

## Postmodernism compared with existential bases therapies (Gestalt): Food for conversations.

### Postmodernism.

There are at least two different ways to approach this word and even to write it. One can consider postmodernism as a new epistemology (in one word). The other way is to see post-modernism as a period of time coming after the modern time (in two words). Postmodern epistemology is based on various theories: Constructivism, Social Constructivism, and Hermeneutism. The common ground of these theories is a Post-Positivist view of the world (as opposed to Positivist). This view argues that reality is a co-construction and a social construction. Reality is created and evolves in relationship. One cannot observe a phenomenon, without changing and being changed by it. Derrida (1978), a French professor of Literature writes about the effects of this new epistemology. His work suggests the idea of deconstruction. To deconstruct means to challenge any text, and by extension any truth, that has been written. To look inside and deconstruct a text, rather than explaining it.

*"A deconstruction is not a parasite but a parricide. He is a bad son demolishing the hope to repair the machine of Western Metaphysics."*  
(Miller et al. 1995, p.55.)

Postmodern ideas were introduced primarily in the fields of Literature (Derrida 1978, Lyotard, 1979, Foucault, 1972, 1980), Architecture (Jencks, 1970, 1977), Sociology (Barthes, 1967, Baudrillard, 1978), Arts (Beckett, 1965, Lichtenstein, 1974, Warhol, 1971, Ben, 1969 César, 1962, Ionesco, 1978, Kundera, 1984, Wenders, 1984) and Philosophy (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986, 1990, Ricoeur 1967, Schultz, 1964, 1967, Shotter, 1974, 1993, Rorty, 1979, 1998, Wittgenstein, 1961, Parsons, 1951). The Postmodern Art movement is essential in understanding how wide spread the Postmodern critique has become. Essential is the artist, in that he is mocking and taking a reflexive stance on art itself. An identifiable example is the Pop Art, in the mid 60's, with Warhol, Lichtenstein or Wesselmann. These provocative artists take the message of the sociologist Mac Luhan (1964) applied to

the arts "The medium is the message". They were taking the consumer materials (Mickey mouse, Campbell's soups, comic strips, Marylyn Monroe's pictures, Coca-cola, Budweiser, hamburger) to reproduce them and make them "art piece". They were using the techniques of consumer's society to turn them into art (Warhol' series). They were challenging the idea that art has to be an original creation.

*"Art was no longer a leap into the future, but a replay of quotations from the past."  
Kearney, 1988, p.25*

Postmodern thinkers have a parallel approach than the postmodern therapists: they invite people to reflect upon the way they live and think.

The field of Family Therapy does not include these ideas into its practice, before the 80's (Anderson & Goolishian 1988, 1991, 1992, Anderson 1997, 1998, De Shazer, 1982, 1985, 1988, White 1986, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1995). In the theoretical field of Psychology and the Human sciences, there were earlier seeds with Bakan, 1967, Garfinkel, 1967, Morse and Gergen, 1970, Ricoeur 1967, Schultz, 1964, 1967, Parsons, 1951, Vygotsky, 1962, and Wittgenstein 1961.

The basic ingredients of the post-modern era are a high-speed communication in constant transformation. Constant and almost exponential augmentation of bits of information is due to the High-Tec technologies (media, computers, Internet, travelling). The dramatic transformation and access to information can only affect people in their perception, and the way they make meaning (Bruner, 1986, 1990, Geertz, 1973, 1983, Gergen, 1991, Vygotsky 1962, Shotter, 1989, 1993). This fast speed information transforms our field.

We would like to do a brief overview of the evolution of these ideas in the field of Family Therapy. We shall show how models of psychotherapy have emerged from these ideas, for the readers that are not too familiar with Family Therapy and its evolution. For those who are, the next paragraph can be skipped.

### Family Therapy goes Postmodern.

First, we will do a brief overview of the evolution of the different epistemologies in the field of Family Therapy. Historically, Family Therapy came from a reaction to the psychoanalytic practice. The psychoanalytic theories did not

seem helpful to treat families as a whole. Pioneers of Family Therapy integrated new theories to pre-existing psychoanalytical ideas (Bowen, 1978).

We have to wait for the Mental Research Institute (MRI) in Palo Alto, California, to operate a major epistemological shift. With the influence of Bateson, Jackson and Weakland, the MRI group creates a paradigm shift in developing a new epistemology (circular versus linear causality, location of the problem in the relationships rather than in the person, positive and negative feedback). MRI borrowed ideas from the Cyberneticians (Theory of the Artificial Intelligence) to create their System Theory. This System Theory is still used as a reference, for most Family Therapy models nowadays.

A Family Therapist in his treatment emphasizes in the relation between different people in a family. The underlining assumption is that if change happens in the way people communicate each person will change. This assumption assumes that there are healthy or good ways to communicate. The best counter-example is the so-called "schizophrenogenic" family (Jackson, 1962, Weakland, 1965) that can, through unhealthy communication (Double Bind), enhance the risk of schizophrenia on the identified patient. We can find two sub-categories in this evolution of the System Theory: the First-Order Cybernetic and the Second Order Cybernetic.

First-order Cybernetic. In the earliest time, Family Therapists assume that they could change the way people communicate in order to create change in the system. The therapist is the expert. He intervenes either directly (reframing, asserting a role to each family member, positioning) or indirectly (paradox, tasks). Practically, it is fundamental to have at this time, all the family members present in the room, for the therapy to be effective.

Second order Cybernetic. An important shift occurs in the 80's, in Milan, Italy, where a group of therapists introduce the concept of neutrality. They affirm that the stance of the therapist had to be neutral to be effective. The therapist is inside of the system he treats, but within it, in a position of neutrality. He does not have any preference. The focus is no more confined to how people relate to each other, but on how people *think* about each other (meaning). The accent is put on the reflexive stance: how a client believes that the others think about him (circular questions, Meta-process). With this major theoretical shift, it is possible to have only one member of the family and "treat" the entire family. One family

member will inevitably affect others (Circular causality). The Second-Order Cybernetic is the theory that supports this practice.

### Postmodern Therapies and Field Theories.

In the 80's, the Narrative therapists White (1986, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1995) and Epston (1990, 1997), along with feminists such as Hoffman (1981, 1985, 1990), Penn (1994), and Papp (1983) start including the effect of bigger Systems on the Family System. Following the ideas of the biologists Maturana and Varela (1980), these authors remind the field of Family Therapy of how systems can only change from inside. Systems cannot be changed from outside. This discovery challenges the idea of the therapist as external, as an outsider. Systems are structurally determined. The Narrative Therapists within the larger field of Family Therapy claim the importance of the larger field. It is not just enough to work with the family, therapists need to deal with larger system such as: school, professional setting,

churches, legal system, gender, and culture. A therapist cannot be neutral. It is impossible for the therapist not to influence the therapy, since he is "in it". A therapist will be changed by the therapy. There is much talk about the social influence in the construction of reality. This creates a movement almost synonymous to postmodernism called: socio-constructivism.

Andersen (1987, 1990, 1991), a social psychiatrist, has a major influence in the latest development of Family Therapy. His interest is to offer new ideas to the family. Following Bateson's quote (1972), Andersen wants to create "a difference that makes a difference" for his clients. The idea is to broaden perspectives and the contextual premises of the work of the therapist. Whatever is offered to a family must be different enough to make a difference, but not too different. If it is too different the family will close. Andersen creates the avant-garde model now largely known as the "reflecting team". The reflecting team emphasizes on multiple perceptions. It lessens the idea of a compromise between the community of experts, since reflections are different, sometimes even contradictory.

The essence of postmodern therapies lies in the very movement, that encourage therapists to reflect upon their own process and to deliver their thoughts in a way that that client can hear them. The delivery of the message is crucial to postmodern therapists. As important as the content that is delivered, is "the way" ideas are delivered. Postmodern therapies do not assume that therapists

can deliver "expert" solutions, derived from objective observations. Postmodern therapists prefer to offer ideas and descriptions to clients, trusting that clients will know what will open space (a similar concept to the Organismic self-regulation in Gestalt). Postmodern Therapists work from a reflexive posture.

### Gestalt Therapy may go Postmodern.

Gestalt Therapy, since based on Existentialism, addresses the reflexive position of the therapist and the client through the concept of awareness (self-awareness, and mainly awareness of awareness). The way to access this reflexive posture is different. Postmodern therapy does not have a theory about dialogue. Postmodern therapists offers many reflections about dialogue, many of them are borrowed to theories such as Linguistic, (Vygotsky, 1962, Bahktin, 1990) and Hermeneutic (Gadamer, 1975, 1988). Practically, a Postmodern Therapist will choose to let the conversation go wherever the client would like it to go (client-oriented, non-expert posture).

The Postmodern therapist holds a responsibility in generating a type of conversation that is potentially helpful for the client. A conversation that is space opening and encourage the client's reflexivity. Postmodern Therapist always bring ideas in a *tentative* way (I was wondering if... This is my idea, what is your idea about that?).

We believe that "good" Postmodern Therapists have extensive knowledge of other therapies. These therapies inform and are seen as ideas, bits of information that can be offered to the client. Postmodern Therapists challenge the idea of **educating a client**. In the postmodern world, this is linked to the idea of being willing to limit the hierarchical position of a therapist. Gestalt Therapy needs a ground to occur, it is not uncommon for a Gestalt therapist to educate a client about the process of therapy.

We have imagined a conversation between a Gestalt Therapist and a Postmodern Family Therapist. This is what it would look like.

### **Briefly could you tell us what are the underlying ideas on which Postmodern and Gestalt therapy are based upon?**

Postmodern Therapist: Postmodern family therapies are based upon different epistemologies and theories, in different fields including Psychology, Sociology, Literature, Arts, Architecture, Physics, Biology, Cybernetics and Linguistic. The main idea that is held by the postmodern critique is that reality

does not exist *per se*, but rather is *co-constructed* in relationship with other. In other words, one can only describe a phenomenon, but one cannot know it objectively. We are interested with how a therapist delivers questions and how we constantly reflect on them, by recycling most of the previously called "theories of communications". With a deconstructive attitude, we ask what is the possible effect of this intervention, using a reflexive posture. We are attentive to the questions and metaphors we use in therapy, since language is the most important ingredient that creates reality between people.

Gestalt Therapist: Gestalt therapy is based on three major philosophies and theory: Existentialism, Phenomenology and Field theory. Gestalt therapy has a theory of personality. This means, by mean of consequences, that we have a theory of pathology and deviance. Human beings, once they are aware of their need, have a choice to satisfy their need by reaching out to the world, through contact. This is what we do best.

### **How would you define Therapy?**

Postmodern Therapist: We are change-oriented and believe in functionality. By that, we also mean that the client is ultimately the expert in knowing when to stop therapy. We believe that our clients know what is helpful for them. Our clients know that, *more* than we know it. It does not mean that we will not

challenge the client, if we disagree. This process will be done openly by sharing our thoughts with the client. In other words, the process of therapy is transparent. The goal of therapy is the goal of the client.

Gestalt Therapist: Gestalt therapy is growth oriented, which does not mean that it is not helpful. Still growth, by mean of awareness is our primary goal. Ultimately, we are the instance that defines growth, as a community of experts. The goal of therapy is to increase the client's awareness in order to support his choices and responsibility. There is an intention to help the client to achieve it. The therapist can suggest to a client to stay in therapy, if he thinks it is necessary.

### **What is your methodology?**

Postmodern Therapist: There is no such thing as a methodology, at least not a static, defined methodology. In fact, we do have a continuously evolving

methodology of our practice. This is what we do. We constantly reflect upon our method and our means. While we co-create conversations with our clients, we constantly think about the process of therapy. As we said previously:

*"Reflexivity is the fascinating ability that human has to think about and reflect upon a situation, while (previously or after) being in it. In a therapy session, any therapist can use and train this fabulous skill: reflexivity. By practicing reflexivity, the therapist is stepping outside of the process, taking a meta-view. The reflexive process implies a perpetual ability to decide to shift or to maintain the direction that the therapist is taking with a client. In the effort to co-construct potentially helpful conversations with the client, a therapist can, moment by moment, use this reflexive ability to control, assess and check the value of the process he (or she) is engaged in"*

*(Kuenzli-Monard, F. 2001, p.2)*

Is the conversation that we are co-constructing going where the clients want it to go? Is it helpful to the client? Are my questions helping the client? This process, also called deconstruction, is based on the idea that nothing stands still, everything can be challenged in order to open new possibilities or new reflections and prevent an objectification of the process of therapy. Our methodology is an attitude of reflexivity, a methodology in movement and in constant redefinition.

Gestalt Therapist: We have a methodology of dialogue. We are among the only ones, who indeed, have a functional methodology of dialogue. We believe that in order to have dialogue, we need three essential and necessary components: movement, contact at the boundaries, and the sharing of our primary experience. Without these ingredients, we might have a *"conversation about"*, but never a dialogue. Gestalt therapy as Marshall Mc Luhan (1964) might have said *is the media*. It creates the number of "mega bites" that allow our hard disk to function, if we take the metaphor of the computer. A theory of psychotherapy that is saturated

in content has more than one disadvantage. It often put the psychotherapist in the back seat, instead of being in the front seat, as he should be. It oftentimes invites the therapist to be defensive, because the only thing he knows is content. This is threatening. As you all know content is now accessible everywhere. Content is necessary, but it is not enough. Gestalt therapy has given to therapists enough ground and support, in most situation, so that they have sufficient *working memory* (availability) to be free, creative, and to access as many content, as needed. Through multiple researches, our field has been telling us, that the primary indicator for success in therapy is the therapeutic relationship. The methodology of dialogue that we created is about the therapeutic relationship. It is a major asset in our field.

### **What are the similarities between these two approaches?**

Postmodern therapist & Gestalt Therapist: We both believe in respect and curiosity. Both we emphasize on the process of therapy rather than on the content. Both of our therapies refuse to be, interpretative. We both accept and worship the uniqueness of each person's experience.

### **What are the main differences between these two approaches?**

Postmodern therapist: We can be future-oriented as opposed to the grounded-in-the-present Gestalt Therapy. We carry a strong Ericksonian influence. We put the emphasis on what promotes change. We have a theory of change that is more related to language and meaning, than the "paradoxical theory of change". We are strength-oriented. We almost never highlights the problems, we only attend to the working solutions. Rare is when we do statements in postmodern therapies, questions have a definite priority in that they generate a stance and a posture of curiosity. Our questions are open-ended. We have constructed a major repertoire of postmodern questions, we are proud of it. This repertoire is not to be used as a cookbook (à la lettre), but just as an inspiration. We value whatever promotes differences and new possibilities.

Gestalt therapist: We focus on what gets in the way of awareness. We are Present-Oriented. We use statements as we used questions. The stylistic use of words is less important to us. We promote awareness and "choicefulness". We can even confront the client, if we need to. Gestalt Therapy is broader than language, since it welcomes and highlights expressions of the body (such as breathing and shaking, sensation of cold warmth, constriction...). We welcome in our session the whole being of a person as we welcome our whole being.

### Gestalt and Postmodernism: A generative encounter?

The few Gestalt Therapists that have never *formally* heard of the postmodern movement might be quite surprised reading this paper. They might perceive an important number of similarities with their work. Indeed, both theoretical roots of Gestalt and Postmodern ideas are clearly compatible. Sometimes they are blurred, even interlaced. Postmodernism has infiltrated the field of psychotherapy and

different "churches of psychotherapy", since the 1970. Because of its solid influence (huge numbers of publications), the postmodern critique infiltrate domains as different as Arts, Architecture, Artificial Intelligence, Sociology, and Literature, but also Physics (quantum physics), and Biology.

When we said at the beginning of our article that Postmodernism *is* an Era. This is exactly what we meant. Its influence is so broad, that it cannot be ignored. Nowadays, we find postmodern influence in "sister" domains such as management, organizational work, and research. The Postmodern critique is everywhere. It is infiltrating discourses that are too sure of them, and questioning the status of this very discourse.

Critiques toward postmodern has often been that it brought nothing new to the world. It is both true and false. It is partly true in that postmodernism is a critique (as opposed to a theory). Its intend is not to provide content, but to question the ideas as they come from Positivism, Structuralism and the Modern Era (as a meta-theory). It is wrong to affirm that Postmodernism brings nothing new. It brought a tremendous paradigm shift to the modernity (epistemological shift). So powerful indeed, that it might take years to understand this non-linear and reflexive way of thinking. The field of Research for example has been distressed and intrigued by the postmodern critique (mainly Qualitative Research). The postmodern critique created a revolution in the world of science.

What might be confusing for some readers, is that this critique, because of its major influence, infiltrated slowly the culture and even the "therapeutic style", without being named, nor naming its source. Postmodern critique was percolating idea everywhere. It was in "L' Air du Temps".

One major mistake has been for some "postmodern extremists" to throw away the baby with the bath water. Especially in the field of therapy, the postmodern cover became an alibi to do nothing and everything, and to disregard our roots and inheritance from the field of psychotherapy. There was not much behind the cover.

*Dogmatism and Relativism are two sides of the same coin.*

*(Bahktin, 1990, p.26)*

Most knowledge that we inherited in the field of psychotherapy was simply negated by these extremists, just for the sake of the critique. This critique became self-involved and sterile. The critique was seduced by its own self-mirroring; losing sight of the object it was supposed to approach. This is not what taught the postmodern authors. We should be curious, not iconoclast. We should continue to critique and question, but have respect for this powerful body of knowledge, that exists and that *constructed* us. Postmodern teach us to stay on the edge. It reminds us that nothing stands still. It reminds us that questions are the ultimate drive of knowledge.

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**We represent in this schema the parallel growth of the two movements of Gestalt and Family Therapy, as evidenced by the number and the quality of publications. Our repeated intent is that this page creates... food for conversations.**

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