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Confronting Oppression not Enhancing Functioning: The Role of Social Workers within Postmodern Practice

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This article represents a philosophical hermeneutic endeavor to explore the meaning of oppression as it expresses itself within social work practices based in both modern and postmodern thought. Practices based within the Modern Discourse, drawing from an authority base of scientific expertise, exhibit a disconnect between the goal of enhancing functioning and social work values and concerns such as confronting oppression; this disconnect must be bridged by the social worker. Practices based within the Postmodern Discourse are founded upon the notion of confronting oppressive narratives as their main goal; social work values are an essential component in this process.

Key words: *Oppression, discourse, narrative, modern, postmodern*

Social workers have always embraced a concern for the effects of oppression on the clients that we serve. The likes of Jane Addams, Florence Kelly, and Mary McDowell represent heroic figures from our distant past squarely confronting issues of oppression. Yet with the turn towards professionalization in the early 20th century and the embrace of science as our new base of authority, the social reform impulse of social work became muted over the decades that followed (Fisher,

1994; Trattner, 1999). Yet our profession is still sensitive to the debilitating influences of oppression and we still seek the goal of incorporating our understanding of it within our scientific approach to practice. To reliably reach this goal, one must answer the question, "what is the nature of oppression within this context?" Recently, postmodern practices—such as narrative therapy, the strengths perspective, and brief solution-focused therapy—speak of narratives in society operating in an oppressive manner. What is the nature of oppression within this context?

This paper seeks to answer these two questions. On the surface, this is a very simple purpose: it is a philosophical hermeneutic endeavor to define "oppression" within the paradigms of the Modern Discourse and Postmodern Discourse. The term "discourse" is used here as elaborated by Foucault (1991/1975, 1994/1963): Briefly, a discourse is a linguistic structure (i.e. an alignment of signifiers) that acts as a template for ordering empirical knowledge in such a way as to conform to particular truth claims, and in so doing, facilitates the production of knowledge. It determines the possibilities of what questions are to be asked in the search for truth, and consequently, the answers at which one arrives. Beyond simple adherence to a particular philosophical stance, a discourse is also the product of cultural and historical forces of a particular era.

Yet, an endeavor to define "oppression" within each of these discourses necessitates one to examine the assumptions (i.e. elements of the discourse) underlying these definitions. Each offers starkly different views on the causality underlying human action. Each offers starkly different views concerning how we view our existence in the world. And each offers starkly different views on our conceptions of the self. These differences speak directly to the distinctly different knowledge base that supports each, and consequently, where social workers base their authority as professionals: scientific expertise for modern practices, a critical consciousness for postmodern practices. These insights contain profound implications for the goals of social work and of social work education.

Taking the position that oppression is linked to a suppression of freedom, this paper will first turn toward a definition of freedom. As the concern here is social work, and more

broadly the social sciences to which it is allied, definitions of freedom and oppression for both the Modern and Postmodern Discourses will be chosen for their affiliation and application to this concern.

Modern Discourse on Freedom

Within the Modern Discourse, Kant (1997/1785) offers the most compelling definition of freedom as it relates to the social sciences (all italics are original emphasis):

> As will is a kind of causality of living beings so far as they are rational, *freedom* would be that property of this causality by which it can be effective independent of external causes *determining* it, just as *natural necessity* is the property of the causality of all non-rational beings, by which they are determined in their activity by the influence of external causes. (p. 52)

In short, freedom—as expressed within the form of free will—is the human quality which allows us to rise above the complete entanglement in causal determinism (i.e. natural necessity) that is the fate of all other creatures and things in our universe. Such a definition of freedom is grounded upon particular fundamental assumptions of the Modern Discourse in terms of the nature of causality, our existence in the world, and conceptions of the self.

The first of these concerns the nature of causality. The Modern Discourse gets its notion of causality from Newton and his laws of rational mechanics. It boils down to the formula of action–reaction, or cause and effect. While originally conceived to describe the motion of physical objects, it quickly grew to encompass all actions in the universe; or conversely, it might be said that all actions in the universe (including human actions) underwent a reduction to a conception of the motion of objects.

As outlined by Newton, each action causes an equal and opposite reaction. This reaction in turn becomes an action itself which triggers its own reaction, and so on. Thus a matrix of unending and unbroken chains of action-reaction stretches back all the way to the beginning of the universe. This is the

natural necessity, or causal determinism, to which Kant relegates non-rational beings and objects. Understanding strands of this action–reaction chain (in the form of natural laws) or even tiny bits of it (in the form of hypotheses) enables one to accurately predict potential reactions from causes and thus control outcomes by initiating a particular action. For a human being, initiating a particular action falls within the province of free will.

Human beings possess reason, it is an attribute that separates us from all other living creatures, and thus, is one of the main defining features of what it means to be human. Freedom is a quality of reason and is exercised in the form of free will. As outlined by Kant (1997/1785) above, free will acts as an initiator of causes (i.e. actions) and is not determined by prior causes. Free will allows us to act upon our environment and is what excuses us from being wholly determined by it. Thus the very definitions of "freedom" and "free will" are derived from the particular notion of causality just described.

The next Modern Discourse fundamental assumption upon which Kant's (1997/1785) definition of freedom is grounded is that as human beings we exist in a natural world—that is, a world that owes its complete existence to natural forces in the universe (it could be argued, and has been, that these forces were set in motion by an omnipotent being—but this is a debate not relevant to the current discussion). Human beings are merely passengers of this world. Successful interaction arises from unlocking the secrets of these natural forces at work (by adopting the stance of a neutral observer) and then manipulating them to one's benefit. This assumption, much contested in recent social work literature (Saleebey, 1994; Witkin, 2001) as well as across disciplines (Bruner, 1986; Gergen, 2006), is also described as the stance that there exists only one True Reality: one Reality in the sense that there is only one physical existence to the universe and one Truth in the sense that there are only one set of natural forces defining this existence. Such an assumption supports and breathes life into the assumption of causality taken from Newton as described above: it is a necessary precondition for the above conception of causality to arise.

The Postmodern Discourse's assumptions about reality

are quite different and will be elaborated more fully later, but a quick contrast may serve as a useful illustration. The Postmodern Discourse does not deny the physical existence of the universe (social scientists seek to understand actual persons, events, phenomena, etc., not completely imaginary ones). However, a postmodernist views reality as comprising more than just existence, it is also comprised of an essence. In our attempts to understand the existence of things (via language)—this very act of understanding grants them an essence—and thus reality is constructed from the combination of this existence and essence.

Getting back to the Modernist stance on Reality, as human beings, we exist alongside other living things and objects within the same Reality. We all fall under the same set of natural laws that guide the workings of the universe. This is why, for example, the possibility arises in the Modern Discourse for us to examine how an ecological system works in nature and then be able to transfer that understanding to explain how humans interact with their environment in the form of the person-in-environment model. In fact, most normative human behavior theories actively seek to ground their validity via analogies to theories formerly established in the natural sciences (Cohen, 1994). We can also target specific human phenomena and—in the form of evidence-based practice—develop treatment procedures that purport to accurately predict successful outcomes (in the form of enhanced functioning).

Free will allows one the possibility to successfully adapt to various non-beneficial situations via initiating new actions that will produce the desired reactions. For this to happen, one must have knowledge of the action-reaction process that is of concern. This is where the expertise of the social worker comes in; one either provides this knowledge to the client or stimulates its awareness within the client. This then bolsters the clients' ability to successfully employ their free will towards achieving the desired outcomes. This process is often described in social work literature as successful adaptation or coping strategies (Ambrosino, Heffernan, Shuttlesworth, & Ambrosino, 2008; Germain & Gitterman; 1980; Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, & Larsen, 2005). Social workers also possess expertise in linking the client to resources necessary to

accomplish the desired actions (more will be elaborated upon this point in the sections on "power" and "oppression").

The final fundamental assumption supporting Kant's definition of freedom concerns the nature of the self. The self is seen as housing reason, and thus in turn, freedom as free will. Free will is an attribute that is possessed by the self. It is a categorical defining feature of what it means to be human.

A bit of a paradox opens up when this elaboration of free will is applied to the social work helping situation. We wish clients to employ their free will, but we ask them to subsume it under our authority—an authority derived from our expertise regarding the action–reaction processes determining the helping situation. In short, we develop treatment plans and expect clients to follow them. As reason is seen as the wellspring of free will, for those client populations whose reasoning ability is somehow impaired (e.g. individuals suffering from mental illness, or children) the temptation to subsume their free will under our authority takes on even greater strength. The imbalance of power that exists in such a relationship and the social control elements that may arise from it are concerns that have been noted for quite some time in the social work literature (Csiernik, 1998; Demsar & Urh, 2005; Greenwood, 1955; Leonard, 1965; McLaughlin, 2002; Toren, 1972)

Postmodern Discourse on Freedom

As the Postmodern Discourse emphasizes the central role of language and an embrace of relativity, a definition of freedom is needed that is built upon these principles. The philosopher Martin Heidegger (2002/1930) offers such a definition (all italics are original emphasis):

> Human freedom now no longer means freedom as a property of man [sic.], but *man* as a *possibility of freedom*. Human freedom is the freedom that breaks through in man and takes him up unto itself, thus making man possible. If freedom is the ground of the possibility of existence, the root of being and time and thus the ground of the possibility of understanding being in its whole breadth and fullness, then man, as grounded in

> his existence upon and *in* this freedom, is the site where beings in the whole become revealed, i.e., he is that particular being *through which* beings as such *announce* themselves. (pp. 93-94)

As was the case with Kant's definition, Heidegger's definition is grounded upon fundamental assumptions—in his case, assumptions of the Postmodern Discourse in terms of the nature of causality, our existence in the world, and conceptions of the self. Elaborating these assumptions will serve to further elucidate Heidegger's conception of freedom.

The first notable difference from Kant is that Heidegger speaks of possibilities—possibilities of one's unique existence—rather than speaking to traditional notions of causality. This is due to Heidegger's embrace of Aristotelian thought; most notably, his embrace of the concept of mimesis as an explanation for human action. Mimesis incorporates the notion that one creates an identity for oneself—one's unique existence—and that one is able to project this identity into the future via imagining how one would like to be: this in turn, guides one's actions in the present (Aristotle 1996/c. 335 b.c.). Heidegger elaborates this concept through his notion of being: "Da-sein is constantly out beyond himself [sic], throwing himself forward into what is not, disclosing it as a possibility" (King, 2001, p. 36).

Since this explanation for human action is grounded upon identity-formation and meaning-making, it may be described as an axiological-based causality. Axiology is the branch of philosophy that concerns itself with questions of meaning and value. As noted previously, a postmodernist views reality as consisting of both existence and essence. An axiological-based causality concerns itself with the formation of this essence. As the two are linked, a change in essence can result in a change in existence. Notably different than Kant's assumption, mimesis is a causality that specifically targets *human* action. In addition, free will—rather than fighting against the impersonal forces of causality—is an integral component to this axiological-based causality. One's identity, one's essence and existence, is made possible by free will pursuing possibilities; this pursuit guides one's actions.

The next assumption upon which Heidegger's definition of freedom rests is that we exist in a socially constructed world. According to Heidegger, we cannot interact with things in the world without at the same time trying to understand them—hence we give meaning to things (things may be physical objects, organisms, events, and concepts). This meaning-giving ability (accomplished through language) is what gives things their essence. Hence the reality of things is constructed via our attempts to understand them. In addition, this meaning-giving takes place in the public sphere in which contested meanings struggle for dominance: the outcome represents the particular cultural/historical milieu in which one lives.

This public sphere of meaning-making occurs across a number of dimensions: from society at large, to the culture of one's community, one's family, and one's friends. These intersections of the public sphere represented by one's unique existence are what comprise one's socially constructed world. The key dynamic at work here is that the construction of one's world is directly related to one's identity. Thus, as free will makes one's identity possible (via pursuing possibilities), it in turn, serves to construct one's world. The goal of the social worker becomes that of understanding the client's world, and thus understanding the client's unique being (i.e. existence and essence). Then it is to assist the clients in meaning-giving actions (i.e. assist them in their employment of free-will) by helping them to examine the possibilities of being open to them: This is like acting as editor to their authorship. From this process is where change in actions arises.

The final assumption grounding Heidegger's definition of freedom concerns the nature of the self. With Kant, the self is a universal and categorical feature of one's existence as human: we can point to any person and state that person is human because he or she has a self which possesses reason and free will. By contrast, Heidegger emphasizes how one's being is a result of a culmination of unique possibilities. Heidegger (1962/1927) employs the term "Da-sein" to capture the non-categorical particularity of this being. It is through understanding Da-sein, the unique being of the person, that we are able to truly understand the individual. This is in contrast to understanding *things* in our world, for example, a cow. We can point

to any cow, and through employing categorical understanding, come to know all cows. According to Heidegger (1962/1927), to treat persons in this way is to treat persons as things.

For Da-sein then, freedom is not an attribute that is possessed; rather, freedom is a modality of being. Da-sein is continually self-creating through one's experience of freedom. This experience of freedom is what allows Da-sein to live authentically (Heidegger, 2002/1930). Anything that impinges upon this freedom, impinges upon the possibilities of Da-sein.

In translating these assumptions to the social work helping situation, the functioning of the individual is not directly targeted. Rather the primary focus is to assist Da-sein (categorically known as the client) to fully explore the unique possibilities open to one's being. As free will is the modality for exploring these unique possibilities, a partnership is created in which the client assumes a prominent role in directing treatment—choosing from the unique possibilities open to him or her. It should be emphasized that these unique possibilities refer to one's being, one's identity: particular ends or events are important in so far as they reflect this being.

As these possibilities are explored, then through the process of mimesis a change in the client's actions will occur which will then serve to address any problems in functioning. As way of illustration, this coincides with the strengths perspective motto of "putting problems in their place" (Weick & Chamberlain, 1997). The helping situation is not defined as enhancing functioning or goodness-of-fit; rather, it's defined as *confronting oppression*: countering elements that undercut Da-sein's experience of freedom to explore one's unique possibilities. Hence within the helping situation of the Postmodern Discourse, it is essential to understand notions of power and oppression.

Modern Discourse on Power and Oppression

Definitions of power within the Modern Discourse can trace their lineage as far back as Hobbes (1962/1651). Since then, notables such as Marx (1976/1867) and C. Wright Mills (1956) have added their own elaborations on power. Current

modernist debates on power center upon agency models (Ball, 1978; Dahl, 1968) versus community or pluralist models (Russell, 1938; Weber, 1978; Wrong, 1979). Yet despite their various differences, all of the above approaches on power fit within the Modern Discourse, and thus, share some fundamental characteristics.

First, power is seen as a resource that is possessed (just as freedom is something possessed by Reason—this is indicative of the objectification that takes place within an action–reaction causality based upon the movement of objects). As a resource, power can exist as money, fame, political influence, charisma, information, physical strength, etc. Power is possessed by individuals, or it can exist structurally and is possessed by organizations. The exercise of power falls within the scope of an action–reaction causality, "Just as a billiard ball colliding with another ball could be said to cause the motion of the response of the latter, so the power of an A could be measured through a response of a B" (Clegg, 1993, p. 19).

Thus in the realm of human action, power is what enables free will to initiate an action. Power and free will combine to form personal autonomy—whether this autonomy is defined as coherentist (Bratman, 1979; Frankfurt, 1988), reasons-responsive (Berofsky, 1995; Wolf, 1990), responsiveness to reasoning (Meyers, 1987; Young, 1986), or incompatibilist (Fischer, 1994; Kane, 1996)—personal autonomy relies upon a conception of the self as possessing reason as defined by Kant (1997/1785), and hence, a categorical understanding of what it means to be human. It is quite possible and common that one's desire to initiate an action does not come into conflict with another's desire (e.g. walking across the room); in such a case, one simply employs the necessary power to initiate the action. However, as we exist in a society with others, it may also be the case that one's desire to initiate an action comes into conflict with another's, in which case, it comes down to who is able to exert more power to make their desired action occur. This dynamic—which involves constraining another's personal autonomy—contains the possibility for oppression to occur.

What are the non-oppressive limitations to one's personal autonomy within a Modernist Discourse? First there are natural limitations. For example, if my desire is to flap my

arms and fly, I will not be able to do so no matter the force behind my free will. Since we all live in a natural world, one's free will cannot create an event or reality that lies beyond the natural laws that make up our universe. Next, in society there are many instances of competition—where one's free will is contested with another's (e.g. sports)—yet while the outcome results in foiling the actions of another, this is not viewed as oppression. This is because the underlying structure is considered fair and equal for all the individuals involved.

Oppressive structures arise in society when a group of individuals (e.g. whites, males, heterosexuals, upper class, etc.) who hold a substantial amount of power use their power to create "rules of the game" that are not equal and fair, but rather advance their interests over that of minority groups. This results in the constraint of personal autonomy among members of minority groups through limiting their access to resources or benefits (Barusch, 2006).

Such a view rests upon a social contract metaphor (Hobbes, 1962/1651; Rawls, 1971; Rousseau 1997/1762) for understanding society. Within this metaphor, society is made up of rational agents who create this contract. Hence, as was the case for power, the definition of oppression within the Modern Discourse rests upon a categorical understanding of what it means to be human. For example, taking a historical figure such as Martin Luther King Jr. and viewing him categorically as a human being as well as an African-American, we can say that he suffered from oppression in his lifetime because he was not allowed access to resources and benefits open to the rational agents of society (i.e. human beings) who were White.

As was the case when exploring the definition of freedom, this definition of oppression has quite a bit of a disconnect as it relates to the current dominant stance of the social work helping situation. The helping situation is commonly defined as that of enhancing functioning or goodness-of-fit of the client (Ambrosino et al., 2008; Germain & Gitterman, 1980; Hepworth et al., 2005). This typically involves a diagnosis of problems (i.e. tracing the causes that have lead to the current problematic functioning or lack of fit) and then the development of a treatment plan (i.e. actions that need to be initiated to enhance functioning or goodness-of-fit) (Ambrosino

et al., 2008; Hepworth et al., 2005). The adoption of a study-diagnosis-treatment paradigm is what served to unify the various practices of social work by the 1950s so that a standardized curriculum could be developed for schools of social work (Konopka, 1958; Leighninger, 1987; Schwartz, 1959). Hence, first group work, and then community organizing, fell under the sway of the study-diagnosis-treatment paradigm (Carter, 1958; Konopka, 1958; Pumphrey & Pumphrey, 1961). Within this formulation, the focus regarding the employment of the client's free will is that of free will as an initiator of actions. Concerns of oppression may arise, but oppression is not a fundamental element of this formulation.

So while social work concerns itself with issues such as empowerment, respecting the dignity and worth of the individual, the importance of human relationships, and respect for diversity to name but a few, these concerns do not naturally arise from the study-diagnosis-treatment paradigm that has arisen within the Modern Discourse. Rather these concerns arise from our code of ethics, practice wisdom, and value base and must be imported into the core paradigm (study-diagnosis-treatment) that has been chosen to define the practice of social work.

To illustrate this point, let us examine two examples of concerns of individual functioning that would fall within the scope of social work concerns: Vanessa, a pregnant teenager who has decided to keep her baby, and Nick, a six-year-old suffering from encopresis. In understanding Vanessa categorically as a teenager, pregnancy and the raising of a child pose a number of challenges in the areas of maturity, economic resources, and coping with stress to name a few. A possible treatment plan could contain elements such as parenting classes, an emotional support group, linkages to both pre- and postnatal health services, and linkages to welfare entitlements. By accessing the above resources, Vanessa would increase her ability to initiate actions to improve her and her baby's functioning.

In understanding Nick categorically as a six-year-old, encopresis is a clear and distinct deviation from an expected norm of functioning. A treatment plan for Nick might consist of individual therapy, family therapy, and/or some form of behavioral-modification therapy. The goal of therapy would be

to increase the clients' access to the resource of insight (into the action–reaction linkages affecting Nick's situation) so that Nick and his parents would be able to initiate actions that would restore Nick to normal functioning and mediate the negative impacts of his current dysfunction on other systems of functioning.

Easily noted within the above two anecdotes is that there is no mention of oppression. The point is not that an analysis of oppression is incapable of being inserted into the above social work helping situations; but simply, it is quite possible to not include an analysis of oppression. Within the study-diagnosis-treatment formulation of social work located within the Modern Discourse, only the barest and cleanest definition of personal autonomy is essential—free will linked with the resources it needs to initiate an action. Oppression may be added to one's analysis of the helping situation; however, it must be imported in by the social worker. It is not an essential component of the study-diagnosis-treatment formulation, hence, the disconnect that must be bridged by the social worker.

This disconnect exists to an even greater degree when it comes to social work values such as respecting the dignity and worth of the individual and recognizing the importance of human relationships. These values neither denotatively or connotatively connect in any manner to Kant's (1997/1785) definition of free will as it is employed in the study-diagnosis-treatment formulation of social work: They do not automatically arise out of the study-diagnosis-treatment approach (this explains the concerns noted earlier that social workers are susceptible to becoming agents of social control); or in other words, it is quite possible to employ a study-diagnosis-treatment approach to interventions and not employ social work values. Social work values must be imported by the social worker, who must create a bridge to connect the two.

Postmodern Discourse on Power and Oppression

Foucault (1980) offers the fullest elaboration on power within a Postmodern Discourse with his concept of the power–knowledge dynamic. This should not be confused with a modernist understanding of knowledge as a resource which enables one to act in the world. Foucault's conception removes the

location of power from the possession of individual agents and places it within the workings of language via the apparatus of the Discourse (Foucault 1991/1975; 1994/1963). Heidegger (1962/1927) expresses this dynamic with his notion of "they." As individuals we all contribute to "they," but the "they" is not comprised of a number of specific individuals; rather, "they" represents the discursive elements socially constructed by everyone in society.

Power gets it expression through these discursive elements—in the form of narratives—that circulate within the particular discourse. Various elements coalesce and begin to reinforce each other in our attempts to understand our world, and thus, in one's process of socially constructing one's world. In this process, reified structures arise and thus non-discursive elements begin to contribute to the discourse. This can be illustrated, for example, by examining the concept of "private property" (Bruner, 1986). By our society (in its present historical and cultural context) understanding the world in this way, other concepts such as ownership, trespass, and inheritance get reinforced. In addition, reified concepts in the form of practical structures arise from this coalescing of concepts, for "By so endowing them with *social* (original emphasis) reality, we give them a practical embodiment as well. So there is not only 'real property' but real estate agents, mortgage companies, and even protest novels like *the Grapes of Wrath*" (Bruner, 1986, p. 134).

Hence in this formulation, power does not act repressively within a societal context—that is, being used by some to advance their interests over others thereby undercutting the other's freedom to act—rather, power is constitutive in nature. Due to this coalescing of narratives, particular ways of understanding our world begin to dominate; hence particular social constructions begin to dominate. This in turn creates a horizon of understanding in which Da-sein operates. On one level, this horizon of understanding is beneficial: it allows one to intuitively navigate one's world (e.g. one is not perplexed upon meeting a real estate agent). However, when this horizon of understanding begins to restrict the possibilities of Da-sein's being, then it begins to undercut the process of freedom operating through Da-sein, and hence oppression occurs.

Just as was the case in the Modern Discourse, some inherent limitations occur in this construction process. While it is quite possible to create the existence of something at the same time as granting it an essence (e.g. a fictional novel), typically, the construction process involves granting an essence to things whose existences have already been established. The concerns of personal and social welfare deal with such tasks as granting an essence to things whose existences have already intruded upon one's life.

As noted earlier, Da-sein refers to one's uniqueness as an individual—one's identity within the context of one's constructed world. So oppression occurs when discursive elements of the dominant discourse—narratives, or master narratives as labeled by some (Brubaker & Wright, 2006; Sands & Krumer-Nevo, 2006)—begin to restrict the possibilities of Da-sein. In plainer language, master narratives begin to define the individual in such a way that one's essence, or worth, is lessened. As long as Da-sein remains within one's current horizon of understanding, freedom is undercut and this oppression will continue. However freedom, in terms of one's free will, has the ability to construct counter narratives to the oppressive master narratives, and thus move Da-sein beyond one's current horizon of understanding by constructing a new social reality or world.

Such an understanding of oppression does not rest upon a categorical understanding of the individual, but rather upon a particular understanding of the individual as a unique entity: Da-sein. In short, it is an existential oppression. If we turn once again to Martin Luther King, Jr. as an example, but this time understand him as Da-sein, we can conclude that he was not oppressed by master narratives in society: The master narratives concerning African-Americans were not able to define him and lessen his worth. Rather, Martin Luther King, Jr. was able to move beyond the limited horizon created by these narratives; and through the use of free will and the critical consciousness it engendered, he was able to develop counter-stories to these master narratives. Such a critical consciousness is what enabled him to attack the reified structures created by the above narratives that continued to exist and served to deny him and others opportunities of a more material nature. In

other words, it was necessary for him to successfully challenge the essence of the oppression of his time for him to achieve an effective onslaught on the existence of the oppression (i.e. material oppression) of his time.

This analysis does not seek to diminish the significance of the level of suffering by those experiencing oppression at a material level. Rather, two points are being argued. First, freeing oneself from existential oppression is a necessary precondition for spawning a critical consciousness (Freire, 2000/1970), and hence, achieving empowerment. This critical consciousness is what enables one to act effectively towards seeking change in the issues and problems one confronts. Heidegger (1962/1927) describes this process as living authentically. It is based within an understanding of human action springing from the process of mimesis. This dynamic has direct relevance to the social work helping situation. The second point is the following: Despite the fact that Martin Luther King, Jr. suffered from a material form of oppression, he did not allow this fact to diminish his greatness as an individual (i.e. Da-sein). This point has direct relevance when working with clients who have suffered greatly from a traumatic event (which might include material oppression); see White (2005) for particularly apt illustrations of this.

At first glance, a postmodern view of oppression as being existential may seem to paint oppression as being a-political. Attention to the *essence* of oppression does not deny the *existence* of oppression; the two are inextricably linked as comprising the reality of oppression. Hence, this view does not absolve from responsibility those who perpetrate material oppression—they are actors who consciously choose to deny power and resources to individuals based upon arbitrary categories. This view advances the notion that the essence of this oppression is already determined before the actors even enter the stage. However, these actors contribute towards perpetrating the existence of oppression. It is an immoral act chosen by these individuals. It is merely the expression or form that the oppression will take that is determined by the essence of the historical and cultural time period. Furthermore, a focus upon the essence of the oppression of our times also opens up the possibility of describing oppression along finer gradations:

such as the movement by recent authors to describe "privilege" as an unconscious contribution to the oppression of our times (Lucal, 1996; Rothenburg, 2005; Wildman, Armstrong, Davis, & Grillo, 1996); or how a policy such as social security (e.g. old age insurance) contains both racist and sexist elements due to its conception of justice being wed to a private insurance model (Barusch, 2006).

When turning to the social work helping situation, social work practices that are inspired by postmodern thought—such as the strengths perspective, narrative therapy, and brief solution-focused therapy—ground themselves upon the following: future-oriented thinking reflective of mimesis; the stance of the client as expert, hence an emphasis upon the uniqueness of the individual within one's socially constructed world; and the goal of helping the client move beyond their current horizon of understanding by developing goals and counter-stories that help spawn a critical consciousness (De Shazer et al., 2007; Saleebey, 2006; White & Epston, 1990). Thus for these practices, the social work helping situation takes on a definition of targeting and confronting existential oppression as the means to promote desired change.

This process can be illustrated using the two examples provided earlier: Nick, a 6 year old suffering from encopresis, and Vanessa, a pregnant teenager who has decided to keep her baby. As you will recall, within the Modern Discourse the treatment interventions arrived at for Nick and Vanessa did not need to include an analysis of oppression. Within the Postmodern Discourse, an analysis of oppression is an essential element in the development of treatment interventions.

White (White & Epston, 1990) provides the case study of Nick in his book on narrative therapy. This case study provides a good illustration of how a master narrative that usually is supportive becomes oppressive due to the unique situation of the client. The master narrative oppressing Nick is that "good boys" do not soil their pants when they are six years old (at a categorical level, this is an expected norm of society with which few would disagree). Additionally, the master narrative oppressing Nick's parents is that "effective parents" are able to teach their child proper control. When these clients approach White, their identities are being dominated by these narratives:

Nick sees himself as "broken" and undeserving of his parent's love; Nick's parents see themselves as "failures," disempowered to affect the situation.

To better understand the following application of narrative therapy to the case study of Nick, a brief digression into defining narratives might be helpful. A narrative contains both constituent events and supplementary events (Abbott, 2002). Constituent events ("nuclei") are the bare-bones events of the story; they are all necessary to the story to make the story what it is (in the case study above of Nick, these would be his incidents of soiling his pants). Supplementary events ("catalyzers") are not necessary for the story's existence, yet their inclusion dramatically affects the overall meaning of the narrative. Postmodern practices focus upon questioning supplementary events that undercut the client's self-worth (e.g. various failures of Nick and his parents) and in turn focus upon the inclusion of supplementary events (e.g. strengths, successes) that seek to promote the client's self-worth, reinforce his or her sense of personal agency, and thus draw upon the causal mechanism of mimesis to engender a change in the client's actions.

The first step White (White & Epston, 1990) takes is to help Nick and his parents build counter-stories to the above narratives by getting them to redefine what it means to be a "good boy" and an "effective parent." He helps these clients accomplish this by getting them to externalize the problem of encopresis—in effect, excising it from each one's identity. Via this mechanism, the encopresis no longer defines the "true" Nick; rather it becomes a foe that "true" Nick battles against—a foe seeking to dominate his identity by influencing his actions. Successes in resisting this influence, however small, are highlighted and form the seeds of his counter-story. This is accomplished by combining the constitutive elements of his narrative (soiling his pants) with consciously chosen supplementary events (his successes in resisting this urge) to build a story line positively reinforcing his identity as a good boy (one who fights against these urges). He becomes a hero valiantly struggling against the foe of encopresis.

The critical consciousness that arises within Nick via this process enables him to build upon these successes—thus through the causal mechanism of mimesis, Nick is able to

change his behavior and steadily decrease the frequency of his "incidents" to the point where they eventually disappear altogether. The parents do the same, seeking to resist its negative influence upon their actions as parents. Important to the success of the above approach is that Nick is not viewed categorically as "a six-year-old" and his parents are not viewed categorically as "parents of a six-year-old." The categorical views of Nick ("normal" six-year-olds do not soil their pants) and his parents ("effective" parents correctly potty-train their children) are what is exerting oppression upon entering treatment. By viewing each as Da-sein, the definition of a "good" boy and "good" parents can arise out of their particular context.

When examining the helping situation of Vanessa as outlined by Brubaker and Wright (2006), we see the same dynamic concerning a master narrative. A master narrative that categorically few in our present society would argue against—"good, responsible teenagers" do not become pregnant—serves to undercut Vanessa's worth. Again, the social worker begins by helping Vanessa build a counter-story to redefine what it means to be a "good, responsible teenager" by helping her embrace her new identity: a "good, responsible teenager" is one who is able to be a "good, responsible mother." A "good, responsible mother" reflects what Vanessa would like to be (hence her actions will be guided by mimesis); and it is incumbent upon the social worker to believe in the client, and hence, reinforce this belief in Vanessa. As Brubaker and Wright (2006) demonstrate, since Vanessa's counter-story represents a social construction (and hence is negotiated in the public sphere), the success of this counter-story is greatly facilitated when it arises within the context of a caring relationship (with the social worker, family, friends, etc.); through a caring relationship, the people in Vanessa's life communicate to Vanessa, "I see you this way, too" (i.e. as a good mother).

Next, the social worker assists Vanessa in building towards her new identity by providing her with linkages to services that reinforce her identity as a "good, responsible mother." These could include such things as parenting classes, an emotional support group, linkages to both pre- and postnatal health services, and linkages to welfare entitlements. As noted, the services offered to Nick (family therapy) and Vanessa remain

similar between the Modern and Postmodern approaches. This bears repeating: The services offered to Nick and Vanessa remain similar between the Modern and Postmodern approaches; however, it requires a huge paradigm shift in consciousness on the part of the social worker to move between the two. When we view Vanessa and Nick categorically, narratives such as "good boys don't soil their pants" and "good teenagers don't become pregnant" seem innocuous, merely reflecting the reality of a desired norm. It is only when we view Nick and Vanessa as Da-Sein that the oppressive nature of these narratives become apparent.

Hence, this approach has at its core that of confronting existential oppression. Thus an analysis of oppression is fundamental to this approach (as contrasted to practices based within the Modern Discourse, where it is not). In addition, this approach also relies heavily upon social work values such as respecting the dignity and worth of the individual and maintaining the importance of human relationships. As explained above, a caring relationship is essential in helping the client to build a counter-story. Consequently, this integrally supports free will as defined by Heidegger (2002/1930) as it helps Dasein (i.e. the client) move beyond the current horizon of understanding and reach new possibilities of existence. In addition, this approach requires that one view the client as a unique individual (i.e. Da-sein) rather than categorically. By viewing the client as a unique individual and by confronting existential oppression which seeks to undercut his or her worth, one must necessarily respect the dignity and worth of the client.

Conclusion

The most telling feature of the above analysis is that social work services themselves may easily remain little changed between practices supported by the Modern Discourse and those supported by the Postmodern Discourse. The huge difference lies in the consciousness of the social worker. The social work practices supported by the Modern Discourse require the social worker to adopt a techno-rational consciousness. Such a consciousness is necessary to view the world as a series of action–reaction processes, and consequently, manipulate the

action–reaction process to the client's benefit. Furthermore, this has implications for how we conceive of our profession's base of authority (i.e. how we present our knowledge as professionals). The techno-rational consciousness—in the form of scientific expertise—becomes the social work authority base, as this knowledge helps one understand the action–reaction processes taking place that influence human behavior. Thus, this in turn calls for an education heavily grounded upon the social sciences.

The social work practices supported by the Postmodern Discourse require the social worker to adopt a critical consciousness. This critical consciousness views each client as creating his or her own world and views human action as springing from the social construction process—hence, an understanding of how power influences the construction process for the client is vital. A much different authority base arises from this paradigm. This critical consciousness—in the form understanding existential oppression—becomes the social work authority base, as this knowledge is necessary to view and open possibilities for the client, the pursuit of which underlies human action. Consequently, this calls for an education with greater emphasis upon the humanities, such as philosophy, history, and cultural studies.

Fluency in only one of the above discourses leads to much misunderstanding and mistrust of practices based within the other. Not surprisingly, they are often viewed as lacking a sound authority base. As our broader society is still heavily grounded within the Modern Discourse, such critiques most commonly occur by those firmly rooted within our Modern Discourse (as embracing a Postmodern Discourse requires one to move beyond an initial anchoring in the Modern Discourse). It is telling that Saleebey's (2006) book outlining the strengths perspective, now in its fourth edition, still contains a chapter addressing how its practices are misinterpreted.

Practices based within postmodern thought represent more than just a current fad. They represent a fundamental shift in consciousness on how we view ourselves in the world. Just as the strong embrace of science by our profession in the early part of the 20th century required a shift in consciousness, so too does this recent challenge to social work. The shift to

science expanded our profession's authority base from being based solely upon moral authority (where we still ground our social work values) to include a base of authority in scientific expertise as well. While the two sometimes clashed, few would argue against the claim that this move strengthened our profession—as evidenced by the continued growth of our profession throughout the century.

Today's challenge for social work educational programs is to fully embrace the new shift in consciousness presented by postmodern thought. Doing so expands our authority base to a third area—critical consciousness. While such an embrace may cause clashes with our grounding in scientific expertise, these clashes represent a healthy debate. In the end, such a move will not only strengthen our profession, but it will also serve to further distinguish its legitimacy from allied disciplines in the social sciences.

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