Counseling Theories Within a Postmodernist Epistemology: New Roles for Theories in Counseling Practice

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Counseling theories have traditionally been considered within a modernist epistemology. Reconsidering theories from a postmodern vantage point opens up new possibilities for theory utilization in the counseling process. The author discusses 3 of these possibilities—theories as narrative structures, theoretical truth redefined as pragmatic utility, and egalitarianism in the counseling relationship—along with their implications for counseling practice.

A postmodern epistemology, therefore, has profound implications for the role of theory in counseling practice. However, a consideration of the ways counseling theories are used and considered within a postmodern epistemic context has received little attention in the counseling literature. The purpose of this article, then, is to thoroughly elaborate the implications of a postmodern epistemology for the role of theory in counseling practice. I accomplish this by (a) contrasting modern and postmodern epistemologies, (b) discussing implications of postmodernist epistemology for counseling theories, and (c) drawing conclusions about the new role of theories for the counseling profession.

Contrasting Epistemologies

Modernism and postmodernism are complex, multifaceted movements in the history of philosophy. Regarding the role of counseling theories, however, the epistemological, or philosophy of knowledge, aspect of these movements is arguably the most relevant feature (Hansen, 2004).

In terms of epistemology, modernism posits that true knowledge of phenomena can be discovered through objective observation (Anderson, 1990; Erwin, 1999; Gergen, 1992; Hansen, 2004). Historically, this modernist epistemology is rooted in the Enlightenment assumption that observers could be entirely separated from whatever is being observed (Hansen, 2002, 2004). Objective, scientific observation, thus, was considered the means to learn the truth about phenomena. During the 20th century, however, critiques of this epistemic position began to coalesce into a postmodern epistemology as it was increasingly recognized that humans actively construct what they observe and are not just passive receivers of information (Anderson, 1990). Postmodern epistemology, thus, maintains that reality is never
objectively discovered but is always, at least to some extent, created by perceivers (Hansen, 2004; Hayes & Oppenheim, 1997; Leary, 1994; Rosen, 1996; Ryan, 1999). Although postmodern epistemology began to achieve critical mass and influence a variety of fields in the mid-20th century (e.g., architecture, literary analysis, art), it is only during the last 2 decades that these epistemic assumptions have become an ideological force in the counseling profession (Sexton & Griffin, 1997).

To add clarity to the contrasts between these competing conceptualizations of knowing, two core epistemological subassumptions are discussed: essentialism and the correspondence theory of language. An elaboration of these concepts also contributes to conclusions about the role of counseling theories within a postmodernist epistemology.

Essentialism

Modernism is founded on the premise that phenomena have essential properties that can be discovered via objective observation. The doctrine that objects of observation have particular true, potentially discoverable, features is known as essentialism (Muran, 2001; Rosen, 1996). For example, scientific investigation may uncover a vast store of knowledge about canine physiology. Through research, much may be learned about disease processes, cardiac functioning, and the many organic precursors to barking. With these discoveries, is it reasonable, as modernism would assume, that the true, essential nature of dogs is gradually being revealed?

From a different observational vantage point, however, dogs are best friends; a food source; a threat to safety; or, perhaps in some cultures, a representation of the divine. What, then, is the essential nature of dogs? The postmodern epistemological answer is that the reality of dogs depends on the mind-set of the observer, not on the discovery of some supposed canine essence. Postmodernism, in contrast to modernism, is therefore anti-essentialist (Muran, 2001; Rosen, 1996). That is, singular truth does not lie within phenomena waiting to be revealed by dispassionate investigators; rather, in the act of observation, observers always infuse phenomena with meaning.

If counseling theories are assumed to represent accurate, discovered realities about clients (i.e., essentialism), this implies a particular role for theories in the counseling process. Alternatively, if theories are not presumed to contain singular truths (i.e., anti-essentialism), this epistemic assumption has radically different implications for theory utilization.

Correspondence Theory of Language

In modernist epistemology, the order and structure of language are assumed to mirror the world it describes. This supposition is known as the correspondence theory of language (Gergen, 1999). Postmodern epistemology has challenged the correspondence theory of language (Gergen, 1999; McNamee, 1996; Shotter, 1992). For example, taking the word *heart* as a signifier, if a cardiac surgeon says that a person has a big heart, it refers to something entirely different than if a person is speaking about a friend in casual conversation. Because language is entirely dependent on context—that is the “language games” (Kvale, 1992, p. 34) being played by linguistic participants—it is unreasonable to assume that language objectively mirrors the objects it purports to signify.

As another example of a challenge to the correspondence theory of language, consider the signifiers for various musical notes. Does the linguistic representation of music correspond to the actual, extralinguistic, properties of sound? That is, in the natural world, beyond language, is sound organized in the same way that we, as Westerners, have linguistically represented it? It is perfectly conceivable that another culture might develop an entirely different, yet equally effective, linguistic structure for the elements of music. It follows, then, that if all systems of signification are arbitrary and culturally derived, language cannot be an accurate mirror of the extralinguistic reality it supposedly signifies.

A logical extension of this thinking is that language has a life of its own that is entirely disconnected from what it purportedly represents. Language, then, only refers to other words, not things in themselves. Advocates of deconstructionism, the philosophical movement that has taken this position to the extreme, regard language as an inherently self-referential system in which true meaning is thereby endlessly deferred (Derrida, 1995). This has led proponents of this school to conclude “there is nothing outside of the text” (Derrida, 1995, p. 89).

Even if a rejection of the correspondence theory of language is not taken to its logical extreme, the idea that theories, as linguistic structures, do not correspond with the counseling processes they purportedly signify has tremendous implications for the ways in which theories are considered and used by practicing counselors. These implications, as well as the consequences of anti-essentialism for counseling theory utilization, are considered below.

Implications of Postmodernist Epistemology for Role of Counseling Theories

As previously mentioned, traditional counseling theories were originally proposed in a modernist epistemic context; that is, they were assumed to accurately represent essential elements of counseling phenomena. However, if counseling theories are regarded as linguistic structures that do not necessarily represent anything outside the realm of language, this alternative, postmodern assumption would have radical consequences for theory utilization in the counseling process. Three primary consequences of postmodern epistemology for the role of counseling theories are (a) theories as narrative structures, (b)
Theories as Narrative Structures

Does the human psychological change that counselors endeavor to bring about require counselors to possess objective truths about human nature in the form of counseling theories? In other words, are theories useful if they are not true (in the modernist sense of truth)? Some evidence suggests that objective truth has little to do with healing.

Cross-cultural studies of healing, for example, note that widely varied theoretical understandings of psychological suffering can be used to promote healing (Frank & Frank, 1991). Witch doctors, shamans, and tribal spiritual leaders, for instance, have very different theoretical models for understanding human problems than does Westernized mental health culture; however, it is clear that these methods, within the context of their particular culture, are quite effective at psychological healing (Torrey, 1972). This somewhat unsettling fact leaves at least three possibilities:

Premise 1. Despite the finding that theories from diverse cultures facilitate healing, Westernized mental health models are still closer to objective truth than the theories of nonscientific societies.

Premise 2. All theories contain seeds of objective truth, at least to some extent. This is why they are effective.

Premise 3. Truth has little to do with healing.

In the following paragraphs, I examine each premise in turn. Regarding Premise 1, the postmodern critique of objectivity as presented above undermines the notion that one particular theory can claim that it is closer to objective, extralinguistic truth than another theory. It is difficult to assert, then, that Westernized models are inherently closer to truth than, for example, tribal ones. All theories are hopelessly entangled in culture, politics, and language. To assert the inherent superiority of one over another seems epistemically naïve, particularly given 20th-century developments in epistemology and the philosophy of language. Furthermore, if Western theories are true and nonscientific theories based on spiritualism, for example, are false, why would both be helpful to people in their respective cultures? When carefully examined, Premise 1 does not appear tenable.

Perhaps, though, the theories of the cognitivist and the shaman, for example, each contains a kernel of the truth, as in Premise 2. This objectively true aspect of the theory, which somehow cuts through the remaining theoretical white noise, is responsible for healing. On closer examination, however, Premise 2 seems as untenable as Premise 1. Theories are always by-products of particular cultures. How is it possible, then, for theories to contain objective truths that transcend the assumptions of the individuals and cultures that created them?

Moreover, what possible criterion could be used to determine which aspects of a particular theory are objectively true for all people at all times? Because theories, and any attempts to understand them, are inevitably by-products of particular cultural mind-sets, investigative efforts at sorting truth from fiction are hopelessly saturated with the biases of the investigators. Even the supposed objective stance of science is inevitably infused with particular communal assumptions (Gergen, 1991). For example, I know of no pharmaceutical research studies that have concluded that depression is a fundamentally psychosocial, not biochemical, problem. Likewise, behavioral researchers are not likely to find that unconscious processes play a causal role in depressive symptomatology. Investigative efforts, even supposed objective scientific ones, cannot yield truths that transcend the subjective mind-sets of the investigators. Thus, searching for needles of transcendent, extracommunal, objective truth in theoretical haystacks is an epistemically indefensible act.

This leaves Premise 3, which holds that theories do not have to be objectively true to facilitate healing. As mentioned above, cross-cultural studies of healing support this premise. If, however, theories do not communicate some objective truth to sufferers, what is the mechanism by which theories facilitate healing? One answer is that theories are narrative structures utilized for rhetorical purposes, designed to persuade the sufferer to consider experience from a different vantage point (Frank & Frank, 1991; Hansen, 2002). For instance, a depressed individual during counseling with a cognitivist might be told that certain thoughts are distorted. The individual might be further informed that changing the distorted thoughts will alleviate the depression. The client gradually becomes indoctrinated into the cognitive narrative and the depression subsides.

The traditional, modernist explanation for the alleviation of the client’s depressive symptoms is that cognitive theory provides a true description of the processes responsible for depression and its cure. However, as suggested above, this explanation seems epistemically naïve (Hansen, 2004). An alternative, postmodern explanation is that the counselor’s theory is a narrative structure that helped to “restory” the client’s experience. This “restorying” of experience is a central component of healing. Creating new meaning structures causes experience to be considered from another perspective, reorganizes the elements of old story lines, creates new symbolic structures for comprehending living, and promotes mastery over experiences that were formerly unmanageable. It should be noted that none of these healing processes are dependent on the transcendent truth of the new narrative. Rather, successful counseling outcomes are a function of counselors’ ability to select new narratives that will appeal to particular clients and of counselors’ skill at indoctrinating clients into these new story lines. Thus, a significant new role for theories in the counseling process is
as narrative structures that aid the counselor in the rhetorical process of restorying a client’s experience for the purpose of healing.

Theoretical Truth Redefined as Pragmatic Utility

The postmodern movement has brought about a resurgence of interest in pragmatism (Rorty, 1982). Pragmatism is a uniquely American philosophical movement that originated during the early 20th century. The central assertion of pragmatism is that ideas should be gauged by their practical utility, not by their transcendental accuracy. In other words, there are many competing ideas and systems of thought in philosophy that are persuasive, internally consistent, and compelling. Rather than make an impossible choice between these systems based on logical appeal, decisions should be based on the criterion of whether an idea is workable in a particular situation (Polkinghorne, 2000). Pragmatism was originally proposed in a modernist context; that is, the underlying epistemic foundation of pragmatism assumed a potentially knowable, unified reality (Polkinghorne, 1992).

Postmodern philosophers have resurrected pragmatism to help resolve one of the most pernicious side effects of postmodern epistemology: relativism (Polkinghorne, 1992). Specifically, because the epistemic starting point of postmodernism is that a transcendent reality is fundamentally unknowable, how can it ever be maintained that one interpretation of events is superior to another? For example, a client’s distress could be interpreted as emanating from family dynamics, unconscious process, or aliens that had invaded the client’s body. Without an epistemic grounding in transcendent truth, all interpretations of events would have equal merit. Some theorists, thus, cite relativism as a fatal flaw of postmodernism, a flaw that can only be corrected by a realist epistemology that presumes that an objective reality can be known (e.g., Held, 1995; Osbeck, 1993).

Certain postmodernist philosophers, sometimes referred to as affirmative postmodernists (Rosenau, 1992), have however imported philosophical pragmatism into postmodernism in order to solve the interpretative problems that emanate from relativism without resorting to a realist epistemology. This new, postmodern pragmatism, often referred to as neopragmatism, is, unlike the original pragmatism, couched in an epistemology that does not presume a unified, knowable reality (Polkinghorne, 1992). Neopragmatism essentially asserts that the best interpretation of events is the one that is the most useful. Truth is redefined as pragmatic utility. In other words, to say something is true is not to say that it matches an objective reality, because transcendent truth can never be known; rather, truth refers to whatever interpretation is workable in a particular situation.

As an example of the way in which neopragmatism diminishes the problems created by relativism, to assert that clients’ problems are due to demonic possession is generally considered untrue, because this interpretation would not be useful in most Westernized societies. However, this exact interpretation may be true in societies in which such a description of events would be helpful and promote healing. Thus, rather than defining truth as objective and transcendent, neopragmatism redefines truth as local and utilitarian.

Neopragmatism has major implications for theory utilization in counseling practice. Throughout most of the history of counseling, advocates for particular theoretical positions argued for the inherent truth-value of their theories (Hansen, 2002). This made choosing among the competing theories a difficult task for practicing counselors, because most theoretical positions have some persuasive appeal and ardent spokespersons advocating for their value as true representations of human psychology. Neopragmatism, however, helps to resolve the problem of choosing a “correct” or “true” theory inherent in modernism while simultaneously serving as a corrective to the postmodern problem of relativism. That is, according to the neopragmatic perspective, the criteria for theory selection should be based on whether a theoretical perspective is helpful in meeting the objectives of a particular counseling situation. Redefining truth in terms of pragmatics, thus, helps to resolve the problems of theoretical eclecticism inherent in modernism and provides practitioners with a guide to theory selection.

Egalitarianism in the Counseling Relationship

In modernism, the helping situation consists of an expert who has access to truth and a sufferer who needs guidance from this expert. It is the helper’s knowledge and expertise that ultimately cause healing to occur. Traditional conceptualizations of counseling also conform to this model (Frank & Frank, 1991); that is, healing for clients is dependent on counselors’ mastery of theories and associated techniques. Counselor licensure, degrees, and certification are badges of expertise that convey that the counselor possesses specialized knowledge of the human condition that clients presumably lack.

Conceptualizing the counseling scenario as an expert–sufferer dyad, as is done in modernism, has enormous, but often subtle, consequences for the counseling relationship. In order to appreciate the relational consequences of maintaining a modernist epistemology, the association between knowledge and power must be considered.

The 20th-century philosopher Foucault (1980) argued that knowledge and power are always inextricably tied to one another; that is, claims to truth automatically suppress alternative points of view. For example, to maintain that heterosexuality is the only true expression of sexual intimacy automatically disempowers the homosexual perspective. Likewise, the claim that chemical imbalances are badges of expertise that convey that the counselor possesses specialized knowledge of the human condition that clients presumably lack.

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expert knowledge inevitably has the relational consequence of suppressing the perspective of the client.

Within a modernist epistemology, however, the dominance of the counselor’s perspective is part of the healing process, because the counselor is seen as having access to theoretical truths that the client does not possess. However, within a postmodern epistemology, as mentioned above, it is untenable to assert that one perspective is closer to ultimate truth than another, thereby completely undermining the status of counselors as experts who possess transcendent truths. Most counselors, of course, probably experience themselves as partners with their clients in the treatment process, not as “truth bullies” who beat down clients’ perspectives with their superior views. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to consider the postmodern critique of knowledge as connected to power and the subtle and overt relational consequences of this power differential in the counseling relationship.

As an alternative to a power–knowledge differential, postmodernist theorists, particularly those from the social constructionist camp, conceptualize the counseling situation as a dialogic forum for the coconstruction of meaning (Guterman, 1994; McNamee, 1996). Rather than an expert who enlightens the client, the counselor is an equal partner with the client in the process of narrative construction. In this context, theories are useful not because they embody objective truth but because they equip the counselor with prepackaged narratives that can contribute to the meaning construction process in the counseling relationship.

Psychodynamically oriented counselors, for example, are prepared to help clients renegotiate their experience according to the psychodynamic story line, with its structural narrative elements such as unconscious process, defense, and transference (Hansen, 2000; Schafer, 1992). Within a modernist context, the psychodynamic counselor might insist that particular interpretations are correct and conceptualize disagreements from the client as manifestations of resistance. Within a postmodern context, however, in which psychodynamic theory is considered only one of many narrative possibilities, the counselor can adjust the theoretical narrative to suit the coconstructive task of the counseling situation, thereby making the client and counselor equal partners in the process of constructing meaning.

Notably, the egalitarianism and emphasis on human meaning systems fostered by a repositioning of counseling theories within a postmodernist epistemology, are, in some respects, similar to the traditional values of humanism, which also highlights the importance of subjective reality construction and the counselor and client as equal partners in the counseling relationship (Hansen, 2000, 2005a; Rogers, 1961). However, there are important theoretical differences between humanism and postmodernism (Hansen, 2005b). For instance, a central premise of humanism is that counselors should strive to achieve accurate empathic identification of clients’ experiences (Hansen, 2000, 2005a; Rogers, 1951, 1957). Postmodernism, alternatively, posits that experience is always linguistically cocreated within the counseling relationship and does not reside within the skull of the client, waiting to be discovered (McNamee, 1996). Under the postmodern vision, then, the counseling process heals by linguistically creating new meaning systems, not by objectively discovering old ones.

Postmodernism and humanism also differ in terms of their conceptualization of self. Under the humanistic vision, self-consolidation and actualization are the general goals of counseling (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1951, 1957). Postmodernism, in contrast, rejects the idea of a unified self as an antiquated and philosophically indefensible relic of the Enlightenment (Gergen, 1991; McNamee, 1996). Under the postmodernist vision, self-multiplicity, not self-consolidation, characterizes the fully functioning person (Gergen, 1995). Thus, although there are some similarities between the postmodern and humanistic orientations as they are enacted in the counseling relationship, there are also major ideological differences between these perspectives. (See Hansen, 2005b, for a more extended discussion of this topic.)

Discussion and Conclusions

Postmodern thought, with its emphasis on anti-essentialism and the rejection of the correspondence theory of language, has profound implications for the ways in which theories are considered in the counseling process. If theories are not tied to objective, indisputable realities, theories have an expanded utility as narrative structures that can be pragmatically and flexibly used to foster a healing dialogic process of joint meaning construction in the counseling relationship. From a postmodernist vantage point, then, the counselor no longer has allegiance to the supposed truth of a particular theory. Rather, the process of constructing meaning within the counseling relationship—and the process’s pragmatic impact on counseling objectives—becomes the top priority.

The purpose of counselor education from this postmodernist perspective of counseling is not, then, for the student to absorb transcendentals truths from the enlightened university intelligentsia; rather, counselor education provides prospective counselors with a repertoire of narrative possibilities for reframing the lives of their future clients. That is, clients typically enter counseling with meaning systems that have failed to support adaptive functioning. In order to reconstruct these systems so optimal living is enhanced, counselors must be prepared with a variety of reconstructive, narrative possibilities. If counselors did not enter the counseling situation with narrative tool kits, or theories, to counter and enrich the maladaptive narratives of their clients, counselors would have little to contribute to a coconstruction of new meanings within the counseling process. Education, therefore, under the postmodern vision of counseling can be reconceptualized as narrative preparation.
Moreover, this new conceptualization of education should be shared with students; that is, students should be told up front that they are not learning discovered theories but rather created narratives. This will engender a healthy skepticism in students about claims to truth when they become practitioners. This ability to think critically is particularly important in contemporary times, when mental health culture threatens to become dominated by truth claims from various domains (Hansen, 2003).

For example, counselors who treat clients with emotional problems typically work in agency environments where the medical/psychiatric model is dominant (Hansen, 1997, 2003). Counselors are often required to diagnose and plan treatment according to a breakdown of discrete client symptoms. Under a modernist epistemology, it might be assumed that this psychiatric view of the counseling process, along with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed., text rev.; American Psychiatric Association, 2000), is dominant because it represents a close correspondence with transcendent truth. That is, it might be presumed that the mental health professions continually evolve toward truth and that the latest trends, therefore, represent closer approximations to truth than earlier models.

From a postmodernist perspective, however, mental health culture continually shifts and changes according to battles for perspectival dominance. Professions do not continually evolve to ever greater approximations of transcendent truth. Instead, there are alterations and paradigm shifts in mental health based on the dynamics of power in the intellectual culture (Fancher, 1995; Foucault, 1980; Hansen, 2003, 2005a; Kuhn, 1970). The psychiatric narrative, of course, has been incredibly useful to psychiatrists, who rely on accurate diagnosis to prescribe medication that ameliorates particular symptom constellations. The utility of this narrative, however, is highly questionable for counselors whose healing efforts occur at the level of psychology not physiology (Hansen, 2003).

Therefore, counselors should not wholly embrace the assumptions of the mental health zeitgeist, with its supposition that current understandings represent the most advanced forms of truth available. An educational background that prepares counselors to critically appraise claims to truth is vital to practicing in modern mental health culture, in which truth claims abound. This educational preparation will enable counselors to resist becoming passive players in current fashionables in mental health story lines that may have questionable pragmatic utility for their practices.

Thus, a neopragmatic focus on counseling objectives that flexibly draws from narratives that have utility in a particular counseling relationship should be the rule for theory utilization in the counseling process. Reconceptualizing counseling theories within a postmodernist epistemology frees counselors from the shackles of theoretical truth, thereby shifting counselors’ allegiance from theories to clients. In this way, counseling can become a truly multicultural and multi-individual process in which the perspective and needs of the client are given the highest priority.

References

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