

Gergen dropped several hints to the careful reader as to the true nature of this school of thought. The author appeared to be motivated by a concern with the reaction of scientifically oriented psychologists, whom he believed may have been put off by their interpretation that postmodernism is inherently incompatible with their worldview and work.

One has to recognize the social and historical context in which postmodernism has emerged to properly appreciate its manifestations. Early in the 20th century, the artistic and literary movement of Dada arose, inspiring later avant-garde movements and profoundly influencing communication mediums as disparate as political protest and advertising. The Dadaists did not intend to create works of art for collectors or galleries but rather to provoke the public into reacting to their activities. One aspect of Dada was the promulgation of confusion or wonder: The artists created posters containing randomly arranged letters of the alphabet, read poems simultaneously in three languages, and distributed leaflets with incomprehensible manifestos and increasingly bizarre demands (see Shipe, 2000).

Postmodernism retains aspects of these earlier works. Gergen (2001) revealed that postmodernists are concerned with philosophical speculation for the sake of intellectual discourse rather than the pursuit of truth or knowledge. In sharp contrast to scientists concerned with the reduction of uncertainty, the generation of knowledge, and the search for truth, "the postmodernist proposes that arguments about what is really real are futile" (Gergen, 2001, p. 806). Gergen's postmodern constructionism "makes no claims for the truth, objectivity, universality, or moral superiority of [even] its own position . . . postmodern critiques are themselves without foundations" (Gergen, 2001, pp. 807–808). When scientists assume that postmodernists share their goals and motivations for creating discussion, it creates a volatile misunderstanding that may be responsible for part of the defensive posture that Gergen alluded to.

Whereas science is concerned with the simplification and comprehension of information, postmodernists are interested in the elaboration of ideas and even obfuscation. The founders of Dada took great delight in their heated debates about the origin and meaning of the name *Dada*, which was probably chosen for its nonsensical repetition of syllables. Postmodernists value the luxury of the discussion of all possible ideas rather than seeking to determine veracity. A postmodernist should even appreciate the controversy and apparent embarrassment that Alan Sokal created with his parody of postmodernism (Sokal, 1996) because it led to a florid discussion of ideas (see <http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/>).

Another similarity many postmodernists share with their predecessors is a concern for societal conditions. The Dadaists were partially a product of the chaotic atmosphere during and shortly after the First World War, and they sought to critique the world around them. Once again in postmodernism, there is a dualism between the expression of abstract ideas and the concrete concern with social issues. If postmodernists adhered to their own perspective that nothing can be certain, how could they passionately analyze existing social conditions, as Gergen (2001, p. 809) stated? In the postmodernist's concern with pragmatic outcomes, there is an implicit assumption of a knowable reality that can be measured and changed through an individual's thoughts and actions. Gergen even acknowledged that postmodernists make value judgments, for example, that oppression is objectionable.

Gergen (and perhaps others) wishes to return psychology to a prescientific subset of philosophy. Freed from the constraints of empirical substantiation, theoretical psychology could generate vast new accounts and explanations of human thought and behavior. However, this may not facilitate the anticipated dialogue with psychological science. Researchers may perceive untested speculation as a luxury that cannot be afforded, considering the informational treasures already waiting to be discovered.

Just as one may be reassured when a sleight of hand trick or the solution to a riddle is revealed, one might imagine that scientists can rest easy once they know the true nature of postmodernism. However, Gergen (2001) emphasized that postmodernism has already had a major impact in the other social sciences. Friction and factions now beset these fields, and it may take years to reorient from this detour. In addition, there is a danger that the public is being adversely affected by these indulgent thought experiments. In a world where the teaching of evolution by natural selection is still controversial in some regions, the fragile scientific literacy of the general public should be carefully cultivated.

One may even interpret the rise of postmodernism in the context of an academic turf war between sections of the liberal arts and the sciences. Some might encourage the postmodern questioning of science in reaction to the increasing discrepancies in funding between departments and the erosion of the traditional core curriculum of humanities at many institutions. It is likely that psychologists and other scientists would support the preservation and vitalization of the humanities in academia if approached in a more straightforward manner.

In sum, the apparent relativism and perplexity in postmodernism results from the valuation of ideas for their own sake rather

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The Deconstruction of Constructivism

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Kenneth Gergen provided an enlightening account of postmodernism in his "Psychological Science in a Postmodern Context" (Gergen, October 2001). In his elucidation,

than for the refinement of understanding. Psychologists and other scientists may now move comfortably from isolation to understanding. Once aware of postmodernism's true nature, psychologists and other scientists will be better prepared for postmodern dialogue, although they might choose not to partake in this thought experiment. In any case, one may rest assured that postmodernists will always be eager for a good chat.

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