

Therapy theory and postmodernist prevarication

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In 'In search of the Holy Grail' (*therapy today*, February 2007), David Bott responds to my article 'Integration re-visited' (*therapy today*, November 2006), where I present a critique of the philosophical rationale behind his and his colleagues' practice of 'cross modality teaching at the University of Brighton', a practice in which two separate groups of person-centred and psychodynamic counsellors in training are brought together to challenge 'the traditional antipathy between person-centred and psychodynamic counselling by creating courses with shared study and points of dialogue' (Bott, et al, *therapy today*, July 2006). I am grateful for Bott's response to my article because it has helped further clarify my own thinking and because it gives me the opportunity to highlight what I believe are crucial philosophical issues regarding the field of counselling/psychotherapy, both in terms of its present condition and its further development.

Bott's story

There currently exist a large number of different and differing theories of psychotherapy, each prescribing how we are to understand what takes place in effective therapy and thus how a therapist is to conduct her-/himself. Bott describes these theories as 'enduring therapeutic narratives that have shown themselves to serve clients well over the years' (2007, p. 28); and it is on this assumption that theories are narratives (or stories) that he and his fellow lecturers engage in the specific 'activity of inviting our students to explore in depth' psychodynamic theory on the one hand and person-centred theory on the other. He and his students, says Bott, are able to approach such an exploration in the spirit of 'respectful co-existence' because 'each theory and model may have a contribution to make to the other--not least in providing a position outside of therapeutic orthodoxy from which to critique one's own approach' (2006, p. 16).

Bott finds philosophical support for this *sharing* of 'elements and points of study', in 'the postmodern position, particularly in its social constructionist variant' insofar as it 'provides a powerful antidote to the tendency towards orthodoxy that sees a useful therapeutic narrative as providing the "truth"' (2007, p. 28). This position, Bott recounts, is to be viewed in the context of 'the latest paradigm shift in psychotherapy', wherein 'attempts to establish a grand theory ['meta-narrative' in his terms, 'meta-theory' in mine] have been replaced by attention to "local knowledges"'. 'For a lucid account of the impact of these ideas on counselling and psychotherapy', declares Bott, 'readers are referred to John McLeod's excellent *Narrative and Psychotherapy*'.

Bott presents himself as at odds with me on two counts:

1. As he rightly says, I have 'set out on the quest for the Holy Grail of a meta-theory of psychotherapy'. Despite this being, according to Bott, a 'worthy endeavour', what he and his students are engaged in is the 'more modest

activity' of in-depth exploration of different therapy theories or 'stories', valuing each in its own right (p. 28).

2. Bott comments that my paper 'Integration Revisited', in which I declare my faith in the future development of an 'organismic meta-theory' of counselling and psychotherapy, 'might be considered an example of...“tabloid thinking”, where practitioners who have commitment to a particular theoretical position reject the validity of other approaches' (2007, p. 28).

In setting the scene in this fashion, I have quoted Bott freely since he considers the account of his work that I present in 'Integration re-visited' to be 'difficult to recognise' (2007, p. 28).

Postmodernist porridge

By comparison, my own position is that Bott has in part misconstrued me, but more than this that he and McLeod, by promoting counselling theories as 'narratives/stories/local knowledges' on the basis of postmodernist social constructionism, have not only fallen foul to conceptual confusion but are at root promoting a point of view that has damaging consequences for the field of psychotherapy. They have failed to comprehend how as a porridge of half-baked ideas postmodernism cooks up a fudge of relativism and nihilism; how it obscures the true state of affairs in the field of psychotherapy and how, far from providing a sound base on which to ground therapeutic practice, it provides no base at all.

Bott may be critical of postmodernism because it leads to 'moral vacuity', and on this basis claim that he and his colleagues 'do not have a “predeliction” for the postmodern', but I'm afraid this in itself is a tall story. Allow me then to 'deconstruct' the Bott-McLeod 'postmodern narrative position'¹.

The story of tall stories

In the field of psychotherapy, advocacy of 'local knowledges', of 'a narrative paradigm, at the local level'², is rooted in large measure in the linguistic philosophy of Wittgenstein and a 'postmodernist' form of literary theory espoused mainly by French authors employing convoluted prose.

Postmodernist thought in general questions the Enlightenment view of human progress: human advance on the basis of reason, as epitomised especially in the advance of scientific understanding with its development of ever more comprehensive (more meta-) theories that provide us with ever increasing knowledge of the true and real nature of things.

World wars and the holocaust, the postmodernists claim, show the flaws in this grand (meta-) theory of progress and point to the fact that this is a story spun by the dominant, most powerful culture, Western culture. Contributing to such an interpretation has been the realization that individuals in different cultures, different social contexts, inhabit different experiential worlds thanks to those worlds being social constructions, i.e. built up in terms of the concepts and categories that people in a particular culture employ by way of the medium of language.

The language we use, the stories we tell, therefore, create our reality: different stories, different language; different reality, different 'local knowledges'. If the elements of language comprise the bricks, mortar and design plans of the world in which we live, then that world is for us reality. On such a basis, the Enlightenment reality is just one linguistic edifice, one story (the story of intellectual progress), one reality among others; no better, no worse, just different from the reality of others that is constructed in different linguistic terms, a different narrative. As Vivien Burr states in *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*³, 'postmodernism...rejects the idea that the world can be understood in terms of grand theories or metanarratives and emphasizes instead the co-existence of a multiplicity and variety of situation-dependent ['equally valid'] ways of life' (pp. 12-13, 185).

It is this postmodernist '*metanarrative*' that narrative therapists hypothesize to be the underlying *true* state of affairs apropos the multiplicity of different psychotherapy theories, different 'therapeutic narratives that have shown themselves to serve clients well over the years'. Some (like myself) may prefer the Western, Enlightenment story that such a state of affairs is the precursor to the eventual construction of a comprehensive meta-theory. Whereas they, for their part, see this as one story among many stories, such as the story (or stories) told by Freud, that by Rogers, that by Ellis, etc., etc., where in inhabiting the reality spun by one story, one has no right to critique/criticise another. They are just different; just as those inhabiting reality constructed in Western, Christian terms have no right to critique and criticise the reality created in Eastern cultures, or vice versa.

Language games

Wittgenstein spoke in this regard of our possessing 'families' of language games, and indeed the metaphor of a game is a useful one in highlighting the flaws and woeful consequences of adopting the pluralistic, narrative conception of psychotherapy theories.

Imagine my reality system to be that of the game of rugby where everything I do is determined by its rules and procedures. Imagine that one day I am 'beamed down' in Startrek fashion into a game being played with a ball of the familiar oval shape and between the familiar goal posts. The first thing I notice is that all the players are wearing the 'wrong' kit, that they all have crash helmets on their heads. Next I notice that the scrum half instead of putting the ball into the scrum keeps breaking the rules by throwing the ball yards forward, and so on. From a meta-narrative point of view, I have landed in the middle of a game of American football. From my own narrative (rugby) point of view, the American football player is in a different meaning-system governed by a different local knowledge and I have no basis on which to assess whether he (few women play the game) is doing things properly or not, whether his game is better or worse than mine. His game is just different.

When Bott *assesses* my quest for a meta-theory of psychotherapy as 'a worthy endeavour', to practice what he preaches he can only do so from *within* the language game or narrative of psychodynamic therapy. What I am engaged in can only be 'worthy' in terms of my having 'made my unconscious conscious', or of having resolved my Oedipus complex, or some such psychodynamic narrative. Unless, that

is, he steps outside his 'local knowledge' and operates in terms of an overarching, meta-narrative, 'common-sense' (?) perspective by which to make assessments of theories different than his own. Just as the rugby player can only listen to a player of American football tell the story of his game and not judge whether it was conducted properly, so from a postmodernist-narrative perspective the psychodynamic and person-centred practitioners can only tell the story of their game and not evaluate the other--except in relation to meta-narrative criteria.

Unless Bott and his students step outside their respective psychodynamic and person-centred language games (their narratives) and make judgements on the basis of some implicit or explicit meta-narrative, their swapping of theory-stories will remain on the level of interesting therapy yarns told in the bar at the BACP conference.

No yardstick

For what is entailed by subscribing to the postmodernist meta-narrative that meta-narratives are to be rejected is that there are no means for judging the merit of different theories. If all therapy theories are, in Eric Hobsbawm's words, 'simply intellectual constructions', we have a situation where 'there is no clear difference between fact and fiction'⁴. What then becomes the case is that the story/theory that holds sway is that told by those with the most power. Advocating the postmodernist narrative point of view thus supports the possessors of power not its victims. This is a situation that is vividly illustrated in the domain of psychiatry where without any grand theory explaining the nature of 'madness', the narrative of those with the power holds sway.

My own argument is that the multiplicity of current theories of therapy represents the preparatory stage to the development of a unitary conceptual scheme by which to make sense of interpersonal interactions where one person or persons facilitates the easing of psychological distress in the other. Psychotherapy may be cultural in origin, but what psychotherapy theories aim at developing is a common, cross-cultural conceptual explanation of this phenomenon--Bowlby's concept of attachment being a case in point and one which postmodern narrative therapists have been desperate to fictionalize. Such a concept is at a higher level of abstraction than previous stories told by different cultures to explain interpersonal affection.

Development of such a cross-cultural, trans-theoretical 'paradigm' is a highly complex and demanding endeavour, one which because of inherent difficulties (such as resolution of the mind-body problem and explaining the nature of consciousness) has yet to be achieved. I may be wrong in hypothesizing that such a cross-cultural meta-theory can be constructed in terms of an overarching holistic/organismic/process philosophy, but I don't think I'm wrong in affirming that development of a meta-theory should be the ultimate purpose behind dialogue between therapists of different theoretical orientations. I don't make wholesale judgements between theories and engage in the kind of tabloid thinking to which Bott refers. I judge across theories with a view to developing a coherent organismic theory. On a somewhat different basis, it is the same kind of cross-theory project that Dave Mearns and Mick Cooper exemplify in their recent book *Working at Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy*⁵.

The silence of reason

Back to Reality, a book by Barbara Held, provides a more in-depth critique of postmodern narrative therapy than my brief account; while in *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*⁴ Eugene Gellner highlights postmodernism's philosophical flaws. Gellner also highlights how Wittgenstein's *Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, Darüber muss man schweigen* (That of which one cannot speak, Of that one must keep silent--preferably sung to the tune of Good King Wenceslas) characterizes the truly logical response of supporters of postmodern narrative therapy vis-à-vis advocates of alternative therapy theories. With no base from which to say anything of narratives outside one's own linguistic game, in Gellner words, 'perhaps some real genius of postmodernism will one day persuade us to admire his uniquely deep silence' (p. 37). To story-tell or not to story-tell, that is the conundrum for the postmodern narrative therapist. I, for my part, will free to exercise my powers of reasoning to assess whichever story or non-story appears to represent a truer characterization of reality.

References

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