

Poststructuralism and therapy – what’s it all about?

co-ordinated by
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Narrative therapy is very influenced by poststructuralist ideas and yet, for many of us, it can be quite a challenge to actually understand what poststructuralism is! Personally, we have been excited, challenged, stretched and sometimes exhausted by trying to understand poststructuralism and what it might mean for our practice as therapists.

While this is a complex topic, this is only a brief piece of writing. We’ve simply focused on a few areas and tried to offer some answers to commonly asked questions. We are not meaning to imply that these are the correct or only answers, we’re just hoping that you’ll find them helpful. We’ve certainly learnt a lot in putting them together.

Before we start we’d like to mention that in order to explain poststructuralism we’ve had to try and show how it differs from structuralism. We are drawing these distinctions simply because it’s the only way we can explain the differences. We also want to mention that in no way is it our intention to dishonour or disrespect those who prefer to engage with structuralist ways of working. We all engage with ideas and therapeutic practices differently. We all create unique ways of doing therapy. Here we’re just trying to explain how we understand poststructuralist ideas and how they are shaping our work.

1) What is structuralism – how has it influenced the therapy world?

As we understand it, there came a time, during what is sometimes referred to as the ‘Scientific Revolution’, when various people in Europe began to believe that the universe and everything within it could be comprehended by discovering the laws (structures) governing all physical phenomena. The underlying assumption was that there are fundamental, unchanging structures which govern everything from the cosmos to the behaviour of minute particles. Methods of scientific investigation were developed in order to learn about these structures. It was accepted that scientific objective exploration could provide reliable, valid and universally applicable knowledge of the physical world. This approach led to some enormously significant developments in the physical sciences and the inventions and technologies that spread from this have transformed the world in many ways.

Not surprisingly, these ‘structuralist’ ideas then went on to influence the social sciences, and people in a whole range of disciplines (anthropology, linguistics, sociology, psychology, family therapy) began to look for the underlying internal ‘structures’ of people, families, societies, culture, language etc. One of the effects of the ‘structuralist’

perspective in the social sciences was to foster the understanding that people can be studied in the same way that objects are studied. This involved seeing people as separate, discrete units, unrelated to others. Structuralism also implied that it was possible to study other people impartially and objectively. It was these ways of looking at the world that had led to so many 'discoveries' in the physical sciences. These 'structuralist' ideas became very popular. In fact, particularly in the professions, they circled the world and there are now few places where structuralist ideas have not taken hold.

Structuralist ideas certainly influenced the therapy world. Within psychology, the influence of structuralist ideas led many of us to believe that if we wanted to know 'the truth' about a person we had to peel away 'the layers' of the self. Structuralism implied that deep down, somewhere, we could find 'the inner self' and therefore 'the truth' of the person's identity. These ideas led many in the therapy world to believe that people's 'behaviour' was due to the influence of these fundamental structures. Therapists and others began to develop a whole range of ways of interpreting people's behaviour as if it was in some way related to the workings of this inner-self, inner-psyche, or inner-nature. When someone was acting in desirable ways, it might be seen that this behaviour was due to an inner-self that was working well. When someone was acting in less desirable ways, it might be seen that this was due to some disorder, deficit or distortion in their inner-self, in their being.

The influence of structuralism can still be seen throughout the therapy world. Structuralism has encouraged therapists and other professionals to believe that it is our role to know the emotional and psychological 'truths' about those we are working with, that it's our role to be able to interpret / diagnose the behaviour displayed as in some way related to the workings of the person's inner-self/nature/psyche, and that it's then our role to develop a treatment of some description for the person concerned.

Obviously, how therapists and psychologists do all of this varies greatly! All we've done here is to try to explain what we believe structuralism to mean and to mention some general trends in relation to how it has influenced the field of therapy.

2) What is poststructuralism and how is it relevant to the therapy world?

Poststructuralism is a way of thinking that is questioning some of the assumptions of structuralism. Its

origins can be traced to various French philosophers, such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, and has subsequently been influencing all the different fields in which structuralist ways of thinking have taken hold.

To try and explain some of the differences between structuralism and poststructuralism we've created a table (see page 87). On the left hand column we've described some of the assumptions of structuralism, in the middle we've described some of the assumptions of poststructuralism, and in the right column we've included some of the invitations that we believe poststructuralist thought is making to us as therapists.

Once again, therapists are engaging with poststructuralist ideas in a wide variety of ways. In this table we've just tried to map out some of the differences between structuralism and poststructuralism and some of the invitations we believe poststructuralism is making to the therapy world.

3) Is poststructuralism only influencing therapy or is it a wider phenomenon?

Poststructuralism is a very widespread phenomenon! Since the 1960s there have been exponential developments in poststructuralist inquiry in a range of different fields including critical philosophy, cultural anthropology, linguistics, literary theory and sociology. Related developments are also occurring in the fields of art, education, architecture, as well as in mathematics and physics.

4) How does feminism fit with poststructuralism?

Just as poststructuralism questions the taken-for-granted, feminism questions and challenges dominant ways of understanding gender relationships and the effects of patriarchy on people's lives. There are many different forms of feminism or, indeed, many feminisms. Some forms of feminism are based on structuralist understandings and promote ideas of, for example, unique women's natures and/or essences. Other forms of feminism, poststructuralist or non-structuralist feminisms, have questioned the idea of 'a feminine self' or a 'masculine self' and have instead pointed to the existence of many femininities and masculinities. They have also traced the histories of how women's ways of being have been created in specific contexts of culture, class, race, sexuality and other relations of power.

Structuralism thinks...	Poststructuralism thinks...	Poststructuralist thought invites us as therapists to...
The aim of inquiry is to search for 'deep structures' or 'essential truths' about people.	It's important to draw attention to the real effects of the process of looking for 'deep structures' or 'essential truths'. One of these effects in the health professions has been the development of various norms and ideas about what people's lives <i>should</i> look like in order to be <i>healthy</i> .	Assist people (where relevant) to stop measuring their lives according to what certain social norms say life <i>should</i> be about.
Such a search for 'deep structures' or 'essential truths' can be objective.	What we are looking for, what we believe and where we come from will shape both how we look and what we'll find.	Question therapist 'objectivity', 'expertise' and 'practices of interpretation'.
It is 'deep structure' (eg. inner-self) that shapes life.	Language and the use of language plays a vital role in shaping life. What people say and do and how we relate to each other shapes life. The meanings that we give to the events in our lives, and how we organise these into stories about ourselves and others, shapes life.	Question taken-for-granted ideas and assumptions that might be sustained through the language we are using in therapy. Consider how stories and rituals and other performative aspects are relevant to understanding the process of therapy.
Our ideas, problems, qualities, are linked to some internal self.	Our ideas, problems, qualities are all products of culture and history. They have been created over time and in particular contexts.	Externalise ideas, problems and qualities in therapy conversations.
Our identities are fixed and essential - to be found within our inner-selves.	Our identities are constantly created in relationship with others, with institutions and with broader relations of power.	Take seriously how every therapy conversation will shape the identity (to some extent) of both the person consulting the therapist and the therapist. Think through how we can involve appreciative witnesses to the work that is occurring in the therapy room. Develop accountability practices to check out the real effects of therapy conversations on those who consult with us.
Our identities are always consistent.	Our identities are made up, and continually being made up, of many (sometimes contradictory) stories.	Consider how the stories of our lives shape our lives and how therapy might enable the rich description of preferred stories of identity.

5) Is poststructuralism always hard to understand? If so, why?

Poststructuralism isn't always hard to understand, but sometimes it is! This is for lots of reasons. Some of the ideas have come from philosophers and it can be a bit of a stretch to engage with their ways of writing and to understand all the implications of what they are trying to convey. Some of these writers originally wrote in languages other than English (mainly French) and so their writings have had to be translated and this hasn't necessarily helped with the ease of reading. But another reason why poststructuralist ideas are sometimes hard to understand is because we're not used to them. Structuralist ways of thinking have been very common for about 300 years and so poststructuralism can seem very unfamiliar and at times confusing. What's more, for many of us, it is only through being introduced to poststructuralism that we come to think about structuralism. Learning about both these frameworks for understanding our social world, and the differences between them, can be challenging. As with anything different than what we're used to, understanding poststructuralism involves stretching our minds to work out what we agree with, what we disagree with and to come up with our own understandings.

6) What do you find most helpful about poststructuralist ideas in relation to therapy practices?

Here are some of the things that a number of therapists are finding most helpful about poststructuralist ideas:

- The understanding that our identities are not fixed, that they're always in the process of being created is helping me understand differently what is happening in the therapy room. It makes me think that we as therapists are in the business of assisting people in the creation and re-creation of their identities. I like this idea.
- The idea of identity being something that's created in relationship with others, rather than something internal, means I'm trying now to always create an audience to witness the changes that someone is making in their life. Whether this is actually having people come into the room, or us catching others up with the developments through writing, I am always busily thinking about who would be good to witness this new development!

- Acknowledging that our identities are socially created means I am now more on the look out for how our lives are influenced by history, culture, gender, sexuality, class and other broader relations of power.
- I think I've always been a therapist who was sensitive to those who come to see me and I've always tried to hear what difference the therapy has been making to their lives. Now, I am even more determined to check things out in the therapy room. I don't think I fully understand poststructuralism, but I like the idea that I can't know 'the truth' about other people's identities. That really fits for me, it always has. Now I just have a different way of understanding why.
- Through engaging with poststructuralist ideas, I am coming to realise that my understandings are never objective, neutral or value-free. This is encouraging me to examine my own perspectives and to prevent imposing my ideas on others. It's keeping me on my toes and I think this is a good thing!
- Poststructuralist ideas are helping me to be on the look out for times, places, events, ways of being that don't fit 'the normal'. I'm more likely to celebrate these now. Of course, I'm not referring to things that are in anyway hurtful to others here, but just the quirks of life. I am ready now to notice the different ways that people negotiate their lives and to explore the history of this and what it means to people. I find these really interesting conversations.

Last words

Well, that's it for now! We hope these questions and answers are helpful. It is a big topic but we also find it really exciting. Poststructuralist ideas seem to open up new possibilities for creative forms of listening to and working with people. We look forward to hearing where your explorations of these ideas take you.

About these questions and answers

We have compiled these answers to commonly asked questions about poststructuralism and therapy in response to

regular requests. Leonie Simmons, with assistance from other people working at Dulwich Centre Publications, generated the questions and sent them out to a range of practitioners. A number of conversations were also held here at Dulwich Centre. The responses were combined and a draft document was then circulated widely for further discussion and refinement.

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Further Reading

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