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Postmodern Influence in Family Therapy Research: Reflections of Graduate Students

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Abstract

Postmodernism has influenced family therapy in significant ways, from clinical work to family therapy research. Little has been written, however, on how to conduct postmodern research in a manner reflecting marriage and family therapy inquiries. The present study seeks to investigate doctoral students understanding of postmodern family therapy research. Using collaborative language theory and collaborative inquiry, students participated in a dialogue to answer several questions: a) what is postmodernism, b) what is postmodern research, c) what does postmodern research look like, and d) what does this mean for the field of marriage and family therapy. Students indicated that postmodern research is characterized by its flexibility in methods, translates into a new way of conducting research, and creates a natural bridge between family therapy researchers and clinicians.

Keywords

Postmodernism, Family Therapy, Graduate Students, and Family Therapy Research

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Postmodernism has influenced family therapy in significant ways, from clinical work to family therapy research. Little has been written, however, on how to conduct postmodern research in a manner reflecting marriage and family therapy inquiries. The present study seeks to investigate doctoral students' understanding of postmodern family therapy research. Using collaborative language theory and collaborative inquiry, students participated in a dialogue to answer several questions: a) what is postmodernism, b) what is postmodern research, c) what does postmodern research look like, and d) what does this mean for the field of marriage and family therapy. Students indicated that postmodern research is characterized by its flexibility in methods, translates into a "new way" of conducting research, and creates a natural bridge between family therapy researchers and clinicians. Key words: Postmodernism, Family Therapy, Graduate Students, and Family Therapy Research

Postmodernism is the concept of rejecting the idea of the self as a processor of true characteristics and accepting a plurality of voices Gergen (1991). It is the deconstruction of what one believes to be true to make way for multiple realities (Fruggeri, 1992). Postmodernism asserts that "privileged positions" of observation do not exist, and that all writing reflects the personal perspective and the philosophy of the author (Doherty, 1999). It is a philosophical position positing that reality is constructed within belief systems, and that the observer is an integral part in what is observed (Becvar & Becvar, 2000; Kvale, 1992).

Just as society at large experienced a change from modern to postmodern thinking, marriage and family therapy succumbed to the same transformation (Cheal, 1991; Doherty, 1999; Doherty, Boss, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993; Gergen & McNamee, 1992). Postmodernism gives family therapists the flexibility to recognize the variety of ways in which their clients view the world (Moules, 2000). It helps to create an understanding that the world does not function in an absolute way (Doherty, 1999) and

influences the way therapists view, understand, and work with families (Lucas, 1985). Family therapists began integrating postmodernism into their work in the late 1980s (McFadyen, 1997). Four family therapy approaches have been identified as most influenced by postmodernism, including the Milan group, collaborative language system, solution-focused therapy, and narrative therapy (Mills & Sprenkle, 1995). Marriage and family therapy training programs have also included aspects of postmodernism in course work (Wieling, Nergetti, Stokes, Kimball, Christensen, & Bryan, 2001).

Mills and Sprenkle (1995) attribute the postmodern evolution in family therapy to changes in American societal ideas about the definition of family. For example, two-parent families are no longer viewed as the "normal" family form. Therapists must recognize multiple perspectives as families change with higher rates of divorce, gay and lesbians, cohabitating families, and biracial couples (Mills & Sprenkle, 1995).

Postmodern family therapy research primarily has been tied to qualitative methodology (Doherty, 1999). Qualitative research has incorporated aspects of social constructionism, constructivism, and hermeneutics (Gehart, Ratliff, & Lyle, 2001). Postmodernism has also been incorporated into family therapy methods as evidenced by the use of discourse analysis (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990). Qualitative methods in research integrated with postmodern ideas appear to make a good fit. Yet postmodernism, which espouses pluralism and acceptance of multiple realities, cannot be restricted to particular method or theory. The idea that there is one best or a "right" way to understand families is mire similar to modernism (Doherty, 1999). Postmodernism creates a time of complexity and ambiguity where there are competing versions of inquiry (MacIntyre, 1990). As a result of this complexity and ambiguity, there are few clear guidelines or rules for scholars and researchers.

Several professions such as education, medicine, and social work, have begun to use postmodern qualitative research as a valid form of data in their respective fields. Health care issues that are not addressed in specific, predetermined terms can be explored through use of postmodern approaches (Cheek, 1999, 2000), which challenge the hierarchal relationship between research and practice (Rolfe, 2000). Self reflexivity concerning power analysis and insistence of difference allow postmodern feminism to contribute to social work (Rossiter, 2000) using a wide range of research methods (Trinder, 2000). In many fields, postmodern approaches to research are becoming more universally utilized.

Postmodern approaches are also being used in the field of family therapy. Wieling et al. (2001) conducted a study of marriage and family therapy doctoral students to define postmodernism in relation to marriage and family therapy theory, practice, and research. The students reported that they experienced difficulty in applying postmodern principles to clinical areas because existing postmodern theories lacked concrete guidelines. The challenge faced by students in understanding postmodernism may contribute to a discomfort in applying postmodernism to family therapy research. Wieling et al. call for more articles to continue the dialogue about postmodernism. Doherty (1999) also challenges scholars to try to understand how postmodernism influences the family therapy field in its creativity, self-reflection, and pluralistic scholarship.

In response to the calls for more discussion regarding postmodernism in family therapy, the present study investigates how graduate students understand and view postmodernism's impact on family therapy research. This study was informed by

collaborative language inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The aim of the study was to use postmodern-informed methodology to socially construct the meaning of postmodern research in family therapy among doctoral students. The present investigation acknowledges the complexity of student therapist and researcher beliefs as well as exploring how the student beliefs impact research and clinical work.

To reveal our personal paradigms and beliefs, the authors present statements reflective of their positions below:

> *Kristen:* We each have an inquiry paradigm, regardless how we define it, which guides us. Embedded within that is theory and methodology. I think methodological approaches and use of theory can change, but it seems that our primary inquiry paradigm remains. Clients and suicide certainly fit into our values around our work as both researchers and clinicians, and on a larger scale I think the way in which we approach addressing this issue fits into our paradigm.

> *Jennifer:* I believe that no matter what research we are doing qualitative or quantitative that the research and its questions are guided by our values. Those values might be about being objective and not letting our values interfere with the results but these then determine the type of methods that are used and how the data is collected and analyzed.

> *Katherine:* I believe the research question, as opposed to my philosophy, will guide my research methodology. For example, I tend to ask questions that are best answered in quantitative means. Doherty (1999) discusses the advanced nature of quantitative methods. The assumption here is that there are things that can be controlled statistically. A postmodernist would find this perspective limiting. I, however, believe I would find it a "good fit." Does this mean that I am a positivist at heart? Is my question really driving my research, or is my philosophy driving my questions, and thereby driving research methodology?

As evidenced by the varying positions of the authors, it is clear that as students struggle with postmodernism and its implications for research and practice, more questions emerge (Wieling et al., 2001). Some of the questions that emerge, including those in the Weiling et al. study, are:

1) What is postmodernism?

2) What is postmodern research?

3) What does postmodern research look like?

4) What does this mean for the field of marriage and family therapy?

The authors responded to these prompts through a conversation. Responses included deconstructing the notion of postmodernism, qualitative research, and research in family therapy. They then invited reflection from other graduate students to provide multiple perspectives on these prompts.

Method

Design

For the present investigation, the authors used principles of collaborative language theory (Anderson, 1997) because it is postmodern in nature and consistent with the research question. Collaborative inquiry is a type of participatory study in which the researchers encourage other participants to test the researchers' beliefs and assumptions (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). In collaborative inquiry, participants actively interpret data and are co-equal with the researchers. The researchers reflect on their own behavior while inviting others to do so (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Collaborative inquiry relates to the collaborative language paradigm in several ways. First, in both approaches, a traditional expert/researcher takes a one-down position. Secondly, both collaborative language theory and collaborative inquiry find a great deal of their power in the voices of the participants.

This study was adapted from a proposal written for a class project. After receiving feedback from the instructor, we submitted the proposal to the Institutional Review Board for approval. Once approval was granted, we collected data in two phases, promoting a collaborative inquiry approach. This type of approach provided two distinct opportunities for reflection. The first opportunity was the conversation of the authors. The second opportunity was the reflections of class members, who commented on the authors reflections.

Participants

Group one

Group One consisted of the authors. At the time of the study, we were female doctoral students in a marriage and family therapy program enrolled in a qualitative research class. Due to the nature of the self-reflective component as well as consistency with postmodern perspective, we felt it was important for the readers to view us as present, active participants, willing to share our personal perceptions related to these issues. Through each of the reflective pieces that follow, we each share our personal assumptions.

> *Kristen:* My journey to my current status as a second-year doctoral student in marriage and family therapy has brought me many challenges and forced me to reexamine the way in which I view people and the way we operate in the world. I believe personal paradigm guides the way we see the world, and helps us to look at therapy and research through a certain lens. In my own self-reflection and continued self-of-the-therapist work, I

am better able to use my Self in the therapy process. My current challenge has been to seek out the appropriate research methods that best "fit" with who I am as a person. I want to study relationships from a context that suits who I am, reflecting my beliefs and values.

Feminist theory is as relevant as systems theory in my therapeutic and research orientations. There has been literature published on feminism influencing both research and practice, which has allowed me to explore the nature of this methodology. I am by nature, a strong collaborator. I believe that I have been trained well and bring a certain expertise to my work, but in no way consider myself to be an expert on how another person lives. I consider myself to be somewhat of a moderate post modernist. Take the case of a battered woman for example, the values society has placed on violence is "bad." Values are socially constructed, but there is a reality in that the woman is being physically harmed and her body is bruised. Her abused body is a reality. The underlying question being asked relates to how these theories that I ascribe to in therapy influence research methodology, or do they? Feminist literature has made references explaining how to conduct feminist research. Qualitative research methods best fit with my outlook-- I want to know how meaning is constructed so I can work to understand and help co-construct new meaning by applying research findings to practice. I want to be able to connect my therapy and research theories and methodology, and have found this to be difficult due to the lack of connection made in the field and in training.

Katherine: My research background is highly quantitative. I began my research career in undergraduate in the field of cognitive psychology, conducting research, writing, and presenting research. During my undergraduate career, I was a member of a faculty-led research group. The goal of this group was learning to conduct research from beginning to end. As part of the group, faculty directed students to do the statistics of the projects by hand, and then go around in the group and share solutions. In my graduate career, I have built on this experience through teaching the SPSS portion of the research methods in psychology class for undergraduates, as well as establishing a background in latent variable modeling and measurement theory. Through all of this training, one thing has caught my attention as being critical when determining what test to use when exploring a phenomenon. I firmly believe the question of interest in the research should guide the methodology.

However, as quantitative and objective as I believe I am as a researcher, I am intrigued by the values and beliefs that I hold and the manner in which they influence my research in family therapy. How do I live with the dichotomy of being a researcher and whose methods are driven by the question being asked, yet see a variety of questions and truths in front of me? Further, what do I make of the analysis? How do I generalize to multiple realities? It is interest in seeking answers to these

questions that has driven my interest in postmodern family therapy research.

Jennifer: I have been thinking about my sudden interest in postmodernism. I have found myself concentrating on the "big picture" asking myself how my personal philosophy influences my research or does it. As a student I get caught up in trying to just understand how all the parts are connected and it is easy to forget that all the sum of the parts create a whole. Consequently, I have been struggling with how or if this "big picture" has been subconsciously influencing all that I do. School has formed much of my experience. The last 6 years of my life have revolved around earning my degree in marriage and family therapy. My training has changed my views, beliefs, and my philosophy of life. My masters training taught me to be reflective. To ask myself "how do I define who I am?" and "how does this influence how I conduct therapy?" As I think back upon my training, I realize now that I was trained to think like a postmodernist. I was taught to look at how I construct myself in relation to others and how does my construction of self influence my therapy.

Yet, as a researcher I have just begun to explore and discover who I am. Here at Tech for the last 3 years I have been opened up to a new world, a world of possibilities. Curiosity drives my research thus; I have not been caught up in the debate of positive or construction paradigm wars. In fact, when I conducted my thesis, which was really my first experience with formal research, I used mix-methods. This thirst for knowledge dictates the methods that will help me get there or does it?

My struggle with how my paradigm dictates what research questions I ask or how I do research is a debate I also see within our field. This debate is one that I wish I had been exposed to sooner because the more we know about ourselves the better researchers therapist, and scholars we will become.

Group two

Criterion sampling was used to gain participants for the second phase. In criterion sampling, individuals who meet a certain standard are selected for participation (Patton, 2001). In this study, the standard for participation was enrollment in a graduate level qualitative research with families course. Group Two participants were invited to participate but not obligated to do so. The eight participants were five women and three men. They were provided an informed consent and treated in accordance with the guidelines presented by the Institutional Review Board.

Procedure

One specific deviation from established practice was the medium through which the conversations were held. As opposed to several conversations in one place, we held

the conversations via a classroom discussion board over the Internet. The use of the Internet as a qualitative research tool is gaining momentum (Mann & Stewart, 2000).

One reason the use of Internet technology has gained momentum is the low cost (Schaefer & Dillman, 1998) and convenience (Foster, 1994) of the Internet as a means to collect data. While for some this maybe a means to an end, the Internet also offers many other advantages, particularly for those interested in conducting collaborative research. The Internet has a context of non-coercive and anti-hierarchical dialogue (Selwyn & Robson, 1995), lending itself to collaborate research. Spender (1995) also argues that the concepts of gender, race, and sexuality do not necessarily apply since there is no face-to-face contact, allowing participants more freedom in their responses. Thach (1995) states discussion boards and list-serves provide more choice for participants than other conventional types of research. Participants have several statements to which to respond rather than the researcher's lone view. Using the Internet and discussion boards as qualitative methods can provide more freedom to participants, thus facilitating an equalitarian relationship between the researchers and participants.

In keeping with the goal of this research, we used an online discussion board to conduct the study. An online discussion board is an increasingly common way for students in a class to engage in conversation with one another between class meetings. The discussion boards can be accessed by any participant in a class or by different groups of participants, as determined by the instructor. Two discussion board forums were necessary. The first discussion board forum was the setting for Group One's conversation regarding postmodern influence on family therapy methodology; the second discussion board forum provided a format for the Group Two reflexive component.

The deviation of using the Internet discussion board as opposed to interviews in another setting is theoretically consistent with the collaborative inquiry in that using an Internet discussion board allowed a great deal of flexibility and reflexivity between both groups of participants. Each participant had opportunities for equal amounts of participation. Another manner in which the Internet was collaborative is that it provides data in a visible form to each of the participants, allowing them to revisit and re-analyze just as we, the researchers, did.

Phase one conversations

In Phase One, the Group One participants discussed the ways postmodernism influences family therapy research. The research questions were influenced by the literature regarding postmodernism and qualitative family therapy research (e.g., Doherty, 1999). Group One members identified two designated times to respond to the prompts during an Internet discussion board format. Each conversation lasted three hours. The research questions on Phase One were the following:

- What does feminist informed family therapy research look like?

- How can postmodern qualitative research inform family therapy research?

- What can qualitative researchers learn from clinicians?

- What can clinicians learn from qualitative researchers?

- How does one's personal philosophy influence one's particular research methodology?

At the designated times, Group One members logged onto the discussion board and responded to the prompts as well as responded to each other's responses in a conversational format. At the conclusion of each of the three-hour time blocks, they ended the conversations and agreed to meet at a later time to analyze themes.

Phase one data analysis

Group One participants collected the quotes from the conversations and, through cutting and pasting, organized them into categories following each question. For example, under the "What can clinicians learn from qualitative researcher?" theme, quotes written in response to this question were listed. Group One participants then conducted a meeting to analyze the data and identify themes from the conversation. Group One members reviewed the list of quotes and themes generated by the prompts on the Internet discussion board and identified themes through a constant comparative method as introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Finally, they agreed on the prompts/themes to present to the Group Two participants.

Phase two conversations

In Phase Two, Group One participants presented themes and selected transcript sections the Group Two participants to provide a reflexive, collaborative component. Group One posted prompts (themes) for discussion on an Internet discussion board. The prompts to which the Group Two participants responded can be found in the Appendix. Group Two participants were instructed to respond to the themes presented. The participants responded to the categories by adding comments, themes, provoking interpretations, and further questions for discussion with other Group Two participants.

Phase two data analysis

The Group One participants met to review the data from the students and to analyze the themes from the conversations held by the students. They collected the quotes from the student discussion and identified themes through constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Group One members reached agreement as to what themes and categories emerged from the data. The categories with supporting themes are listed in the findings section.

Rigor in methodology and data analysis was established in a variety of ways, per suggestions provided by Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002). Credibility was achieved through triangulating Phase One responses with Phase Two responses. Transferability was achieved through the rich, thick description and presentation of findings. Dependability was attained through our implementation of a code-recode strategy and through triangulating responses. Confirmability was achieved through including

reflexivity in the findings, meaning that we explored how the findings would impact us as students, impact us as researchers, and those individuals receiving these findings. Consistent with collaborative language inquiry, we continually reflected on our comments. At the same time, we were inviting others into the conversations and offered the opportunity for them, too, to reflect on our comments and the comments of others.

Findings

Three coding categories emerged from the data. They included characteristics of postmodernism, "a new way," and implications. Several themes emerged from the data under each category and are described below.

Characteristics of Postmodernism

The participants in this study identified three themes related to their definition of postmodernism: pluralism, the role of objectivity vs. subjectivity, and how knowledge is socially constructed.

Pluralism

Doherty (1999) identifies pluralism as a defining factor in postmodernism. Wieling et al. (2001) state postmodernism reflects a lifestyle and is regarded as a philosophy influencing personal ideology that "emphasizes pluralism, and local narrative, skepticism and reexamination, deconstruction and hermeneutics." (p. 527). Similar to the present study, the Wieling et al. study stemmed from a conversation that took place in a graduate level class exploring postmodernism in family therapy. Wieling et al. ask "Would you please share with us your understanding of postmodernism?" (p. 529). A theme identified under this category was that postmodernism consisted of shared meanings.

In the present study, pluralism was also identified by participants in both phases as being critical to postmodernism through its flexibility and allowance for change. One student highlighted this theme when he stated:

> Postmodernism can make an important contribution to society, not only by interpreting the reflection of realities in policy and research, but also by providing guidelines to integrate separate experiences and to strengthen insight that help explore the truth.

The freedom postmodernism allows researchers and clinicians is viewed by student as a significant contribution in both family therapy research and larger society. The flexibility of postmodernism allows therapists and researchers to consider multiple perspectives, enhancing researchers' and clinicians' explorations of meaning.

Postmodernism encourages the acknowledgment of multiple realities through exploring them in a variety of contexts and uncovering the variety of meanings, considering individuals within context (Lax, 1992). Participants in the present study also believed the consideration of context an important characteristic of postmodernism. The

following statement from a student participant evidences the recognition of such: "…[the] postmodern approach is dependent more on the contextual experience provided for the participants than a preconstructed (however loose) methodology." Researchers should be aware of the context in which the individuals exist rather than depending on a standard, one-size-fits-all methodology to guide their research.

Objectivity vs. subjectivity

Objectivity and subjectivity are often discussed in the context of postmodernism. Postmodernists share beliefs and knowledge about how the world works as opposed to understanding only one objective position (Lax, 1992). Hoffman (1992) states: "[Social constructionists] charge that we cannot ever really know what 'social reality' is, and that therefore traditional scientific research, with its tests and statistics and probability quotients is a pious hope if not a downright lie." (p. 9). Participants in the present study identified the theme of objectivity and subjectivity as being critical to the definition of postmodernism. As one student stated:

> Even beyond theory, it seems like modernism and postmodernism are ways we approach this work in general. As researchers and practitioners, do we believe in objectivity? Are we experts? Do we believe in absolute truth? Is there flexibility in that thinking? Does everything exist as a social construction?

Other participants applied the theme of objectivity and subjectivity to the idea of a family. For example, one participant stated: "Is it assumed that postmodernists would agree on what constitutes a family?" Similarly, postmodernism was also associated with the relativity of knowledge and truth. Kristen commented, "The truth is relative." in describing a personal interpretation of postmodernism. What one individual, researcher, or family defines as "truth" can and often does vary from one family or individual to another.

Social construction of knowledge

Postmodernism moves from understanding broad knowledge and emphasized the creation of knowledge (Doherty, 1999). Postmodern thinking focuses on narratives and texts (Lax, 1992). Social constructionists see concepts and ideas being generated through language-exchange – ideas and interpretations about the world come out of conversation (Hoffman, 1992). The social construction of knowledge appeared to be associated with postmodernism for the participants in the present study. Some participants, though they agreed that language was a component of postmodernism, challenged postmodernists to examine their own language in regard to postmodernism. One student stated:

> I find myself readily agreeing with the postmodern notion of using language that doesn't distance you from your audience. I just think postmodern researchers should stand meta to their own process a bit more than they do. I think that postmodern researchers (at least many of the

prominent ones) often use language and introduce concepts that will not be digested by anyone other than graduate students having philosophical discussions in their classes. And those who do digest and retain it may find the philosophical goals of postmodernism (not be an expert, co-construct rather than direct, etc.) a little confusing.

Language appears to be an important component in understanding postmodernism; language might be one vehicle in which the family therapy researchers can connect the bridge with the families they study, and accomplishing this through an acute awareness of the language the family uses, but also the language the researchers themselves use.

What is Postmodern Research?

Several themes emerged in trying to determine what constitutes postmodern research. These themes included the role of the researcher, qualitative methods, quantitative methods, feminist research, flexibility of methodology, and a new way.

Role of the researcher

The decisions and judgments concerning a study reflect the philosophical orientation of the researcher, thus influencing and guide an investigation whether stated or not (Hoshmand & Martin, 1995; Krasner & Houts, 1984). The role of the researcher provides guidance and judgments about the way method will influence the investigation, as illustrated by Kristen when she stated: "Beyond theory…postmodernism are ways we approach [research] in general. As researchers and practitioners, do we believe in objectivity? Are we experts? Do we believe in absolute truth? Is there flexibility?... Does everything exist as a social construction?

Postmodernism may also influence methodology. Katherine "believe[s] the research question, as opposed to my personal philosophy, will guide my research methodology. For example, I tend to ask questions that are best answered in quantitative means." In contrast, Jennifer stated:

> I believe that no matter what research we are doing, qualitative or quantitative, that the research and its questions are guided by our values. Those values might be about being objective and not letting our values interfere with the results but these then determine the type of method that are used and how the data is collected and analyzed.

One student illustrated a mutually inclusive view of the self of the researcher and methodology when he/she stated: "I think it is a two way street. Sometimes research informs the paradigm and sometimes the paradigm is what inform the research." There are currently a variety of methods to use when conducting research, yet little consensus on how a method is chosen as witnessed in our conversation.

At the start of the conversation, Group One participants did not agree on the role of the researcher; however, through the continued discussions, the role of the

investigators appears to be vital in postmodern research. Katherine rethought her previous position and later stated:

> I agree, what is of interest to you as a researcher is something that is embedded in your personal system. For example, one of my strong theoretical frameworks in therapy is Bowen's family system's theory. I initially didn't connect this to research until just now, but as I look at my research in family therapy, I have used family systems theory as a guiding theory for my questions I develop about systems behavior. So for me, yes, I think my philosophy leads my work.

The belief that paradigm influences research and methodology was also reflected during the conversation as one student illustrated "I think that our research topics…[are] largely influenced by our world view. I think that our research methodology is largely influenced by our personality (or self)". Methods are linked to philosophical assumptions whether it be deciding the population to study, what questions to ask, or in the selection of topic (Hoshmand, 1994).

Postmodernism also calls for reflection, as Kristen illustrated the role of a postmodern researcher as one who "is no longer an objective observer. The researcher has influence and ideas about the research…and see[s] what these findings mean to those we are studying and how we as the researcher find meaning as well". Doherty (1999) also stated that the role of a postmodern researcher is one who articulates the values and assumptions underlying their work. Thus, a postmodern researcher should ask and answer questions such as these to better articulate the assumptions that underline their work. In answering these questions a researcher can identify their beliefs informing how they conduct research. Formerly, a researcher's beliefs may have remained unstated since the consensus of the field was that objectivity is obtainable. Postmodernism has exposed us to our naïve belief that what we believe is immaterial to our research (Doherty, 1999).

Is it qualitative?

When offering examples of what we believed postmodern research was, several examples appeared to highlight how closely postmodernism and qualitative research are linked. For example, as Group One responded to the "what is postmodern research" statement, items such as "ethnographic focus groups, hermeneutics, collaborative language, and discourse analysis" were the first to appear. The idea of qualitative methods being readily identified as postmodern research could be related to the assumptions that are part of qualitative methods (Doherty, 1999). These assumptions allow for multiple valid perspectives, highlight uniqueness, appreciate the unrepeatable, and acknowledge the bias of the researcher (Gilgun, Daly, & Handel, 1992; Rosenblatt & Fisher, 1993; Rosenau, 1992).

Is it quantitative?

The assumption during Group One's conversation was that postmodernism could not be applied to quantitative research. Yet this seemed to contradict the very ideas that

are part of the postmodern philosophy. The ideas include that there are many different viewpoints and each is valid (Doherty, 1999). These concerns were raised during the conversation by Jennifer as she asked "…qualitative and postmodernism seems to go hand and hand and I wonder that if this is so then it leaves out the quantitative researchers….Can …quantitative research and postmodernism…work together". Students also identified that they learned qualitative and quantitative methods as two separate distinct entities. Thus, when thinking of postmodern research, the farthest thought from their minds were quantitative methods, even though these methods can be influenced by postmodernism. Katherine highlighted that:

> …latent variable modeling is informed by postmodernism, probably more than any other methodology in the quantitative world…Latent variable modeling typically involves a theory base…you have to have some idea, theoretically, of the variables you think are related to a phenomenon…This is also true for those doing postmodern types of research. Typically, they don't work form scratch, but from some understanding of a phenomenon.

Katherine voiced ideas expressed by Doherty (1999) who stated that postmodernists do not necessarily dismiss sophisticated quantitative methods – only the assumption that such methods yield 'privileged' data. Consequently, it is not the methods that postmodernists disagree with, but rather how the knowledge constructed by the researcher using this type of method is written in a way that states as if it is the truth. Katherine responded by saying:

> there are a variety of ways to test hypothesis…You can have one hypothesis understanding meaning for a certain group about…a phenomenon and test that in a qualitative or quantitative way which ever best answers your specific question or fits best your personal philosophy.

The conversation on postmodern research concluded with the idea that postmodern research does not have to be qualitative in nature for multiple perspectives to be viewed.

The conversation regarding postmodern research developed from a monolithic view of how postmodern research can be conducted. During the course of our conversation, however, the methods do not necessary dictate the lens. The lens can dictate the way methods are used. Jennifer illustrated how quantitative methods can be used with a postmodern lens by having the researcher "go to clinicians and say this is what I found after analysis get their thoughts about the results [and] use it… to help inform [the researcher] write the implications section of the paper". Katherine also highlighted the fact that she is a quantitative researcher however, that does not mean she is not a postmodernist:

> I am a quantitative researcher, I am not a positivist. I think that you can certainly find ways to quantify experience while still realizing that there is not one sole experience worth quantifying. I think all researchers,

> quantitative, qualitative, etc., need to keep their eyes and ears open to understanding multiple perspectives.

It is possible the dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative methods is not a given when using postmodernism.

   The conclusion drawn during the conversation has also been espoused by feminist postmodern epistemological approach calling for an approach that is open and inclusive regarding research methods (Allen & Barber, 1992). "Rather than becoming bogged down in the competing prescriptions of those who would set up qualitative and quantitative in an exclusive duality, postmodern feminism accepts the tension between the two methods" (Allen & Barber, 1992, p. 9).

Is it feminist?

   The feminist paradigm seems to be closely related to postmodern philosophy. Ideals contained in postmodernism such as deconstruction provide a way to challenge values and ideas that have been established as natural or absolute by society (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988; Scott, 1990). Considering beliefs and applying these concepts to research, postmodern feminist are committed to plurality, reject the notion of one privileged standpoint, and challenge the idea that women's experiences are determined only by gender (Allen & Baber, 1992). During the conversation discussing postmodern feminist and family therapy research, Kristen described a research study that could investigate "…how gender roles are socially…constructed within the family" or:

> conducting a study of married women who have full time careers and run the household (because they are expected to) by holding focus groups to capture their [experiences] and develop themes as to how this impacts their marital satisfaction, therefore identifying areas for clinical intervention.

Postmodern feminist allows for multiple ways of conducting research while also attending to gender, class, and race in understanding families (Allen & Baber, 1992).

Flexibility of methodology.

   The conversations seemed to only reflect qualitative or feminist-informed methodologies as a way to conduct postmodern research conversation regarding what is postmodern research. Yet the idea that postmodern research can only be qualitative seemed counter to what postmodernism espouses. To grapple with this idea, one must develop a deeper understanding of postmodernism in that it can fit into any research method. Consequently, postmodern research is qualitative, quantitative, feminist, and many others. Postmodern states that there are multiple perspectives and each is valid.

"A new way."

As a result of the discussion on postmodern research, all participants alike were able to see the illusion of the dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative methods. Katherine discussed how:

> there are a variety of ways to test hypothesis….You can have one hypothesis [such as] understanding meaning for a certain group…and test that in a qualitative or quantitative way. Which ever best answers your specific question or fits best with your personal philosophy or theoretical framework.

Postmodernism perspective supports the existence of diverse and seemingly contradictory research methods (Doherty, 1999). Therefore, the determination if a method is postmodern is not based on type of methodology but rather on the researcher. The researcher's beliefs and values ultimately guide and dictate the flavor of the research. Additionally, the "new way" perspective presents researchers and clinicians with many tools to understand families while also offering a theoretical framework to guide research. This perspective is unique in that any theoretical framework can be valid and useful as long as one acknowledges his/her paradigm and does not assume that this method or theoretical framework will yield "privileged" data (Rosenau, 1992). The postmodern perspective provides marriage and family therapists "a new way" to look at research. The client is part of the research process. Jennifer discussed what postmodern research would like when the client is also an integral part of the investigation:

> [Postmodern] research could be [to] see how the therapists [language] may change over time and start to use the same types of words as the [client]. Or maybe the client uses a certain metaphor for the way they…feel and this then gets used by the therapist or vice versa.

Postmodern research in family therapy can be a recursive process and adheres to the cybernetic properties to which marriage and family therapy prescribes. The system of therapists as researchers informed by their client population and clients as active participants in the process exemplifies a both-and perspective with both taking part, forging a "new way."

Postmodern Qualitative Research and Clinicians

Clinician-researcher gap

The clinician-researcher gap is an important concept in the field of family therapy (Sandberg, Johnson, Robilia, & Miller, 2002; Sprenkle & Moon, 1996). Pinsof and Wynne (2000) state couple and family therapy research is often too distant from the actual therapists' experiences and does not provide meaningful information for affecting treatment. Additional explanations of contributions to the gap include clinicians who are

frequently unwilling to cooperate in clinical research and researchers who use and develop confusing techniques while not being clear or engaging about the clinical implications of their research (Johnson, Sandberg, & Miller, 1999). Sandberg et al. (2002) suggest researchers can build collaborative relationships with clinicians by tailoring research to benefit the needs of practicing clinicians. As clarity about postmodern in both research and practice becomes more apparent, marriage and family therapists have the opportunity to bridge the gap that exists between researchers and clinicians.

Clinicians and researcher can learn from one another

Kristen identified commonalties in that both seek to gain an in-depth understanding of the client/research participant experience in saying, "What is done with the collected information is what draws the distinctions between research and clinical practice." Katherine discussed that qualitative research can "offer [clinicians] innovative ways to solicit client stories." She stated that clinicians can offer qualitative researchers "a model for listening, being empathetic, and other techniques to solicit information." Kristen explained:

> A step needed to close the researcher gap would be the language used to relay information. Clinicians who are not well versed in statistical data outputs may have difficulty... another step might be including the non-researched ideas of full-time clinicians to guide the questions of researchers.

In other words, students believe that qualitative research can provide a bridge between clinicians and researchers. Researchers can offer clinicians a variety of ways to guide client interviews and to ask questions. Clinicians can offer researchers guidelines for interviewing research participants in a way that communicates empathy and understanding.

Language impacts the gap

Another theme that was identified through the conversations was the impact of language on clinicians and research. Postmodernism and its language can also impact clinical language. One student explained by stating:

> I feel that postmodern ideas are extremely prevalent in our field in particular, and have defiantly helped close the aforementioned gap. Modernists ideas have long been represented in scholarly journals, aimed primarily at the academy. Postmodern ideas seemingly find their way into professional books and more reader-friendly journals, which may have a bigger impact on practice than does the former.

Communication of ideas can be key in understanding family therapy research findings. The findings in this study suggest that making language clinician-friendly can help bridge the clinician-researcher gap.

Toward methodological pluralism

Sprenkle and Moon (1996) declare a multi-methodological bias and state, "The mixed methods allow researchers synergistic interplay between quantitative and qualitative approaches to research" (p.15). They suggest moving toward pluralism, which encompasses stating and accepting a wide variety of research methods (Sprenkle & Moon, 1996). Findings of this study also suggest that incorporating an emphasis of mixed research modalities may help to bridge the clinician-researcher gap. In the present conversations, students discussed uniting qualitative and quantitative research. Kristen elaborated: "maybe it is a matter of more research collaboration, conducting studies that give meaning to numbers." Jennifer supported this when she stated: "if we only believe that qualitative research can bridge this gap, the field will be finding itself in the same place with [only] the ability to answer some questions and … see parts instead of the whole." Another student added, "I agree, it's a both/and. I think each has flaws, and when they come together in a multi-method [manner], it's the best of both worlds." Clearly, students view studies that incorporate meaning with statistics as a way to see more parts of a whole.

Marriage and family therapy training

Training programs have the potential to make a substantial impact on the ways students view research and clinical practice. None of the authors were trained in qualitative research at the master's level, and one author was heavily trained in quantitative research. Katherine stated: "it would be better to relate the value of all research and findings to clinical practice in master's programs." Kristen illustrated similar ideas: "clinicians are often master's level. Emphasizing how research and clinical are connected could be valuable in creating a systemic outlook. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Marriage and family therapists should consider the basis of the field, family systems theory, and look at research and clinical practice as parts of the whole.

Combining research and clinical training can be made possible by adapting elements of the scientist-practitioner model. The scientist-practitioner model was borrowed from clinical psychology training and places equal focus on research and clinical practice (Crane, Wampler, Sprenkle, Sandberg, & Hovestadt, 2002; MacEachron & Gustavsson, 1997). Crane et al. describes the scientist-practitioner model in marriage and family therapy training as three interrelated roles that "include the roles of consumer of new research findings, evaluator of one's own clinical practices, and researchers who contributes to the professional literature through evaluation of one's own clinical work" (p. 75). Katherine further illustrated this when she stated:

> ...most clinicians are already doing research but they just don't know it...
> Everyone as they conduct therapy thinks about what went well, what did

not go well, why did this intervention work... clinicians ask these questions which are process questions they are just not formalizing the process.

Although a direct application of the scientist-practitioner model has been suggested for marriage and family therapy doctoral programs (Crane et al., 2002), the elements of the scientist-practitioner model be incorporated into master's level training programs in order to create better understanding of research and increase likelihood of utilizing research findings as practicing clinicians. Katherine stated: "I am suggesting that the instructors help us to realize that we are already doing both." The scientist-practitioner model can help master's students create balance of research and clinical practice and recognize there interconnectedness.

Crane et al. (2002) discuss problems with research classes taught in other academic disciplines that support the findings of this study. Kristen stated:

> ...as students we are so busy learning [research] methods in other disciplines (farming out) that we are not taught how to take these methods and use them as clinicians [conducting research]. It is as if we are shown how to separate the two instead of learning to combine these roles... future [marriage and family therapists] need to be shown how to connect these goals as one if we are to bridge the gap.

Many marriage and family therapy master's graduates do not have adequate research training and lack the experience of applying research to the field (Crane et al., 2002). The separation of clinical and research in training can lead to the creation of dichotomous thinking. Clinical and research practice may be viewed as either/or rather than both/and when they are taught separately.

Discussion

Postmodernism is composed of three overarching categories, as identified by doctoral students. First, students believed pluralism was an important component of postmodernism, but specifically in postmodern research. Pluralism referred not only to methodology, but also in the manner in which the researcher views the participants within context. Subjectivity was also an identified component of postmodernism because of postmodernism's acknowledgment of more than one truth. Finally, students saw the social construction of knowledge as a component of postmodernism. In the view of students, knowledge is socially constructed through language. However, it is also the responsibility of postmodernists to look at how their own language influences how individuals in other contexts view them.

Several aspects characterize postmodern research, in the views of students. Students believed that researchers had the responsibility to understand their underlying values and beliefs that guide their work. Students also provided ideas identifying what postmodern qualitative and quantitative research would look like. Postmodern qualitative research was identified as being studies that highlighted uniqueness, acknowledge researcher biases, and were appreciative of different strategies to collect data. Some

specific designs tied with postmodern qualitative research included ethnographic studies, collaborative language, and hermeneutics. Postmodern quantitative research would be characterized by researcher's openness to a variety of ways to test hypotheses. Feminism was also identified as a specific type of postmodern informed research. Finally, postmodern family therapy research, in the eyes of students, possesses a flexible methodology, translating to a "new way" of conducting research by including the clients as participants.

Finally, several themes were identified under the category of how clinicians and researchers are impacted by postmodern theory. The clinician-researcher gap is evident in marriage and family therapy, but postmodern qualitative research can provide ways in which to bridge the gap. First, clinicians and researchers can learn from one another. Both can provide the other with better ways to interview clients while communicating empathy and soliciting stories. Paying attention to language as researchers was also identified as an important component in bridging the clinician-researcher gap. Students also reported more studies involving methodological pluralism will help to make the family therapy research more applicable to clinicians.

Implications for Training

Increasing understanding of postmodern influences on family therapy research is valuable in connecting the clinician-researcher gap. Helping students to understand postmodernism, postmodern qualitative research, and how relating clinical work to research in training programs can help to bridge the clinician-researcher gap.

There is a significant divide between researchers and clinicians in the field (Pinsof & Wynne, 2000), which may explain the division in training programs. Doctoral level clinical psychology students are introduced to a scientist-practitioner model that incorporate equal aspects of research and practice into training (MacEachron & Gustavsson, 1997). Although MacEachron and Gustavsson (1997) argue for a re-visioning of this model to shift to a practitioner center stance and include more qualitative research methods, students are able to recognize that what model fits in academic settings is different from what fits in practice.

Students' perceptions of research and clinical practice are greatly influenced by the ways these concepts are introduced in marriage and family therapy master's training programs. Adapting aspects of the research-practitioner model can help students gain a better understanding by incorporating a balance of both clinical and research. Helping students recognize ways in which research is connected to clinical practice can help promote the use of research findings when they become clinicians. By allowing students to identify the common goals of research and clinical practice within the academic discipline of marriage and family therapy, students will be better able to connect the various aspects that contribute to the field.

Challenges

Using the Internet as a qualitative tool to collect data has many advantages, yet it is not without challenges. One pragmatic challenge that we faced in this project was a technological disadvantage for one of the authors. One author had a slower Internet

connection than the others. This resulted in confusion, frustration, and less responses from this researcher. Additionally, collecting data in this manner loses context of the dialogue. In this forum, there are no non-verbal communication and other environmental cues that usually occur between people in conversation. The Internet relies heavily on written communication to express ideas and beliefs. Though there were some limitations with this type of data collection, we believed the benefits and fit for the theoretical grounding (collaborative and reflexive) outweighed these challenges.

We also would consider using a different yet similar postmodern approach in the future. Postmodernism shaped this study by allowing the researchers flexibility and the freedom to explore students' understanding in a non-objective way, which permitted reflections of meaning that captured students' true experiences.

The present study, though tentative, presents some important findings about the way the next generation of family therapists views the role of postmodern qualitative research in family therapy. As postmodern approaches to qualitative inquiry have become more popular, some authors have discussed the current development of a post-postmodern qualitative research era, where there exists no common or mutually understood paradigm to which all social scientists can ascribe (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Just as postmodernism formed as a response to modernism, post-postmodernism is a response to postmodernism. Qualitative research has shifted to challenge the social sciences to consider morality in terms of race, class, gender, democracy, community and nation (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). Although the notion of post-postmodernism is important, especially when considering intersections of race, class and gender in qualitative research, we do not feel that these developments challenge the ideas put forth in this study.

Postmodern family therapy research is, in the eyes of students, flexible, complex, influenced by many factors, and has important implications for the future of the field. By forging a "new way" of qualitative research driven by postmodern thought, the field will be able to conduct qualitative research in a way which includes clients in an active participatory process, giving everyone a voice.

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Appendix

- Does self-of-the-researcher impact the methodology of a study? If so, how? (In other words, what drives research? Does paradigm inform research or research inform paradigm?)

- How could a postmodern study with families be conducted whose results would inform family therapy?

- Doherty (1999) states modernism is based on ideas of change, rational planning, rejection of history and tradition, and emphasis on the experience of the individual. He continues to contrast those themes with postmodernism, which involves being skeptical of progress, abandoning broad knowledge, emphasis on socially constructing knowledge, moving away from focusing on the individual and instead on groups, focusing on language, and understanding the past and its influences. (p. 206). Has postmodernism helped to close the practitioner-researcher gap? It what ways can it help?

- Please reflect on the following conversation:
  Person 1: When the researcher is able to acknowledge his or her biases they can still conduct quantitative research without being a positivist. It seems that qualitative research might naturally lend itself to recognizing the researcher's bias because those studies are all about meaning.

  Person 2: I disagree. I do not believe qualitative lends itself to having a researcher be aware of their biases. I think it is up to the person, whether they are aware of themselves.

  Person 1: Of course it is always the responsibility of the person/researchers. But I think that qualitative focuses on meaning. There is more person to person, face to face interaction. I think biases are more evident in these settings. This is not true for every qualitative researcher, but I think it is so much a part of the training that it does lend it self to self awareness.

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