

*POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVES ON THE STUDY OF
CONSCIOUSNESS*

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Abstract. Among the scientific disciplines to be impacted by postmodernism is the study of consciousness. Narratives, key aspects of postmodern approaches, are already replacing abstract generalizations in theoretical formulations about such aspects of consciousness as memory and imagination. Research studies, both quantitative and qualitative, can be looked upon as attempts to tell stories that yield new information. A postmodern project for the study of consciousness would utilize narratives that are embedded in a time and a place — and the constant evaluation and questioning of the usefulness of these narratives.

In 1992, Vaclav Havel, the playwright-turned-statesman, counseled, “We have to abandon the arrogant belief that the world is merely a puzzle to be solved, a machine with instructions for use waiting to be discovered, a body of information to be fed into a computer in the hope that, sooner or later, it will spit out a universal solution.” This proclamation could serve as a precept for the shift that some scientific disciplines are making as they move from modernism to postmodernism. Nowhere is this transformation as apparent as in the field of the scientific study of consciousness — the disciplined inquiry into perception, cognition, emotion, and intention in all of their aspects and permutations. Intention, in fact, plays a vital role in determining the state of the organism, depending on the strength of the individual’s affective response and the ability to find meaning in experience.

The Shopping Center

In recent decades, studies of consciousness have become a popular topic for the general populace as well as for social scientists, behavioral scientists, and neuroscientists (Krippner & Winkler, 1995). Yet consciousness remains somewhat of an enigma. Psychodynamic conceptions of how human behavior is influenced by unconscious processes have been augmented by discoveries that most human decision-making occurs outside of conscious awareness. Yet most psychological models of consciousness are derived from cognitive science, ranging from computer simulation of intelligence to parallel distributed memory and

attentional processing. The neurosciences study consciousness in terms of brain and central nervous system activity, with special attention to the neurotransmitters and their effects.

Each of these perspectives is vying for attention in what might be called the shopping center of contending models that characterizes the study of consciousness. These models compete for serious consideration, attempting to appeal to powerful institutions that can bestow research grants, foundation awards, academic appointments, and book contracts. Applied technologies of consciousness, which constantly deluge this shopping center, are purchased by consumers eager to reduce their stress levels, improve their sex lives, cope with psychological or physical pain, repair fragmented relationships, or obtain job promotions. These therapies, workshops, training sessions, and mechanical devices all reflect explicit or implicit models of what English-speaking Westerners refer to as “consciousness” and illustrate the postmodern phenomenon of multiple realities and worldviews.

From Medievalism to Modernism to Postmodernism

The pluralism reflected in the study of consciousness can also be found in contemporary economics, religion, industry, politics, social groups, arts and entertainment, subcultures, and lifestyles. This confused situation is often referred to as “postmodernism,” as opposed to “modernism.” The latter term describes the “modern” worldview that humanity’s “progress” depends on the discovery of “reality” and “truth” through logic, reason, and empiricism. It replaced “medievalism,” with its dependence upon “revealed truth” as determined by religious authorities, primarily those speaking for the Roman Catholic Church. Historically speaking, modernism produced industrialization, capitalism, socialism, communism, and the nation-state. Religion, once the arbiter of all knowledge, became marginalized in most Western nation-states, and its authority was relegated to spiritual issues. Immanuel Kant firmly ensconced the course of modernism with his 1784 injunction, “Dare to be wise,” encouraging his readers to become independent not only from the church but from political authorities as well. As far back as the beginning of the 17th century, Francis Bacon had developed an early form of the Western “scientific method,” favoring inductive reasoning over seeking solutions to problems through religious dogma.

Walter Anderson (1990), in his definitive book on postmodernism, *Reality Isn’t What It Used to Be*, suggested that Kant may also have provided a preamble to postmodern thought when he described the human

mind as an active faculty that organizes and shapes the raw data of experience. People do not experience things in themselves, according to Kant, but only representations of them; the actual events take place in an unknowable external world. In the meantime, some writers (e.g., Smith 1994) have preferred the term “late modern” to “postmodern,” because the latter term over-emphasizes European and North American experience, ignoring the rest of the world’s population. In addition, “late modernists” feel that they can integrate the lessons learned from the postmodernists into disciplined inquiry, which they “privilege” above other epistemologies.

The “modern period” did not come into being everywhere at once; some parts of the world, indeed, have remained in the “medieval” era, operating in legal and political frameworks that follow the dictates of “revealed truth” as interpreted by religious authorities. Anderson has added other epistemologies to the modern (use of methodological, disciplined inquiry to discover “truth”), the postmodern (“truth” is socially constructed), and the medieval (“truth” is revealed by a supernatural agency). “Traditionalists” find “truth” in their cultural heritage, while “romantics” find “truth” in self-exploration. Finally, there are writers who periodically announce the “death of postmodernism,” offering such terms as “hypermodernism,” “digimodernism,” and “performatism” to describe oncoming epistemologies.

Some writers date the “modern period” in Europe from 1454, with Gutenberg’s use of movable type to print the Bible, or from 1492 and Columbus’s arrival in the Americas. Others date it from the founding of Portugal, arguably history’s first major nation-state, after the battle of Aljubarrota in 1389. Still other writers claim that the “modern” era was launched in England in the early 1500s, with the consolidation of grazing lands for sheep under private ownership.

Still others claim that the “modern period” was initiated by the 1648 Peace of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years War and established nations as sovereign states able to resist the control of the medieval church. This development marked a shift, in Western Europe, from sacred to secular authority and control over the citizenry (Kim, 1984). Following the disorder of the war, a quest for certainty emerged that was bolstered by René Descartes’ use of mathematically structured thought as a foundation for knowledge, a methodology inspired in 1619 by a series of dreams that called for the unification of all natural principles through reason. Modern science, strongly influenced by Descartes, moved from the oral to the written, from the particular to the universal, from the local to the general, and from the timely to the timeless (Toulmin, 1990). Spiritual matters were

left to organized religion, resulting in the Cartesian division of “mind” and “matter.”

Modern science holds that what is available to perception “out there” is an orderly and systematic universe, potentially the same for everyone. From this perspective, logical thought, rational problem solving, and scientific investigation will ultimately secure universal agreement about Nature. According to the credo of modernism, this decontextualized “truth” can be accurately described in objective, cause-and-effect statements about a structured “reality” that can be measured, predicted, and controlled. According to modernists, humans are on the verge of understanding and mastering the fundamental “laws” of the universe. With such information and techniques, a just, peaceful, harmonious social order can be obtained. In studying consciousness, it is assumed that such processes as perception, cognition, and imagination are most likely to reveal themselves in a controlled environment such as an experimental laboratory.

In contrast, postmodernists suspect that what scientists take back from Nature depends on their way of representing Nature. Whether one realizes it or not, people’s understanding of Nature comes through language, symbol, and metaphor. Hence, the postmodern approach to science involves skepticism, paradox, irony, and narrative. Its practitioner shifts from being a detached, theory-testing investigator and onlooker to being an involved, interested, interpretive, procedure-testing, critical participant who takes an active role in both finding and constructing information. The postmodern investigator realizes that human phenomena are altered when they are studied, especially if research participants are given feedback about the investigation and their role in it. Postmodern scientists understand that science is not value-free but both produces and reflects implicit or explicit values, especially when its findings become the basis for applied technology (such as atom bombs, space satellites, computers, and electronic media). Marc Pilisuk (2008) underlined this sentiment in his book, *Who Benefits from Global Violence and War*, contextualizing scientific activities squarely within the geopolitical Zeitgeist.

The Postmodern Discourse

If modern science has a publicly-stated value, it is its quest for “certainty,” a goal that postmodernists regard as futile, because of their conviction that knowledge tends to be local rather than universal. According to postmodernists, the most important human activities can barely be measured, much less predicted and controlled. Rather, the postmodern scientist strives to identify, describe, and understand these

activities as deeply and as thoroughly as possible. “Truth” is a matter of perspective, and perspectives are a byproduct of social interchange or “discourse.” One’s language about the world operates as the lens that construes that world into something not simply “out there” but into an interactive process where the “observer” and the “observed” are in constant dialogue. Modernism tries to hold a mirror to Nature, not realizing that language rests midway between Nature and discourse. Postmodernism, in contrast, asks the scientist to join this discourse, hoping that it will yield new insights and novel interpretations. The study of consciousness is an integral part of this discourse because it frequently involves stepping out of one’s milieu, culture, worldview, and thought processes in order to reflect upon them. According to Anderson (1990), “All of postmodernism, in fact, can be summarized as looking at beliefs — including one’s own.”

Postmodernists believe that the lives of human beings largely revolve around discourse. As humanity realizes that social utopias are unlikely results of scientific investigation, people can take personal responsibility for their actions here and now. The emphasis would be on specific community projects, whether the community is familial, ethnic, commercial, industrial, spiritual, academic, or something else. For postmodernists, local interactions are the point of departure: community context replaces global ideologies. There is an emphasis on individual, family, and group narratives, on the telling of stories, the ways in which people explain how their world got to be the way it is and what is likely to happen. Jean-François Lyotard, who introduced the term “postmodern” into the philosophical lexicon in 1979, proposed that the computer had transformed knowledge into coded messages within a system of transmission and communication. Analysis of this system has revealed how science is far from detached; it is, in fact, tightly interwoven with governments and businesses. In so doing, science has distanced itself from philosophy and other “meta-narratives.” Postmodernism, however, mixes philosophy with concepts and methods from other disciplines.

A hallmark of postmodern thought is “deconstruction,” which began as a method of literary criticism. This method reduces the language of a text to a multiplicity of possible meanings rather than to any single meaning such as that supposedly intended by the author. Deconstruction tears apart a “text,” a story, a phenomenon, an event, or a concept. Deconstruction reveals its contradictions, discloses its assumptions, and undoes its constructions.

Deconstruction was introduced into the philosophical literature by Jacques Derrida, who used it as a way to “read” theories of language. It

might be said that Thomas Natsoulas (1983), an American psychologist, began to deconstruct the term “consciousness” by citing a variety of definitions appearing in the Oxford English Dictionary. “Consciousness” could be defined as the normal waking state, as internal or shared knowledge, as direct awareness, or as the totality of one’s impressions, thoughts, and feelings. To completely deconstruct the term “consciousness,” each further description would have to be deconstructed — “knowledge,” “awareness,” “thoughts,” “feelings,” and the historical origins of the term would need to be described, going back to the word’s Latin root that translates into “knowing.” Finally, the postmodernist would “muse” about the contradictions in the established definitions, “reveal” their circularity, and “disclose their tensions,” allowing the “text” of consciousness terminology to “deconstruct itself.” The critical question would be whether the term “consciousness” assists discourse and should be retained, or confuses discourse and should be abandoned.

Deconstructing “Altered States”

In a series of theoretical essays, Rock and Krippner (e.g., 2007) have attempted to deconstruct the term “altered states of consciousness,” arguing that it is underpinned by fallacious reasoning. Rock and Krippner’s argument focuses on the conscious awareness component of consciousness and the fact that definitions of the term consciousness clearly differentiate between: (1) consciousness as awareness; and (2) the phenomenological content of consciousness (visual imagery, affect, time sense). However, Rock and Krippner observed that, when one shifts from definitions of consciousness to definitions of altered states of consciousness, consciousness is confused with its content. These definitions (e.g., Tart, 1969) assert that an “altered state of consciousness” refers to a shift or deviation in the content of consciousness rather than consciousness itself. Consequently, when the qualifier altered state is affixed to the concept of consciousness, consciousness is erroneously categorized as content. Rock and Krippner have termed this error the consciousness/content fallacy, arguing that it can be avoided if one replaces the term altered state of consciousness with the term altered pattern of phenomenological properties.

If Rock and Krippner’s logic is sound, it would be pertinent to reconceptualize the field of altering consciousness as altering phenomenology. This reconceptualization has numerous implications for future research. For example, a researcher who is mindful of the consciousness/content fallacy and wishes to construct a questionnaire to

quantify, for instance, shamanic experiences, would construct items concerning alterations in phenomenological properties instead of alterations in consciousness. By way of illustration, items such as “I experienced a strange state of consciousness” would be replaced with items addressing various phenomenological properties, for example, “My sense of self was expansive,” “Time seemed to stand still,” “I felt intense fear,” “My visual imagery was unusually vivid.” Similarly, a qualitative researcher who is cognizant of the consciousness/content fallacy would not conduct semi-structured interviews by asking questions about, for instance, meditative states of consciousness or altered consciousness. Instead, open-ended questions concerning phenomenological properties would be posed, as for example, “Would you please tell me about your sense of the flow of time during your most recent meditative experience?”

From this standpoint, to understand a psychological phenomenon one needs to integrate first-person phenomenology, second-person intersubjectivity, and third-person neurophysiology. McNamara’s (2008) work with nightmares illustrates this viewpoint; his study of the phenomenology of nightmares led to the identification of their formal features which, in turn, led to an understanding of their neurobiology. McNamara hypothesized that nightmares “exhibit functional design and solved a problem or addressed an opportunity for ancestral human populations. Functional adaptations need not be pleasant to be helpful. Nightmares, in fact, can be compared to a fever: unpleasant but adaptive and even life-giving” (148).

Consciousness in Different Times and Places

From a postmodern perspective, not only is the term “consciousness” socially constructed, but conscious experience itself is constructed differently in various times and places. People in each culture construct experience in terms of the categories provided by their own linguistic system, coming to terms with a “reality” that has been filtered through their language. Each culture has a specialized terminology for those aspects of consciousness important for its functioning and survival. Many writers have pointed out that Western culture often describes inner experience in psychopathological terms. But traditional Eastern cultures have developed intricate vocabularies for describing the varieties of consciousness as well as spiritual experiences.

Thus Western psychology equates “reality” with the world as perceived in the ordinary waking state, denying credibility to “realities” perceived in other types of awareness. Eastern perspectives, on the other

hand, dismiss the physical world as an illusion and see “reality” as something that cannot be grasped in ordinary waking awareness. Commenting on the Mexican Huichol tribe, Ptolemy Tompkins (1990) remarked, “by our standards, all of Huichol life is a kind of well-organized hallucination, for the cosmos they believe and live in bears very little resemblance to the one that Western civilization wakes up to every morning.”

Tompkins also pointed out that Freud’s image of the conscious ego as the external boundary of an invisible matrix of volatile psychic “energies” that feeds and informs it resembles the shamanic model. But for the shaman, these “unconscious energies” are keenly intelligent, not blind. These “energies” originated in the earth itself rather than in the neurons of the brain. In addition, Western models of consciousness ignore the concept of the shaman’s dreaming body. This body is capable of moving out of itself into realms existing beneath the earth and in the sky.

Swami Radakrishna Radha (1994) observed that the Eastern equivalent of the Western “unconscious” is the process of “not being fully aware of one’s true nature.” Indeed, Vedantic and Buddhist texts are replete with discussions of conscious states and how to regulate them. From the meditative perspective, it is through the perceptual integration of sensory stimuli that a person begins to know the world as self.

The Tibetan Buddhist tradition contains thousands of volumes on consciousness, most of them dealing with meditative practices and experiences. The phenomenologies of these experiences are remarkably consistent across texts, with a sophisticated language that beginning yogis are required to learn. By studying these terms, the adepts channel their subjective reactions into socially approved directions. The technical terminology is precise, comparable to the Western psychological constructs of attention, perception, cognition, information processing, emotion, time sense, and physiological parameters. But there is a longitudinal emphasis, virtually absent from Western psychology, illustrating which variables are most likely to undergo change at certain stages of practice. Also differing from Western concepts are such attentional factors as “directing the mind,” “holding the mind,” and “stopping the mind.” One type of Buddhist meditation has five obtainable levels, each one of which has three subjectively distinct sublevels, reflecting a construction of consciousness more subtle than anything found in Western traditions.

The Mayan model of consciousness was depicted by artists who showed how the world of everyday reality and the dream-world sometimes overlapped, allowing beings from both realms to interact. In dreams and in

waking visions, the Maya asked the deities to appear before them, thus remaining faithful to the shamanic tradition of visionary ecstasy that had bequeathed this vivid universe to them, a universe so intense it could overwhelm them at any moment. Borrowing heavily from the Maya, the Aztec model of consciousness focused on the instant of death and on the mental attitude that captive and killer adopted in the charged moments leading up to that event. The fact that the Aztecs and their prisoners were willing to die to achieve the status of a liberated spirit testifies to the urgency with which they sought an authentic experience of the soul's autonomy and power. Australian aborigines, through entering into what anthropologists call a primordial "dreamtime," achieved a similar "liberation," but through locating natural "power spots" rather than by courting death.

In retrospect, students of consciousness in different eras and locations have used various terms and have focused on different aspects of the "consciousness project," but at the same time they have posed similar questions: What is meant by "mind"? What techniques can be used to regulate, direct, and utilize consciousness? What are the different states, forms, and levels of consciousness? From the perspective of some postmodernists, these questions are self-referential and not worthy of serious discussion. From other postmodernist perspectives, there is no need to look for single answers to these questions, but to appreciate how these issues have been dealt with over the years and how various communities have used the resulting insights and technologies, e.g., meditation, dream working, visionary journeys, the ingestion of psychoactive plants.

The Primacy of Consciousness

Contemporary science has paid increasing attention to the brain and central nervous system, but much less attention to "mind" and "consciousness," even at one point describing consciousness as a mere epiphenomenon of the brain. Addressing this neglect, Nobel laureate Roger Sperry (1981) asserted that current concepts of the "mind" involve a "direct break with the long-established materialist and behaviorist doctrine that has dominated neuroscience for many decades.... The new interpretation gives full recognition to the primacy of inner conscious awareness as a causal reality." Going even further, Willis Harman (1988) suggested that consciousness may be the ultimate stuff of the universe, not the end-product of material evolution. This perspective has been developed by Kelly et al. (2007) in *Irreducible Mind* and by contributors to the anthology *Mind before Matter* (Pfeiffer, Mack, & Devereux, 2007).

Postmodern writers do not speak with a single voice on these topics. “Deconstructive postmodernism” declares that there is nothing but cultural construction in human experience. The deconstructive postmodernist believes that even the human body image and the objects and organisms found in Nature are little more than cultural projections; hence one’s perceptions of them are suspect and unreliable. Some postmodernists advocate the study of the human body as a system of signs and signifiers, and suggest that neurophysiology, not psychology, is the proper discipline to investigate what goes on in people’s heads and bodies. Ecological postmodernism, on the other hand, sees both the human body and the “Earth body” as sources of wisdom and grounding for a humanity trying to effect a transition beyond the failed aspects of the modern age. What might be called “constructionist postmodernists” believe that the constant reexamining of one’s beliefs, plus learning about one’s socially constructed reality, are the most important learning tasks needed for survival at this time in history. Yes, there is an objective cosmos that humans can seek to understand, although all such attempts are to some extent subjective.

The Postmodern Sensibility

Postmodernists in general challenge the modern notion of a “coherent self” apart from Nature. This image successfully met an earlier challenge by depth psychology and its exploration of unconscious motives. Freud’s free association method, Jung’s notion of unconscious archetypes, and Adler’s concept of “complexes” implied that logic and reason were hardly the predominant operating modalities in human behavior. But the “coherent self” had been deconstructed even earlier in such literary masterpieces as Henrik Ibsen’s play *Peer Gynt*. *Peer Gynt*’s lack of commitments and loyalties is illustrated when he peels off the layers of an onion, identifying each with a social role he has played, finding nothing but an empty core. *Gynt*’s self is not reconstructed until he returns to Solveig and opts for deeply rooted relationships with others.

Another precursor to the postmodern sensibility was Luigi Pirandello’s play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, which may be taken as an allegory of modern European society as its individuals wander about in search of meaning. W. B. Yeats’s poem, “The Second Coming,” intuitively described a center that “cannot hold,” and J. B. Priestly’s plays (e.g., *Dangerous Crossing*, *The Inspector Calls*) twisted and shifted time sequences, with their attendant effects on his characters’ lives and realities. The initiation of postmodern theater is often dated back to 1953, the date

of the first production of Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. An early 21st-century Broadway musical, "Wicked," has been described as postmodern because it deconstructs the story of Dorothy's visit to the Wizard of Oz, reconstructing the beginning and end of the narrative in a radically different format. Quentin Tarantino's films are considered postmodern; "Inglourious Basterds," for one, invents an alternate scenario for the death of Adolph Hitler.

The publication of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* in 1956 and William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* in 1959 initiated postmodern writing with its use of irony, paradox, parody, and play, the inclusion of previously taboo topics, and the combination of multiple cultural elements. Other authors associated with postmodern fiction include Kathy Acker, John Barth, Richard Broughton, E. L. Doctorow, Umberto Eco, Joseph Heller, Jerzy Kosinski, Doris Lessing, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut. Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and other writers of Latin American "magical realism" are sometimes linked with the postmodern movement in literature. Salman Rushdie's 1988 novel, *The Satanic Verses*, is often called the last major postmodern novel. The emergence of "cyberlink" and "hypertext" fiction and the publication of such novel works as Mark Z. Danielewski's 2000 novel *House of Leaves* are sometimes dubbed "post-postmodern." These works are relevant to the study of consciousness because of their emphasis on subjectivity and the stream of inner experience they portray.

Just as postmodern drama and fiction puncture modernist assumptions about "truth" and "reality," postmodern science contends that "truth" remains arbitrary because all knowledge is language-bound; hence "truth" needs to be reconceptualized as personal, local, and community-specific — or rejected altogether. This is an especially critical issue in the case of consciousness studies, which attempt, through language, to describe processes marked by complexity and multiplicity. Such an issue is notably apparent when one considers that neither Western materialism nor dualism has solved the "mind/body problem" to everyone's satisfaction. The philosopher David Griffin (1988) noted that "conscious experience is not a property of things as they appear to us from without; it is what we are in and for ourselves." According to Griffin, mechanistic, reductionistic approaches have been spectacularly successful in certain areas and unsuccessful in others — less successful with rats than with bacteria, less successful with humans than with rats. Griffin's perspective on postmodern science is that it involves the attempt to establish "truth" through

demonstrations open to experiential replication, although those replications need not be done in a laboratory.

Chaotic Systems Inquiry

What form would postmodern approaches to consciousness research take? Novel forms of systems inquiry have demonstrated their utility in describing and understanding processes that undergo continuous change, growth, and evolution of a chaotic Nature, such as weather patterns, ecological systems, and a whole array of phenomena that operate in a nonlinear fashion. In accordance with postmodern thinking, chaos theory (nonlinear systems analysis) questions the modernists' position that Nature can be predicted and controlled. According to the Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine (Prigogine & Stegners 1984), one of the most highly refined skills in the West is dissection: the reduction of problems into the simplest components. Prigogine proposed that the knowledge uncovered by reductionistic, mechanistic science has produced models, theories, and constructs that have become insipid and pragmatically infertile.

Chaos theory offers a fresh approach that is process-oriented and steeped in evolutionary thought. From this perspective, living systems are self-organizing, self-producing, emergent entities that do not lend themselves to linear analysis. Chaos theory is especially applicable to processes that are nonlinear and complex (Davis, Smith, & Leflore 2008).

Chaos theory may become an important method of inquiry in both the biological and behavioral sciences (Abraham, Abraham, & Shaw, 1990). Chaos methodology shifts emphasis from relationships of cause and effect to more interactive approaches that stress the importance of defining patterns, form, self-organization, and the adaptive qualities of complex processes. There exists a debate among postmodernists about the usefulness of any scientific method employing mathematics. However, chaos theory provides a rich and elegant way of describing various psychological processes based on such methods as EEG brain wave analysis and brain scanning, and pointing out their often chaotic patterns. It is possible to entertain the notion that any disciplined scientific inquiry is yet another narrative that can provide useful information for our understanding of the world. On this basis, chaos theory is an avenue that is likely to provide new and valuable ways of conceptualizing consciousness.

Most experimental methods and their attendant statistical tests are based on linear assumptions. If the nonlinear mathematics of chaos systems analysis can demonstrate its utility for the understanding of complex phenomena in other physical, biological, and social sciences, it is probable

that it will lead to valuable ways of understanding psychological phenomena that can be viewed in the context of a narrative. For example, Krippner and Combs (2007) have applied chaos theory to nighttime dreaming, describing how a dream organizes itself into a narrative that is usually coherent and often adaptive.

Critics of chaos theory have asserted that its methodology of data analysis is flawed, that such derived topological representations as attractor reconstructions and fractal dimension estimates do not represent “true” chaos but are merely mathematical artifacts that are not indicative of the system under scrutiny. A subtext to this criticism is the extensive preparation needed in order to use chaos inquiry to study consciousness and related phenomena. At this point, the opposition takes on economic and political dimensions, becoming immersed in struggles involving power and territory. Francis Bacon coined the aphorism “Knowledge is power,” but Michel Foucault and several other postmodern writers have pointed out that power often determines what passes as knowledge. For these writers, the process is circular: power determines knowledge, which in turn bestows power, thereby selecting, for example, which projects get funded, obtain recognition, and win prizes.

Indeed, from a postmodern perspective, all research methods can be viewed as inherently political, because they are intertwined with issues of power and legitimacy. Widely used research methods are permeated with a powerful group’s assumptions about the researcher, what is to be researched, and the relationship between them. Even purportedly “objective” methods are politically charged, because they define, control, evaluate, manipulate, and report. Modern science often legitimizes the preferences of normative, powerful agencies, using them to support political policies.

Some postmodernists advocate abandoning experimental research completely, because it is a leftover from discredited positivism. However, such human science methods as oral histories and case studies are winning new respect among postmodernists, although it is deemed essential to identify the setting and context in which the story was told, the relationship between the interviewer and the research participant, the motives of the interviewer, and the cosmological worldview of both interviewer and interviewee. In human science research, the topics of a researcher’s studies are not presumed to have an objective existence (as was the case with modern science’s discovery of chemical elements), and the role, expectations, and traits of the researcher play an integral part in the inquiry process.

Postmodernists are suspicious of “meta-narratives,” “models,” and “paradigms,” because it is alleged that they typically suppress differences in order to legitimate their own vision of reality (Krippner, 1988). However, specific narratives are used as “texts” in both phenomenological and hermeneutic studies. Postmodern writers recognize that personal accounts, including those that describe exceptional human experiences, are, to at least some extent, culturally constructed and loaded with accounts of local significance. The researcher can look for common themes in these narratives, both within a culture and cross-culturally, often teasing out what David Hufford (1982) has termed “core beliefs” (for example, “Humans have souls that leave the body,” “There are threatening and frightening spirits”) and the “core experiences” associated with them (for example, “out-of-body experiences,” “demonic possession”). Highly unusual and vivid narrative reports emerge, in part, from these core experiences and ultimately form local folk traditions. Thus, postmodernism has helped to bring folklorists and their research methods into the field of the study of consciousness. For example, folklore plays an important part in Patrick McNamara’s (2008) understanding of nightmares and their functions.

Some postmodernists dismiss the distinction between mental states and the outside world as illusory. In *The Saturated Self*, the social psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1991) asked, “Can one identify an ‘inner state’ not already prefigured in the public language? Can an American look inward and identify an emotion for which there is no English word?” Language is a structure of reality in itself, one which varies across cultures and provides distinct constructions of time/space and causality. Gergen also discussed the role of the media in constructing emotional and mental events, lamenting that “for many people film experiences provide the most emotionally wrenching experiences of the average week.”

Dream Reports as Texts

Postmodern approaches are especially suited to dream research; the psychiatrist Gordon Globus (1995) noted that dream reports can be conceptualized as texts that spontaneously erupt during sleep and enrapture the dreamer. For Freud and other modernists, the dream’s “meaning” precedes the dream; the dream is the carrier of that meaning. For the postmodernist, the dream is a discourse of “otherness” expressing a consciousness different from waking life, which suggests that research could be initiated to discover how meaning is constructed from the dream text. Furthermore, the dream can introduce researchers to the way “selves” are deconstructed over time.

In dream research, the dreamer is not only the object but also the subject of investigation. The very production of dreams is unpredictable, and, with the exception of disciplined “lucid” dreamers, quite uncontrollable. Modernism’s fear of the unpredictable and the uncontrollable is probably responsible, in part, for the relative neglect, over the years, of reported “telepathic,” “clairvoyant,” and “precognitive” dreams, because they do not occur on demand and do not seem to fit into modern scientific causal paradigms. This fear may have been a major motivating force behind the repression in Western culture of psychedelic drugs, “spirit possession,” and other indigenous means of altering one’s phenomenology, as well as the general suspicion of meditation and other spiritual disciplines involving changes in consciousness. Many indigenous cultures are far more knowledgeable in these intricacies of consciousness, even to the point of training children and adolescents how to alter their phenomenology at will through culturally sanctioned dances, songs, and even dissociation.

From the standpoint of modernism, an individual observes and reflects on the world, transforming this conscious experience into words that will express these perceptions and cognitions to others. For the postmodernist, language is a system unto itself, a social format that is shaped by a community of participants. However, the cultural agencies with power and authority not only influence how conscious events will be communicated, but how they will be experienced. Again, modesty is required when researchers depend upon language to convey the experience of a life-changing vision, a dream that came true, an interpersonal adventure, an encounter with Nature, a personal loss, a terminal illness, or any other exceptional human experience that is worth studying, albeit with tools that are not completely adequate.

Criticizing Postmodernists

Most postmodernists appreciate the irony, skepticism, and humor involved in their concepts. For example, it can be claimed that the belief that there is no absolute “truth” or “certainty” has become an “absolute truth” in its own right. Further, if all “truths,” no matter how absurd, are given serious consideration, how can communities attempt to create values? The principles used to deconstruct uncontextualized narratives tend to be uncontextualized themselves, and postmodern generalizations are used to refute other generalizations. Jurgen Habermas (1987) has pointed out that postmodernists employ the same concepts and methods of rational thought that they deride. Habermas nonetheless takes postmodernism seriously,

unlike a number of other philosophers, and agrees with postmodernists that the focus of debate needs to be on the impact of modernism on social practices and institutions. Addressing these issues has to become an important aspect of the postmodern project.

In the meantime, postmodernists can add fresh perspectives to the study of consciousness. They can encourage psychologists to question their assumptions, their terminology, and their constructions. They can bring questions of power and authority to the forefront, and challenge the use of applied psychology to belittle, manipulate, and abuse people. Postmodernists can help prevent psychotherapists from brusquely pigeonholing their clients, and from taking reductionistic interpretations of people's reports of exceptional experiences. In the increasingly complex, postmodern world, there will be an ever increasing number of local and marginal texts, selves, institutions, and societies, but in the hands of modernists they are likely to be ignored at best and pathologized at worst.

On the one hand, postmodernism can be criticized for its relativism, skepticism, and cynicism; on the other hand, its pluralism, complexity, and ambiguity have characterized the study of consciousness from the days of William James and other pioneers. The "multiple voices" from external stimulation that Gergen (1991) observed to "saturate the self" can also be found internally, as people shift from one phenomenological state to another, giving play to their competing subpersonalities, personal myths, local "truths," and individual "realities." These voices emerge and submerge as the context changes and as social demands vary.

Paradigm shifts are necessary for any field of inquiry to retain its vitality and avoid succumbing to stasis. The long-term effects of postmodern approaches to consciousness may move Western psychology from a perspective that recognizes the value of only a single "normal" state of consciousness to one that values multiple states; from one that sees human development as having a ceiling to one that views such limitations as culturally determined; from the dismissal of exceptional human experiences as pathological or illusory to the appreciation of their potential for illuminating neglected human capacities; in the devaluing of non-Western psychologies as "primitive" or "quaint" to the honoring of their richness and complexity; in ridiculing experiences of "union" with the Earth and the cosmos to an awareness that this sensibility may well be critical for the survival of the planet and its inhabitants. Postmodernism itself is a story. And when other stories about consciousness emerge, let us hope that the postmodernists will listen to them, encourage their voices to be heard, and advocate that their tales be told.

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