet, I was burdened with the realization that if I were to be true to my philosophy relative to self-responsibility, it was imperative that I discern whatever contribution I might make to our department, not as a victim, but as one who could be "part of the solution" to the extent I identified myself as "part of the problem."

This benevolent "I want to help" attitude soon gave way to a realization that I first had to acquire more awareness of my own confusions, inconsistencies, and strengths before I could maximize my effectiveness in relating to my colleagues. In the midst of our conflict, amid other departmental experiences, I had lost some awareness of my positions on critical issues, as well as how these positions had initially been informed and synthesized. And, I considered it imperative that I address my nagging doubts as to my effectiveness with colleagues when interacting with them.

Improved self-awareness, I determined,



could be achieved by my assessment against norms that related directly to 1] our department's consideration of MSW research, in this instance "modern versus postmodern," and 2] my participation in our group interaction, with reference to "discussion versus dialogue," both of which are the foci of the section, BACKGROUND.

In the section, PERSONAL AWARENESS, I identify five areas for personal change that I discerned from section I, which I believe will enable me to be more present with colleagues, and will facilitate my capacity to listen more effectively to them.

I have made one assumption in this project: When two dimensions exist on either end of a continuum — such as hot/cold or night/day — they are each considered equally important, as each is necessary for the continued existence of either one. For example, without both female and male, sleep and awake, land and sea, neither one of the dialectical pairs is ultimately possible. Applied to my consideration of my colleague interaction, this assumption means that modernism and postmodernism are in a dialectic relationship, as are discussion and dialogue.

BACKGROUND:

Modernism/Postmodernism

Library research reveals hundreds of references to *modernism* and *postmodernism*, often noting that exact and consistent definitions are difficult to find. I have relied on the work of Nichols and Schwartz (2001) for cohesive direction.

Modernism

According to Nichols and Schwartz (2001), modernism, which gained strength in the first half of the twentieth century, was a reaction to romanticism "which held that there were unseen, unknowable forces at work in the world" (p. 309). In contrast to the views of romanticism, which left people feeling

vulnerable, modernists claimed that through scientific observation and measurement the essence of phenomena could be discovered that explained individuals and their relationships with one another. Ostensibly these discoveries would give people a greater sense of control over their destinies.

With reference to human service practitioners in the modernist tradition, it was believed that grand narratives or universal laws, transcending individuals, could be discovered and applied to people to enhance their lives. This strategy, manifest in the medical model, is practiced by practitioners, identified as experts, who are more inclined to do something for clients than to co-create with them.

I observed modernism practiced during a family therapy internship. Against the norms of structural systems theory, people and their relationships were assessed, seemingly with little regard for their individual identities, histories, or contexts. In this tradition, family therapy practitioners were clearly knowledgeable and skilled in their understanding and use of theories and interventions that transcended individuals and families. Impressed as I was with the remarkable progress made in the treatment of families, I was equally uneasy with aspects of the work that sometimes seemed to be done *to* families and their members, rather than *with* them.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism, which gained momentum during the last half of the twentieth century, was a skeptical reaction to modernism. It challenged phenomena that had been discovered and interpreted as fact by modernists in the name of the scientific method. What had been presented as absolute truth and objective reality beyond question was shown, in many instances, to be biased and motivated by power. For postmodernists, phenomena could never be

fully understood, particularly when history and context were taken into account. Reality was simply too elusive to fully know or understand. This skepticism reduced the security that modernists had attempted to deliver, but it was liberating. Instead of single realities, there potentially were as many realities as there were people, leading to the possibility of unlimited multiple perspectives.

Postmodernism is consistent with Turkle's (1995) statement that people make conclusions about the world more by way of "interpretation" than by "perception" (p. 264). From interpretation, it is an easy transition to constructivism, the notion that people make meaning of their lives by way of their particular constructions of reality. In other words, reality is not something external that is the same for everyone; rather it is the mental constructions of the individual observers significantly influenced by their assumptions.

When oriented to the postmodern perspective, human service practitioners are experts, not by way of applying external, universal laws to people — and then providing assessments through techniques such as interpretation and insight — but by facilitating, a process whereby people become more aware of their unique identities with reference to what they need or want and the strengths they possess or can acquire to reach their goals. Client self-determination is strengthened, as is the sense of practitioner-client partnership.

Application to MSW Research Requirement

Modernism and postmodernism are different ways of searching for truths about reality but, in my opinion, neither is more important than the other. With reference to my assumption regarding dialectics, modernism and postmodernism, linked by way of a creative synthesis, offer more potential for a closer approximation of reality than does either one alone.

In relation to modernistic and postmodernistic research, Martinez-Brawley (1999) raises a critical and relevant question for social work: "Does the profession speak with the single voice of science and empirical evidence or the complex fluidity of art?" (p. 335). As I listen to conversations between people in the profession, and read writings in the field — heavily spiced with terms such as "diversity" and "strengths" — my sense is that social work might be more art than science; that the profession often responds creatively in different ways to different situations, in the spirit of postmodernism, rather than applying service templates to individuals and systems of individuals potentially representing vastly different histories, identities, and contexts.

This more artistic, postmodern orientation seems to be contrary to the traditional notion that to attain and retain legitimacy within academic settings, quantitative research based on the scientific method is required to merit credibility and associated perks, such as financial allocations. Could it be, however, that these modernistic influences may cause the profession to be at odds with itself by forcing artistic, postmodern data into a modernistic, scientific research paradigm? Or, could it be argued that the profession has become so practice oriented that it has neglected a more disciplined, scientific, and modernistic research dimension? These two questions summarize the diverse positions held by our faculty as we debated our research requirement.

Both orientations, in a dialectic relationship, provide corrections to the weaknesses of the other, in my opinion. Manifest in scientific research, modernism risks the possibility of failing to recognize uniqueness in individuals and, in so doing, leads to a dangerous confidence in a "one-size-fits-all" practice orientation. However, when postmodernism is supported to the exclusion of certain modernistic theories and practices, social work, and perhaps other professions,

runs the risk of multiple perspectives that lack verification and fail to respect knowledge bases which offer stronger assessments and interventions.

Against this background, the essence of our departmental search involved this question: Should our MSW program continue to require student research that leans heavily in the direction of the scientific method, usually quantitative and modernistic, or should we move toward research more compatible with postmodernism?

In retrospect, our discussion relative to this question was dualistic, creating a win-lose atmosphere where everyone was hurt, to various degrees, and we failed, in my opinion, to produce a creative, dialectical outcome that represented the strengths of everyone. To label any of my colleagues as right or wrong seemed limiting, reductionistic, and sad, for I perceived them all to be competent and well meant.

In contrast, I propose that the operative question guiding our process might have taken a variation of this form: How can a modern and a postmodern orientation be synthesized to form a "both/and" dialectic with reference to our MSW research requirement?

To facilitate group interaction that might yield a more creative response to this question, I would argue that the work of Senge (1990) would have been applicable because it appears to be in the interest of dialectic outcomes through dialogue more strongly consistent with postmodernism, while simultaneously recognizing the need for discussion, more compatible with modernism.

Discussion & Dialogue

Senge (1990) argues for the significance of the distinction between *discussion* and *dialogue*.

Discussion is composed of individual presentations to one or more people with the intended result of having "one's views accepted by the group" (Senge, 1990, p.

240). Aspects of the views of others may be accepted, but "fundamentally you want your view to prevail" (Senge, 1990, p. 240). Discussion can be loosely correlated with modernistic, scientific research that generally finds one hypothesis prevailing over another, and usually there is no attempt to synthesize hypotheses that take contrary positions. This orientation, according to Senge (1990), is inconsistent with progress toward finding a higher truth and coherence.

Dialogue, on the other hand, is a free exchange of ideas and the generation of outcomes that usually could not be achieved without interaction between two or more people. Gradually, through dialogue, a common meaning develops that transcends the views of any one person or group, resulting in constant development and change. This process is unlike the competition and opposition generated by way of discussion. Could dialogue, therefore, be thought of as more consistent with postmodernism than modernism?

During our department's endeavor to address our research requirement, I am uncertain as to why we seldom reached a dialogue, as indicated by our dualistic, "either/or" positions. Discussion could have yielded positive results, however, had it been united in a creative dialectic with dialogue.

To move interaction beyond discussion dialogue, Senge (1999) recommends that three basic conditions are necessary for dialogue: "1. all participants must 'suspend' their assumptions, literally to hold them 'as if suspended before us;' 2. all participants must regard one another as colleagues; 3. there must be a 'facilitator' who 'holds the context' of dialogue" (p. 243).

My past administrative and consulting experiences have left me vulnerable to the temptation to make recommendations to our department. I have resisted this temptation. I am, however, free and responsible — particularly with reference to my "walking in



clients' footsteps" — to extract from this assessment understandings as to how I might change in order to render a greater, more productive contribution to our department. In essence, this would involve strengthening my capacity for "being" rather than "doing." My experience, with myself as well as with observations I have made of others, is that the most significant growth often accompanies small, subtle progress in awareness that positively impacts transactions between people, rather than large "how to" conclusions and recommendations.

PERSONAL AWARENESS

My assessment, with reference to modernism/postmodernism and discussion/dialogue, has enabled me to identify five areas for personal change that I believe will enable me to be more present with colleagues and will facilitate my capacity to listen more effectively to them.

First, I am inclined to think in terms of "either/or" dualities, not "both/and" dialectics. For example, my natural inclination is to think of practice *or* policy. I fail to regularly ask questions of this type: How can policy be incorporated into practice settings? Or, how does practice influence policy? Could it be that this orientation is related to courses being segregated by topical categories? Relative to certain postmodern and modern theories, I often move away from inquiry, for example, considering how solution-focused and narrative practices could be strengthened by a creative, dialectical fusion with psychoanalytic ideas.

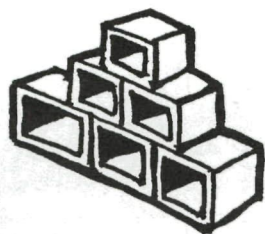
Categories, like boxes, serve to contain knowledge and skills for me. In this rather boundaried condition, much like that of a closed system, I experience greater confidence in my level of comprehension. However, when I allow these boundaries to be more diffuse, permitting their contents to seep into other theories and practices, changes inevitably occur that result in something more

mysterious and complex, requiring me to extend myself beyond what I know. "What if" questions, posed by me or my students, are the quickest way for me to move from teaching to the dialectic of teaching *and* learning.

Creative unity of different, even opposite, dimensions can be equated to feedback loops where each part impacts the other. Grappling with the inevitable shifts and changes produced by their interactions is particularly frightening because after 35 years of experience — practice, administration, consultation, radio production, and teaching — I am increasingly uncertain of what I know in relation to what I do not understand. This uncertainty, I think, makes me vulnerable to pretense rather than honesty for hanging tightly onto the known, rather than risking acknowledging the reality that I may have made too much out of too little throughout the years. The challenge of staying with this exciting but difficult, never-ending learning process reminds me of the heavy equipment operator who once told me he held a Ph.D. in psychology, but he prefers to dig the earth because "It's more fun."

My task it seems is to engage in categorical thinking for purposes of organization, but not to use this as an excuse for failing to foster creative unions between categories, such as between modernism *and* postmodernism, that will produce outcomes beyond my present knowledge and skill. Leaping from what I know to what I do not understand gives me a feeling of a mildly chaotic state where I am slightly off balance. In this condition, I am flexible to accept new ideas, but I have sufficient structure to avoid collapse of myself and the systems in which I participate. Although this is not necessarily a comfortable way to live, I know it offers possibility for constructive change.

Second, I am aware that I often maintain control by failing to recognize people ready for dialogue, shutting out possibilities for learning that might have yielded new



understandings with corresponding invitations to change. I feel a sense of personal embarrassment, tinged with regret and loss over this practice.

To surrender my need to control through discussion and the avoidance of dialogue, it is necessary that I identify myself as "part of the problem," not a victim of my department. For me, this brings a simultaneous recognition of my deficiencies in my departmental interactions, including some blown classes, occasional poor-quality contributions in department meetings, half-hearted research efforts, etc., all of which invite feelings in me of hurt, disappointment, fear, and embarrassment. Failure to acknowledge these feelings would promote repression and subsequent projection in the form of judgment and/or the right to absolve myself from responsibility as to how I might change to make things better.

When clients are most responsible, they usually exercise their strengths to make changes in response to acknowledgment of deficiencies and mistakes. Otherwise, why would people make changes? So, I choose to walk in their footsteps by acknowledging my hurtful feelings linked to weaknesses which may be active — such as engaging in departmental politics — or passive — as in a failure not to be sufficiently informed on some issues about which I vote.

My identification with clients, and perhaps most people, may relate to the words of Oliver (1992):

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting — over and over announcing your place in the family of things. (p. 110)

"The family of things" or community, it seems to me, offers the possibility for

reconciliation, by whatever form is consistent with the group's value and belief systems, clearing the way for the constructive acknowledgement of strengths. Recognition of my weaknesses — such as blown classes — and strengths — such as my being named honored professor of the year in our professional studies division — is then honest and authentic, as well as holistic. It is not "being too hard on yourself" or engaging in braggadocio. It is a prelude to dialogue as, in essence, it communicates this message: I have something to offer you from my strengths, and I wish to listen to you, recognizing my weaknesses.

Third, I keep a frenetic schedule that allows time for few experiences of dialogue in my professional and personal life. Short cuts have left me productive relative to short-term objectives. I am, however, too often stuck in my own perceptions without benefit of corrective learnings acquired through dialogue, a process requiring more time.

And without allowing for serendipity, a prime ingredient for dialogue, I have likely failed to recognize some people who fall outside my usual interactions but who could have enhanced and enchanted my journey. In particular, I have probably missed many people who are thought to be "characters," folks who may threaten and challenge but who also add refreshing perspectives and interpretations that foster correction and extension in myself if allowed to simmer in dialogue.

Ironically, by inviting my clients and students to consider new perspectives, might I be identified as a "character"? I want to more often honor this aspect of my identity, even though this orientation may not be received well by those who choose to live within more narrowly defined boundaries. For example, might it be a constructive exercise to challenge my students with this question: How could a creative union of strengths and weaknesses be more potent than the strength perspective



alone? I do not know the answer to this question but would argue that in instances such as this, the question keeps ideas from becoming rigid and beyond challenge.

Fourth, as my academic training has advanced, my work with colleagues and clients has shifted subtly and gradually toward discussion rather than dialogue. Titles, fees, and appointments, while important, encourage efficiency, a by-product of discussion as manifest in interpretations and suggestions with students and clients. This more efficient strategy is quicker in the short-term than it is to fully engage them in a manner that invites them to author their own rationale for change toward their desired results by way of their identified resources. Upon close examination, however, it is apparent that short-term gains, discovered in an atmosphere of discussion, may be accomplished at the expense of long-term results that are a by-product of dialogue between persons.

Several questions arise. Why is it then that a clinical, modernistic discussion strategy is often regarded as more indicative of professional advancement, particularly with reference to third-party payments and licensing, than a postmodern orientation that may place greater emphasis on dialogue? I presume it may be because such work is more scientific, but does it require more practitioner knowledge and skill? Could an argument be made that it might be easier to apply general standards and grand narratives to people in a medical-model, clinical setting where clients are not expected to have as many strengths — justifying, for example, a pharmacological approach — than it is to invite individuals and systems to take greater responsibility for their own lives in accordance with their own standards, as in a client-centered, postmodern strategy?

For me, it seems that a clinical orientation is more modern, discussion oriented; alternately, client-centered work seems to be more postmodern and dialogue-oriented,

thereby offering the possibility, if not the inevitability, that everyone, including the practitioner, changes in the process. But, with respect to the necessity for a dialectical relationship between modern and postmodern, clinical diagnoses by way of the DSM are no more or less important than postmodern personal narratives, such as in solution- focused and narrative orientations. One without the other leaves gaping holes that give too much authority to one or the other and reduces the possibility of correction for the weaknesses of each.

I believe it is important that I continue to explore how clinical and non-clinical orientations can be mutually reinforcing, in reality inquiring how modernism and postmodernism are better together than separate.

Fifth, perhaps the goal is to strive for a dialectical balance between the discussion of modernism and the dialogue of postmodernism. In the classroom, I think it is possible to be the expert, in a modernistic tradition, to the extent students are then invited to challenge the material against their own constructed standards, an exercise in postmodernism. This dialectic becomes a dialogue whereby everyone — faculty, students, and staff — teach, learn, and change. In the future, when dualistic ideas arise — such as modern versus postmodern-oriented research requirements — I hope to recognize them as an opportunity for creative synthesis by way of dialogue, not as a dualistic, “either/or” opportunity that may discount others. This process, however, is the long way. Short cuts restrict opportunity for depth and breadth of interaction.

My personal challenge is that dialogue with dialectical potential requires interdependence as it essentially reflects this reality: only by way of interaction with others will I be able to go beyond my present biases to new knowledge and skill. Relationships at this level require trust and the sacrifice of my

assurance and conviction that my individual perceptions are highly correlated with truth not only for me but, I assume, for others. It may even mean that I relinquish assurance of the known to a new position of uncertainty, and a recognition that I may not be able to replace what I have abandoned with anything else that will render me equally confident. Moreover, I may be tempted to interpret this process as failure or as my losing to others whom I may then define as victors.

In this situation, one that I find somewhat frightening, I will have little choice but to trust and listen to others, a primary ingredient for dialogue. This orientation, one that some might interpret as sacrificial, would seem to be supported by Brown's (1978) reference to American Indians: "So it is told that only in sacrifice is sacredness accomplished; only in sacrifice is identity possible and found. It is only through the suffering in sacrifice that finally freedom is known and laughter in joy returns to the world" (p. 15). Of course, most people who willingly sacrifice know the paradoxical, dialectical relationship between giving and receiving.

Summary

By way of an assessment in the context of modernism/postmodernism and discussion/dialogue, I have discerned five areas for personal change that I believe will enable me to be more effective in my interactions with department colleagues: 1) to think beyond "either/or" dualistic categories to "both/and" dialectical relationships between entities, as in open systems that are impacted by feedback, creating fluidity; 2) to recognize my individual identity yet my simultaneous membership in a universal family from which I receive acceptance and encouragement to acknowledge both my strengths and weaknesses in the interest of holism; 3) to celebrate serendipity and seek to learn from the characters in my midst; 4) to orient myself increasingly toward generalist practice with

recognition for equal emphases on modernism/postmodernism and discussion/dialogue; and 5) to trust the appropriateness of sacrificing certain aspects of my identity to provide room for more interdependence.

By way of these five dimensions of improved awareness and associated opportunities for personal change, I realize I have challenges that I can best meet in community; in this instance, my colleagues. To acknowledge them as partners in this journey identifies them as resources, people from whom I can learn. This is about a new quality of my "being," not necessarily about "doing." It is consistent with the "butterfly effect" where small changes can potentially culminate in large effects for me, and possibly for my colleagues.

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