

## Consequences of the Postmodernist Vision: Diversity as the Guiding Value for the Counseling Profession

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The counseling profession has strongly identified with the multicultural movement. Nevertheless, postmodernism, which is the ideological foundation of multiculturalism, has had relatively little impact on other segments of the profession. The author argues that many realms of the counseling profession are locked within modernism and could be significantly enriched by a foundational shift to postmodernism. Two of these realms, professional identity issues and the helping relationship, are elaborated, and conclusions for counseling practice are discussed.

One of the characteristic features of intellectual history is that new paradigms occasionally intrude on and disrupt long-standing ideological traditions. Indeed, there are signs within the counseling profession that the rumblings of a new paradigm are beginning to take hold. The primary symptom of this underlying ideological tremor is arguably the multicultural movement, which, because of its vast influence, has justifiably been referred to as the "fourth force" (Pedersen, 1990, p. 93) in counseling.

The primary value that animates multiculturalism is an appreciation for diversity (Sue & Sue, 2002). Because the multicultural movement rejects the assumption that there is a singular, correct way of being, the principal ideal of fourth force counseling is that cultural differences should be understood and appreciated, not judged and dismissed. This laudable emphasis on multiplicity emanates from an overarching philosophical system, which has been referred to as *postmodernism* (Hansen, 2004; Sexton, 1997).

The postmodernist movement represents a radical paradigm shift that, unlike modernism, epistemologically permits the co-existence of multiple realities. At a higher level of abstraction, then, the multicultural movement is dependent on postmodernism to intellectually legitimize the value of diversity (D'Andrea, 2000). That is, without the epistemological possibility of multiple, legitimate realities, diversity, as a value, would be nonsensical. Notably, signs of the postmodernist paradigm shift can also be seen in the qualitative research movement (Berg, 2004), which emphasizes multiple, local truths rather than singular, universal truth, and narrative models of counseling (White & Epston, 1990), which operate under the assumption that there are many legitimate ways to story a life.

If one uses a conceptual hierarchy metaphor, then, postmodernism is at the highest level of abstraction. The value

of diversity emanates from postmodernism and resides underneath it at a more concrete step on the theoretical ladder. The specific practices and movements that are dependent on the value of diversity, such as multiculturalism, qualitative methodologies, and narrative counseling reside at the most concrete, bottom rung.

Other professions can also be theoretically mapped with this conceptual hierarchy metaphor. For example, at the highest level of abstraction, physicians rely on medical knowledge. This medical knowledge allows for the value of health. The value of health, in turn, creates specific methods and procedures at the concrete level of practice.

To elaborate this analogy, it is certainly desirable for medical knowledge, and the value of health that is derived from it, to trickle down into all realms of medical practice. At the level of clinical medicine, then, physicians apply the value of health to all aspects of the body, not just the cardiovascular system, for example. If medical practitioners only applied medical knowledge to particular bodily systems and neglected others, the effectiveness of applied medicine would be severely compromised.

Perhaps there is a lesson for the counseling profession in this medical analogy. Specifically, because medical practice functions optimally when the overarching ideology of medicine flows freely down the conceptual hierarchy into all aspects of practice, the conceptual hierarchies of counseling might also be examined to determine whether all aspects of counseling practice are benefiting from the influence of particular ideological systems. In this regard, because postmodernism, and the value of diversity that emanates from it, has generated useful practices and orientations within particular realms of the counseling profession (e.g.,

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multiculturalism), it is reasonable to presume that other, unaffected areas of the profession might also benefit from a postmodernist infusion.

Indeed, it is the thesis of this article that there are at least two areas of the counseling profession, professional identity issues and the helping relationship, that could benefit from an epistemological shift from modernist singularity to postmodernist diversity. This thesis is elaborated within the following organizational structure: (a) modern and postmodern perspectives, (b) professional identity issues, (c) the helping relationship and theoretical orientation, and (d) discussion and conclusion.

## ■ Modern and Postmodern Perspectives

The Enlightenment represented a revolutionary change in the course of intellectual history. For purposes of this discussion, the primary legacy of Enlightenment thought is the Cartesian division between the immaterial mind and the material world (Stolorow, Atwood, & Orange, 2002). This division spawned an epistemological movement, often referred to as *modernism*, which presumes that the singular essences of objects in the material universe can be either accurately or inaccurately represented by immaterial human minds (Rorty, 1979). For example, from a modernist perspective, birds may be inaccurately portrayed in the minds of certain people as gods. Scientists, however, who use the scientific method in an attempt to discover the essence of birds, mentally represent them accurately as flying biological organisms. The scientific method is idealized by Enlightenment thought as a route to discovering true essences (Anderson, 1990; Hansen, 2007).

This Enlightenment epistemology, and its tool for discovering singular truth (i.e., science), came under critical attack in the centuries that followed (Anderson, 1990; Hicks, 2004). During the mid-20th century, these critiques of modernism began to coalesce into a new epistemological system, which is called *postmodernism* (Anderson, 1990; Hansen, 2004; Sexton, 1997).

In contrast to modernist epistemology, which is essentialist (i.e., presumes objects have essences that can be discovered), the chief feature of postmodernist epistemology is antiessentialism (Hansen, 2005a; Muran, 2001). As an illustration of antiessentialism (again using birds as the object of knowing), birds might be perceived as biological entities, pets, gods to be worshipped, national symbols, nuisances, food, collections of atoms, or artistic objects, to give just a few examples. Out of all these possibilities, which one represents the correct, singular essence of birds? The postmodernist response is that there is no correct essence (i.e., antiessentialism). Each of these perceptions of birds may be justifiable, depending on the needs of a particular community of perceivers.

Postmodernism, therefore, because of its antiessentialist epistemology, permits the coexistence of multiple perspectives, without concern for adjudicating which one is suppos-

edly correct (Hansen, 2004). Because there is no singular truth within a postmodernist framework, the idea that one culture is closer to truth than another is incoherent. Various cultures are to be appreciated, not judged. Therefore, the value of diversity, and the multicultural movement that follows from it, is dependent on an overarching postmodernist framework that allows for the coexistence of multiple realities.

Now that the link between postmodernist epistemology and the value of diversity has been established, other aspects of the counseling profession, aside from multiculturalism, can be examined to determine whether they might benefit from a postmodernist revision. Indeed, I maintain that at least two areas of the counseling profession continue to be trapped within modernist singularity and could benefit from a postmodernist overhaul. These areas, which deserve particular scrutiny because they have been a vital part of contemporary discourse within the profession, are (a) professional identity issues and (b) the helping relationship and theoretical orientation.

## ■ Professional Identity Issues

The struggle to define oneself is one of many fundamental parts of the human developmental process (Erikson, 1963). Analogously, achieving a professional identity is usually thought to be a vital part of becoming a mature professional. Professional identity development may be particularly problematic for counselors because of the professionally diverse and continually evolving nature of the counseling profession (Gale & Austin, 2003). Therefore, although identity proposals have been offered, the issue of counselor identity has probably been debated so vigorously in the literature because the nature of the counseling profession makes it difficult to agree on the precise identity factors that distinguish counselors from other helping professionals.

This ongoing dialogue about counselor identity, however, has typically been couched in modernist epistemology. Within a modernist epistemology, professional identity is established by the profession. People who enter the profession are gradually enculturated into adopting this identity. For example, upon entering a counselor training program, counseling students may be told that counselors, unlike other helping professionals, do not pathologize their clients. Eventually, after a period of indoctrination, the various identity messages are internalized and congeal within the psyches of students as a mature professional identity. Under this modernist vision, the new identity is relatively fixed and congruent; resides within the individual; and draws from universal, rather than local, principles (Flax, 1990; Rosenau, 1992).

Consider, however, an alternative, postmodernist view of professional identity that is informed by the value of diversity. Rather than being fixed and congruent, identity would be fluid

and diverse. Furthermore, identity would not be envisioned as a core element of the psyche that is contained within individuals. Instead, self-definitions would be continually constructed in conjunction with the social group in which the professional is currently participating. This new, postmodernist view of professional identity would mean that identity is locally responsive, not universally defined, and is guided by pragmatic considerations, not professional proclamations. Each of these principles of the postmodernist identity is elaborated in the following sections as the principles relate to considerations of professional identity development.

### Congruent Versus Dialogic

Contemporary discourse within the counseling profession about professional identity issues is founded on the Enlightenment glorification of self and the humanistic ideal of self-congruence. Nevertheless, the modernist, humanistic ideal of self-congruence as it relates to professional identity is an arbitrary by-product of a particular intellectual history (Rorty, 1979). Suppose, alternatively, that professional identity discourse was founded on a postmodernist vision of self that is informed by the value of diversity rather than a modernist, humanistic one that is grounded in singularity. How would this new professional identity be different?

If self-diversity were to replace self-congruence and singularity as the foundational ideal of professional identity discourse, this would substantially change the nature of the dialogue and lead to profoundly different conclusions about the professional identity of counselors. Most notably, professional identity would be seen as inherently diverse. Multiple, and even conflicting, professional identities could coexist within the same individual. For instance, one facet of a counselor's identity might be structured along traditional humanistic ideals of client holism, whereas another component of the same identity may embrace psychodiagnostic formulations of human problems. Under a postmodernist vision of professional identity, this identity inconsistency is not a sign of self-fragmentation, identity dissolution, or dissociative identity pathology. Rather, identity diversity is simply a natural by-product of the "dialogic character of the mind" (Shawver, 1996, p. 375). Simply put, multiple and often discordant, internal voices speak within every individual, and there is no reason to unify these voices into some congruent whole. Indeed, within the postmodernist vision, the humanistic ideal of identity congruence places extraordinary limits on the freedom, creativity, and adaptability of identity processes (Gergen, 1995; Hansen, 2005a).

If the counseling profession were to embrace this postmodernist vision of professional identity, identity diversity within the same individual would be tolerated and appreciated, just as diversity between people is championed by the multicultural movement. Indeed, it is ironic that the counseling profession has embraced diversity between people in the form of multicultural-

ism but has generally rejected diversity within individuals as it relates to professional identity (Hansen, 2010). This irony is richly illustrated by the most recent Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards for counseling programs (CACREP, 2009).

The latest proposed CACREP standards mandate that counselor education programs consist of "a diverse faculty" (CACREP, 2009, p. 5). This recommendation is certainly consistent with a postmodernist view of professional identity, because a diverse faculty can promote identity multiplicity within students, rather than congruent, homogenized identities. Nevertheless, shortly following this mandate, the standards recommend that faculty "have earned doctoral degrees in counselor education" (p. 5) and "identify with the counseling profession" (CACREP, 2009, p. 5). These mandates, of course, are not consistent with the first directive to hire a diverse faculty, and a homogenous faculty cannot optimally promote professional identity diversity within students. Therefore, these conflicting recommendations demonstrate the counseling profession's ambivalence about diversity, idealizing its virtues when applied to culture, while simultaneously denigrating its worth as an ideal for individual professional identities.

### Individually Determined Versus Socially Constructed

As previously noted, the Enlightenment idealized the self as a source of truth and knowledge (Flax, 1990; Stolorow et al., 2002). As Enlightenment thought evolved, the idea of self became gradually more interiorized (Messer & Warren, 2001). That is, the self came to be thought of as existing within, and emanating from, individuals. This idea of the self as the internal, willful, and agentic core of being persisted into 20th-century thought and formed the basis for core counseling treatment orientations, such as humanism and psychoanalysis (Hansen, 2009). This assumption of the internality of self, however, has been challenged, particularly by the social constructionist camp of postmodernism.

Social constructionists conceive of the self as being continually constructed by social interactions (Gergen, 1999). That is, "it is no longer meaningful to talk about a core identity when identity shifts by virtue of the relational context in which a person is presently immersed" (McNamee, 1996, p. 127). Identity, then, according to the social constructionists, is not an interiorized, self-sustaining organ of the psyche. Rather, identity is continually negotiated and transformed within relational contexts. This alternative notion of identity has major implications for the concept of professional identity.

If a social constructionist vision of identity is adopted, professional identity is not something that is carried around in the heads of counselors and activated when they are professionally engaged. Rather, professional identity is dynamic and fluid, undergoing adaptive transformations depending on the

social and professional setting in which the counselor is participating. For example, in a career counseling environment, a counselor may adopt a very different identity than when the same counselor is participating in a group that is dedicated to bringing about social justice. Social conceptualizations of identity, then, allow for more flexible and adaptive use of the professional self than do individualistic, modernistic conceptualizations of identity, because, within a social constructionist epistemology, the self is continually re-created depending on situational demands. Again, it is an extraordinary irony that diversity and respect for unique, socially constructed identities is valued in one realm of the counseling profession (i.e., multiculturalism), because it is structured by postmodernist epistemology, but is almost completely absent as a value in another realm (i.e., professional identity), because it is structured by the ideology of modernist singularity.

#### Universal Versus Local and Pragmatic

Because, within a modernist ideology, truth is singular and universal, it becomes the task of the enlightened intelligentsia of a profession to discover truth and disseminate it to practitioners (Fishman, 1999). Within this modernist vision of the counseling profession, counselors who are engaged in research uncover truths for the purposes of passing them down to practitioners, who can then apply these discovered truths to human problems. This modernist, top-down model of truth dissemination also applies to professional identity. That is, identity debates occur in the intellectual stratosphere of the profession, where they are ironed out and eventually fall, like rain, thereby causing growth in the professional identities of the earth-bound practitioners.

There is evidence, however, that this top-down view of professional identity is not working for the counseling profession. Divisional infighting within the profession, separation of certain arms of the profession from the overall professional organization, and the multitude of roles that counselors assume in their professional lives all suggest that the model of a universal identity is impractical and, indeed, may be having a harmful impact on the evolution of the profession.

An alternative, postmodernist view of identity would likely alleviate many of the problems created by the modernist vision of identity as singular and universal. Specifically, rather than viewing identity as a top-down process, a postmodernist vision of identity would promote a bottom-up conceptualization of identity processes. Professional identity would be created in individual practitioners by the demands of local counseling environments. These local identities would, then, inform identity discourse at the top of the profession, not the other way around. In this regard, consider the elegance of a pragmatist metaphor of the human condition, which rejects a self-image that is structured by notions of universal truth and, in its place, offers an image of humans as "machines that continually adjust to each other's behavior, and to their

environment, by developing novel kinds of behavior. These machines have no fixed program or function; they continually reprogram themselves so as to serve hitherto undreamt-of functions" (Rorty, 1998, p. 32).

This local, pragmatic account of identity is sorely needed by the counseling profession, which has struggled, largely in vain, to identify a common identity denominator that can be adopted by all members of an extraordinarily diverse profession. In this regard, then, perhaps professional identity can be thought of as analogous to national citizenship. Citizens of democratic countries are not ordinarily defined by a particular identity. Rather, citizens are defined by the fact that they are part of a particular country and usually have some knowledge about the unique history and values of that country. National citizens adapt their identities to the local demands of their communities, and there is no need for a singular, national identity to be imposed on them. Counselors, in turn, can be conceived of as citizens of the counseling profession who have been exposed to the literature and values of the profession. In this way, members of the profession can still justifiably refer to themselves as counselors, but professional identity will be structured around the pragmatics of local demands, not by the proclamations of influential members of the profession.

#### The Helping Relationship and Theoretical Orientation

Many of the treatment movements within mental health culture today have been spawned by modernist epistemology, which presumes that there are singular truths about helping to be found (Hansen, 2002). For example, the best practices (Hansen, 2006; McGowan, 2003) and empirically supported treatments movements (Wampold, 2001) start with the modernist assumption that singularly correct counseling interventions for particular categories of human problems can be discovered (Hansen, 2006). Although a postmodernist emphasis on diversity has had some influence on conceptualizations of the helping relationship (e.g., narrative counseling), modern mental health culture, for the most part, has been structured by modernist epistemology (Hansen, 2002, 2006).

An epistemology that embraces multiplicity (i.e., postmodernism) provides significant revisions to conceptualizations of the helping relationship that are derived from modernist singularity. These revisions, furthermore, make for new possibilities in counseling practice. Nevertheless, to appreciate the influence of postmodernism on counseling practice, one must first have an understanding of the impact of postmodernism on theory.

Under the modernist paradigm, the ultimate goal of theory construction is to eventually arrive at a correct theory of the helping relationship through continued scientific investigation (Anderson, 1990). Within this vision, the theoretical multiplicity that is present at this point in the history of counseling is simply an unfortunate consequence of the relative immaturity

of the profession. As knowledge advances, certain theories will be cast aside as untrue; others will be mined for the truth they contain; and a supertheory will eventually emerge that contains a set of singularly true, internally consistent propositions about the helping relationship. These ideals are a direct product of modernist epistemology.

Postmodernist epistemology, alternatively, provides a different vision for the role of theory in the helping relationship. Because the ideal of singular truth is inconsistent with postmodernist ideology, truth can no longer be the criterion for endorsing one theory over another, as it is in modernism. Rather, theories are selected according to the consequences of using them in particular, local situations, not on the basis of universal truth (Hansen, 2007). Theories become tools rather than representations of an objective reality.

This postmodernist revision of theories as tools has direct consequences for counseling practice. First, unlike modernism, theoretical multiplicity within a postmodernist epistemology is a strength, not a sign of an intellectually immature profession that is slowly evolving toward singular truth. If theories are thought of as tools, theoretical diversity is desirable because counselors can bring multiple tools to bear on client problems.

Second, within a postmodernist vision of counseling theory, practicing counselors need not feel pressured to place advanced bets on a theoretical lottery, hoping to have wagered on the theory that ultimately proves to be the winner of the singular truth prize. Anxiety about aligning oneself with a correct theory is no longer a professional identity issue. Practitioner identity can be structured around diverse modes of thought.

Finally, if theories are tools, their value is determined by the consequences of using them in particular situations, not by their ties to an objective truth (Hansen, 2005b). Within this tool conceptualization of theories, the claim that particular theories, such as psychoanalysis and cognitive behaviorism, are the ultimate truth about all client problems would be just as absurd as the claim that a hammer is the singularly correct tool for all carpentry problems. Most important, then, embracing theoretical diversity automatically changes the allegiance of practicing counselors. Counselor allegiance, under the postmodernist vision, is to client betterment, not to a supposed theoretical truth, as it is in modernism.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Counseling discourse has been captivated by the epistemological metaphor of modernism, which is founded on the assumptions of essentialism; singular truth; and the private, interiorized nature of self (Anderson, 1990; Flax, 1990). This epistemological starting point, however, is completely arbitrary, a by-product of a particular intellectual history (Rorty, 1979). Therefore, this foundation can be replaced with new assumptions, which will open up novel and previously unrecognized possibilities.

There is no reason, then, to limit diversity, as a value, to multiculturalism. Indeed, it is ironic that the generative potential of postmodernist thought has been relatively confined to the multicultural realm. The assumption that multiple, and even discordant, realities can comfortably coexist is an epistemological foundation that can be usefully applied to many segments of the profession. Indeed, in addition to broad professional realms, the value of diversity can also be applied to specific professional problems.

As an example, counselors who work in the mental health realm often struggle with an ethical dilemma when they document their work. Third-party payers ordinarily require counselors to describe counseling in terms of diagnostics and behaviorally oriented treatment plans (Hansen, 1997; McWilliams, 2005). Counselors, who usually conceptualize the counseling process in a more humanized and less technical way than do insurance companies, sometimes feel as if they are misrepresenting the counseling process in their documentation to get paid. This ethical dilemma, however, is a by-product of modernist singularity. That is, counselors often believe that their way of describing counseling processes is closer to the truth than are the descriptions demanded by third-party payers. Therefore, documenting according to the language of insurance companies is an ethical dilemma because, from a modernist perspective, it is tantamount to misrepresenting the truth.

Consider the same scenario from a postmodernist perspective. When the possibility of multiple, coexisting realities is epistemologically presumed, third-party payers and counselors simply represent different, socially constructed professional communities, each of which has its own preferred language to describe the activities of counseling. Under a postmodernist perspective, wherein language is considered a tool, not a pictorial representation of that which it signifies (Chessick, 1987; Gergen, 1999; Hansen, 2005a; Rorty, 1999), it would be indefensible to claim that one way of describing counseling is closer to the essence of the activity than another. Rather, counselors and third-party payers represent different linguistic communities. Within this postmodernist framework, documenting a session is no longer an ethical dilemma but becomes an act of translation, converting the language of the minority linguistic community into the language of the dominant one. As an analogy, if an English-speaking counselor were to visit France, it would be unreasonable for the counselor to experience an ethical dilemma about translating English into the dominant language of the land when the counselor needed to communicate, even if some of the intended meanings were lost in the translation. This example illustrates the extent to which postmodernist thought has penetrated the cultural realm but has been relatively segregated from other varieties of counseling discourse.

These ideas about the potential of postmodernist thought should not be misread as a plea to get rid of modernist ideology. Modernist thought has been incredibly generative in its own right and should absolutely be retained as a core

epistemological well from which the profession draws. The recognition that foundational systems of thought are created by humans, not found pristine in nature, however, allows professionals to appreciate the arbitrariness of the models that sometimes imprison their ideologies. In this regard, recasting old goals along new epistemological lines can be an incredibly productive activity, because all progress is arguably born out of redescription (Rorty, 1991). If there is any ethical imperative, then, it is for counselors to continually reexamine their core assumptions and redescribe their work, so that the ideologies that guide the counseling process will continue to evolve, thereby expanding the horizons of possibility within the helping encounter.

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