

SOME ASPECTS OF EPISTEMOLOGY AND POSTMODERNISM THAT MIGHT BE RELEVANT TO CHRISTIANS IN PSYCHOLOGY

Despite strenuous efforts, this may get a touch philosophical at times, though Foucault is off the menu. It tries obstinately to stay with questions like, “What’s this got to do with me being a-Christian-and-a-psychologist?” and to avoid ones like, “Can’t I live life to the full *without* considering epistemology and postmodernism?” The topic probably includes several concepts with which we may have only a nodding or snoozing acquaintance. And, since this is a massive topic area, it needs to be emphasised that what follows only concerns “*some* – hopefully relevant – *aspects of*” it. Therefore, without further ado, here goes...

Part One – working definitions

Epistemology scrutinises how we know things - *the study of the grounds of knowledge*. Within the scientific establishment of which psychology claims membership, there are set ways of knowing things.

Modern¹ refers to a set of ideas dating from the Enlightenment that gave honour to the notion of *individual persons* as beings who can think and act in their own right and determine what’s what [as opposed to previous notions that, generally, people are beings who simply accept in an unthinking manner that what The Church or The King says is so].

The term **postmodern**² indicates a development beyond modern ideas about a unitary self who determines things with exactitude, towards a ‘multiple’ view of selfhood with many shades of personally understanding things (often referred to as *subjectivities*) – and therefore, having a *less certain* grasp of them.

Part Two – brainstorm

Suppose you were asked to complete several questionnaire items. What resources – material, ideational, or whatever – would you draw upon, in order to arrive at your decision on the following mixture of items (*please jot down on a notepad a list of the things you used to arrive at your YES or your NO*):

	YES	NO
(i) “GM foods are not healthy for people to consume.”
(ii) “Clause 28 should be revoked.”
(iii) “I will opt for the bone marrow transplant operation despite its predicted 30% failure rate.”
(iv) “The two great commandments (Luke 10:27) are guiding principles of my life.”

Now - imagine you are asked to share with a group of tough-minded other people the ways you knew how to put *YES* or *NO* for each item - BUT: a rule of communication has to be followed, that restricts any serious consideration by your hearers of what you say to that which is viewed, by common consent, to be *material, logical, and objective*. No serious attention will be paid to any *nonmaterial, irrational and subjective* aspects. In your list, separate out those resources which you think would gain attention, from those that are likely to be treated dismissively.

Here's a rhetorical question to **think about and discuss**: Within the 'scientific' psychological community (of which you may count yourself an aspiring or actual member), what happens if you come to know something outside of the community's set rules? For example, what *epistemological problems* might be encountered with your professional colleagues or your psychology lecturers if you were to share with them what you know of God, and your certain attribution of various changes in your life to His divine work? Can this be communicated successfully? Will your membership be cancelled? Is the legitimacy of what you are trying to tell them downgraded by your peers?

[Miller (1998) found himself in a not dissimilar situation (though not concerning religious belief), saying he felt "marooned on an epistemological island in a sea of empiricist-inspired scepticism and disbelief." The focus here is upon the constraints put upon knowledge claims - constraints that result from a commitment to a *modern* 'scientific' psychology. Using an example from the admittedly controversial area of talking with an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse, he cogently argues that there are data - such as the experience of knowing that emerges out of clinical practice - that are inaccessible to formal traditional empirical research methods.]

Part Three – some didactic input

So what's wrong with *modernism*? Could the critical stance of *postmodernism* be a more useful alternative when it comes to construing and communicating the integrationist stance of "being a Christian *and* a psychologist"?

Richards and Bergin (1997) examined the viable sources available to us as psychologists. The *modernist* view (often referred to as *positivist*) permits us to appeal to two sources to legitimate knowledge claims:

- (1) **Empiricism** – the claim to knowledge, derived from information that has been collected under rigid conditions, about variables that are operationally defined, producing data that are numerically quantifiable.
- (2) **Rationality** – the claim to knowledge, based upon clearly and coherently thought-through ideas, that follows the commonly-accepted rules of logic.

They point out that two further sources are frequently overlooked:

- (3) **Authority** is often appealed to, especially if a well-respected author within psychology. Thus, one typically finds the Introduction section to a journal article citing previous academic literature as 'authorising' the current study reported; or, a well-established leading figure in the psychological community may opine about the rights and wrongs of a current hot topic, and serious attention is commanded simply by the fact that it is that famous person who is giving an opinion.
- (4) **Inspiration and intuition** are not infrequently mentioned in the accounts of (say) a well-known scientist who is being interviewed near to retirement, when trying with the wisdom of hindsight to account for the start of a discovery made years ago. Richards and Bergin make a clear case for this as a valid fourth source to which to attribute knowledge claims.

An invitational question – is there something that we can borrow from these ideas, and boldly hold forth in order to start claiming validity for data that we would wish to legitimate as psychologists who are also Christians? The trouble is, possibly because we anticipate such data would be marginalised or even ridiculed as inscrutable by professionals and academics, we may tend either to keep quiet and suffer in silence or to operate the technique that Cohen (1994) described as ‘compartmentalisation’ – by which he meant keeping our faith issues carefully separate from our psychology – the very opposite to the integration of issues of psychology and Christianity to which NeCIP is committed.

[If this is already boring you, or whatever, please skip to Part Four below.]

Consider 1 that the postmodern view (a) breaks away from a single, tangible reality, and (b) espouses realities that are multiple and constructed. The good news: (a) implies an end to the monopoly of positivist empiricism and rationality as sole legitimators for knowledge claims; the not-so-good news: (b) implies that if a single reality were to be claimed, like Jesus’ famous claim in John 14:6 that he is *the way, the truth and the life* and that *no-one comes to God except through him*, then this is only one of several such claims each of which may equally demand our serious attention and none of which may claim absolute veracity.

Consider 2 the postmodern axiom that knower and known are (a) not independent of each other, a dualism, but (b) are interactive, inseparable. Good news? (a) makes it more reasonable to claim a spiritual relationship where God is both within me and without me; not-so-good news? (b) disallows my understanding from the Bible that even if the world were to disintegrate and all humans ceased existing, God exists – independently of my or anyone else’s imagination.

[I leave the good and bad news implications of the remaining considerations (taken from Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to you.]

Consider 3 the postmodern axiom that scientific inquiry is (a) not value-free and neutral but is (b) value-bound.

Consider 4 the postmodern axiom regarding generalisation: (a) time- and context-free generalisations are not possible; only (b) time- and context-*bound* hypotheses are possible.

Consider 5 the postmodern axiom that (a) rather than there being real causes preceding/simultaneous with their effects, instead (b) all entities mutually shape each other, so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects.

Richards and Bergin (1997) make the point that for positivist research, the study of spiritual phenomena entails researchers *must alter their conceptions of spirituality to make it fit modernist assumptions* that phenomena must be operationalisable/replicable/subdivideable into dimensions, factors and other fragments...

The possibility that postmodern axioms permit us to examine Christianity-and-psychology issues more freely, cannot be ignored. Olthius (1999) reports its considerable benefits in the field of psychotherapy (confirming Miller’s (1998) views).

[One of the drawbacks of the postmodern stance – especially in its deconstructionist guise – is that adherents seem to feel it is their moral duty and right never to forgo critical questioning in order to defend an otherwise unsuspecting public, lest a conspiracy by the powerful positivist scientific majority hoodwink the public into believing something that *ain’t necessarily so*. Although our appeal (above) to Authority or Inspiration to legitimate psychology-and-Christianity knowledge claims would cut no ice with them, their critical questioning stance seems to act as an Authority, and even to Inspire them... Gergen (1999) suggests that this untrammelled critical questioning provokes an eventual downturn for deconstructionism: not only are modernist traditions shown to be stripped of legitimacy, but deconstructionist critique of them is too – leaving what he calls ‘a deposit of despair’.

Further drawbacks may be found in Honeysett (1999), who is not a psychologist, but who writes a thoughtful Christian response, almost implacably opposed, to Postmodernism. His engagingly written website argues lucidly that the three pillars of Postmodernism disable Christian conviction, commitment and morality: (a) knee-jerk mistrust of authoritative meta-narratives; (b) relativism; and (c) philosophical pluralism. [This leads to the sort of ‘hyperchoice’ daze on moral style that you get on yoghurt at the relevant counter in Sainsbury’s.]

Part Four – locating the problem within an ordinary life

Consider some anonymised but real-life experiences of Jo, a Christian psychologist. Please note down any ways in which the four vignettes may arouse in you a recognition of personal subjectivities (multiple senses of self) connected with Christianity-psychology integration.

		Peer Group	
		<i>with fellow Christians</i>	<i>with fellow psychologists</i>
Subjectivities	<i>as a psychologist</i>	Vignette [B]	Vignette [A]
	<i>as a Christian</i>	Vignette [D]	Vignette [C]

[A] Jo attended an awayday with colleagues whose ideas on teamwork differed very considerably. He was pleased that everyone was listened to respectfully – they all had valid ways of construing teamwork. They had to end the day agreeing to differ sharply, with those staff under greatest pressure from senior management following a ‘no nonsense’ line, and the newest members of staff wanting to create more opportunities ‘to talk about our differences’. Jo suspected that the agenda of one person who was completing a management course in his spare time was to use the group as a case example for an assignment!

[B] It was Sunday 14.2.99 - Valentine’s Day. Jo was in church listening to a sermon that at one point emphasised that a couple leaving the parental home to live elsewhere (interpreted from Genesis 2:24) is the only Christian way forward within God’s plan of marriage. Inwardly, he castigated the preacher for privileging a system consistent with the rampant individualism of the West, and paying no attention to the more communal, extended family system of living that is the rule for the majority of the world’s cultures, where newly weds may well make their home within the parental home ...

[C] Jo was presiding over an end-of-day plenary session of selectors, to decide on which interview candidates to offer places to, for a prestigious postgraduate course. The selection performance of one particular interviewee came under consideration. Ostensibly in order to assist recollection of the interviewee, one of the panel members said, “You know, the pro-life one”. Jo was inwardly furious, felt vicariously marginalised – but suffered in silence: he was too cowardly to rebuke the panel member either publicly or privately.

[D] During a Sunday morning church service, Jo was part of a small group being 'prayed over' with some intensity by all the other worshippers. The group was just about to leave to visit a solidly Islamic country, for the purpose of prayer-walking, and of encouraging local Christians. He felt strongly moved to strike up the refrain of the popular song "We want to see Jesus lifted high" - *Step by step we're moving forward, little by little we're taking ground ...* With the entire congregation continuing in full voice, he and the rest of the team slipped out of the auditorium, took their cases to the car and set off for Gatwick. He had an enduring sense of being totally sure that it was absolutely the right thing to be doing.

Although Vignette A may have elicited few notes, the others probably did better. Using what you have noted down from your response to the vignettes, with respect to psychology-and-Christianity integration, imagine a *dimension of response to Postmodernism*, a Likert scale stretching from 'complete dismissal' to 'unrepentant espousal'. What are the points of excellence and the points of corrosiveness that have struck you? Where would you place yourself on this imaginary continuum?

Part Five – in conclusion...

What conclusion? Who said anything about making conclusions?! Seriously though, here are the references cited, together with a few other useful resources.

Coffey, J. (1996). Life after the death of God? Michel Foucault and postmodern atheism. *Cambridge Papers* 5(4):1-4. *Well written critique (like the rest of the Cambridge Papers, phone 01223 501631 for availability).*

Cohen, P. (1994). An interesting contradiction: A study of religiously committed psychoanalytically oriented clinicians. *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 22(4):304-318. *Fascinating stuff.*

Derrida, J. & Caputo, J. (1997). *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*. Fordham University Press. *I found this more difficult than I'd bargained for; good if you've got insomnia.*

Gergen, K. (1999). *An Invitation to Social Constructionism*. Sage. *A little 'evangelistic' but I don't think you'll fall asleep.*

Honeysett, M. (1999). How can we believe in God in a postmodern world? (*and several other short, thought-provoking essays, all from a conservative evangelical viewpoint - I stayed wide-eyed and wide-awake*), available on-line at <http://www.mhoneysett.freereserve.co.uk>

Lincoln, Y. & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic Enquiry*. Sage. *Heavy stuff.*

Miller, R.B. (1998). Epistemology and psychotherapy data: The unspeakable, unbearable, horrible truth. *Clinical Psychology: Science & Practice* 5(2):242-250.

Olthius, J. (1999). Dancing together in the wild spaces of love: Postmodernism, psychotherapy and the Spirit of God. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 18(2):140-152. *This is a great consideration of the benefits rather than the horrors of making use of a postmodern viewpoint.*

Richards, P.S. & Bergin, A.E. (1997). *A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy*. American Psychological Association. *Wow, big book, excellent - I enjoyed Ch 12 best: 'A theistic spiritual view of science and research methods'.*

Endnotes

(1) One of the outcomes of the European Enlightenment was to authenticate a superior alternative to knowing things traditionally because Religion or Royalty said so. This ‘modern’ idea was that the individual person could judge, evaluate, choose. Hobbes’ *Leviathan* portrayed society as made up of *individual* citizens consenting through a social contract. Reflections of the new honour given to the individual, might be things like *democracy*, *The French Revolution*, “*cogito ergo sum*”, Luther’s “*Here I stand, I can do no other*”, *nonconformity*. Epistemologically, there was a growing confidence in certainty, in being able perfectly to represent the world and its processes (in thought – *rationality*, and in experiment – *empiricism*). It has become so accepted that the world *is* made up of the things modern science shows it to be – individual atoms, and individual human beings – that it is easy to think *any reasonable person would reach the same conclusion*. The cultural imperialism of individualism, rationality and empiricism has led to a special moral value being put upon conclusions reached via them: *The Truth*. Anyone who disagrees, is ‘Other’ – and unreasonable, to boot.

(2) During the 20th century, significant doubts were cast upon the way that members of the modernist ‘knowledge class’ accumulated their ‘results’. (The unremitting casting of doubt – Genesis 3:1 – is a sort of moral hallmark of this conspiratorial school of thought.)

(2.1) Despite all façade disclaimers to the contrary, the according of Truth value only to the data of positivist science, is the deliberate suppression of the truth value of other ways of knowing. For instance, to proclaim *The cosmos is material* says Gergen (1999), marginalises the spiritual: “the spirit is an unspoken absence.” A quaint piece of illustrative script by someone called Adam Smith always tickled me – it went something like,

Look, Mummy, purple cows!

Don’t be silly, Thomas, there’s no such thing as purple cows.

Thomas then paid less and less attention to the purple cows, until he stopped noticing them altogether.

Now, the purple cows wander around freely, unseen and undetected.

Of the binary distinctions that have attracted the attention of postmodern critics, typically there is a privileged pole that is claimed by the dominant group; the suppressed pole is assigned to the Other – it’s a power thing, really: male/female; white/black; etc.

(2.2) To this system of **difference** between poles, should be added, says Derrida (1997), a second, deconstructionist, process of **deferral** to some similar text – e.g., from *bat* we defer to *flying mammal*, or *wooden club used in cricket*. But if we continue asking question after question about *flying* or *club* etc, the elucidation of one certain meaning disintegrates. If you have a taste for certainty, stop asking questions!

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