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'Crash': Modernism Meets Postmodernism

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As the movie *Crash* (Haggis, 2004) illustrates, Western culture has experienced a crash as postmodern assumptions have challenged its modernistic ones. Counseling has made the transition from attempting to replicate research in the physical sciences to studying people in their context; and from studying just "dead white theorists" to valuing diversity and responsiveness to multicultural issues. Epistemology and ontology are embedded in these discussions, and understanding these terms can help counselors and counselor educators to avoid "crashes" and adapt to the changes.

Modernism

Familiar names are embedded in the discussion of modernism and what is now emerging after it. Plato, Aristotle, Sir Isaac Newton, and B. F. Skinner are a few of those significant people.

Modernism believes that the human experience and the world can be explained in terms of specific ideas and principles and that this paradigm creates a "strong confidence in human cognition and social progress" (Gill, 2000, p. 3). As the renaissance bloomed and science came of age into the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the belief was that the world had order and our task as humans was to understand and describe that order—ideally in mathematics (Kuhn, 1996, p. 83). Every aspect of life was based upon principles and could be described and quantified. The physical sciences led the way, and everything had a neat formula and a definite answer.

The behavioral sciences followed the physical sciences, and B. F. Skinner would eventually focus psychology only on observable human behavior. J. B. Watson's famous quote about being able to shape a child into anything, a " 'doctor, lawyer . . . and yes, even into beggarman and thief' " (Viney & King, 2003, p. 295), seemed within grasp of modernistic behavioral science. The optimism was exhilarating, but something was missing.

What modernism diligently sought and repeatedly seemed to verify was White middle class culture (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998), or "dead white theorists" as John

Sommers-Flanagan called it (2007). Western culture was being affirmed by scientific examination, and other cultures were being minimized. Sir Isaac Newton is typical of the process.

From a Western perspective, Newton believed that God had created the world and thus had established it with order (a premodern assumption). When Newton did his analyses, he looked for order and was not disappointed (Miller, 1958, pp. 227-234). Science held onto variations of Newton's point of view and resisted "Chaos Theory," which said that the world was disorderly or at least had times of disorderliness. Today the European Caucasian view has been challenged, and a more violent postmodern interpretation of the universe has emerged in its place (Mann & Dann, 2005, p. 789).

Ontology and Epistemology

Philosophical issues, particularly ontology and epistemology, are embedded in the behavioral sciences but are often not acknowledged: Who are we? How do we know what we know? Since the Greek philosophers, who laid the foundation for Western society, two traditions of defining what humans are (ontology) and how we know the world (epistemology) have emerged that are still vital in the transition from modernism to postmodernism. Beginning with Plato's discussion of the non-physical world-of-ideas (Anderson & Jowett, 2001) and Aristotle's understanding of the physical world (2004), the basics of today's discussion of epistemology and ontology took shape.

Epistemology

To summarize the story of the emergence of postmodernism from a philosophical perspective, an oversimplification of the change in epistemology might look like the following. Plato made a strong presentation in the "Republic" with his cave metaphor that the physical world, what humans experience through the five senses, are "shadows" of a more substantial reality that exists in the non-physical world. Recognition of objects in this world is based upon their being a reflection of the invisible world (Anderson & Jowett, 2001). We "know" things before we experience them, then we see them reflected in the physical world.

Like any good student, Aristotle stood Plato's teaching on it head: he said that the real world is the physical world, and we can know it by careful study and organization of our observations (Velasques, 2005, p. 152). We learn through our senses and reach conclusions about the individual pieces of information.

In the 12th century, Aristotle was re-discovered and the underpinnings of the Renaissance, and modernism, were begun (Miller, 1958). Scholars began to consider the significance of the natural world and understanding its patterns. The pendulum had begun to swing, and science with its experiments was not far behind. Those with an investment in the old order were resistant to change (Gill, 2000, pp. 22-23; Kuhn, 1996, p.72). A collision occurred then that still echoes down the centuries.

From the 15th century into the mid-20th century, rationalism and then science had the dominant explanation for how we know what we know: we observe, we analyze our observations, we rationalize and theorize, we test our theories, and we refine our ideas

based upon our thoughtful considerations of the data. Ontologically speaking, humans were just a "naked ape" with a few more tricks (Morris, 1967). The mystery of the most advanced civilization of the 20th century (Germany in World War II) irrationally going to war and creating the holocaust suggested that something was missing from a purely scientific perspective (Polanyi, 1970). Another crash occurred.

Ontology

The Idealists with their emphasis on the human experience began to re-emerge during the 20th century in the discussions of how we know what we know. The physical world may provide us with data, but people have their own interpretations of that data. No transcendent principles were possible, just individual experiences. Maybe the world itself is an illusion, as the Buddhists have been saying in the Bodhisattva paramitas (Smart, 1969, pp. 105-106), and the "Matrix" (Silver, 1999) movie trilogy has suggested. We are inside little energy pods and just dreaming.

Postmodernists have deconstructed science and questioned whether any Truth (with a capital "T") is possible. "Meaning and truth are thus plural, changing, and subjective" (Mann & Dann, 2005, p. 787). Epistemology is a personal experience and the only transcendent belief is that no shared beliefs are possible.

Modernism assumed that transcendent principles and people existed, were rational (in the Cartesian tradition), and that capital "T" Truth was knowable if we did the scientific process while postmodernism is less certain about any of these assumptions and is left with only a little "t" truth, a personal statement of our experience. Your experience is as good as mine; your beliefs are as good as mine; and your culture is as good as mine. The only rule in postmodernism is that there are no rules.

Evidence of Change

Research

The last century has brought an entirely new approach to social science research called qualitative analysis. Until recently, behavioral science research was largely quantitative like medical, agricultural, or physical science research. Today, qualitative research or mixed design, with some quantitative and some qualitative, is respected in behavioral research. The world has turned and some of us are still crashing.

The assumptions of qualitative research are postmodern. Notice the following descriptions of qualitative data and research by William Wiersma and Stephen Jurs:

> 1. Phenomena should be viewed holistically, and complex phenomena cannot be reduced to a few factors or partitioned into independent parts.
> 2. The researcher operates in a nature setting because of the concern for context…
> 3. "Meaning" is as perceived or experienced by those being studied; it is not imposed by the researcher.

> 4. A priori assumptions, and certainly a priori conclusions, are to be avoided in favor of post hoc conclusions. Assumptions and conclusions are subject to changes as the research proceeds. (2009, pp. 232-233)

Qualitative researchers are postmodern in their commitment to understanding the phenomenology of the researched person or people. Only after we observe, interact, and learn from the other people can we attempt to organize that encounter and present it to others.

Multiculturalism

A similar change has occurred around multicultural issues. The value of diversity found in other religions and cultures was minimized in the emergence of White Western modernistic science that emphasized only the cultural aspects recognizable by that dominant culture. The "Great Books" of universities (Mann & Dann, 2005, p. 787; Kuhn, 1996, p. 165) and Western culture itself was a self-congratulatory affirmation of the Caucasian experience (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998, p. 77). Multiculturalism has collided with modern dominant White assumptions and radically changed the perspective.

The American Counseling Association (ACA) and the American Psychological Association (APA) have produced documents detailing those organizations' visions for a postmodern multicultural profession. Statements like Sue and Sue's, "The study of minority group cultures must receive equal treatment and fair portrayal on all levels of education" (p. 25, 1999), has stimulated a movement against the absolutes of the dominant culture and opened discussion to a variety of other approaches to life and culture. As all individuals and their respective contexts are emphasized, treated equally, and encountered, a collision of perspectives between a modern Caucasian world and a postmodern pluralistic world must be endured.

		The WORLD	
		No Patterns	***Patterns***
PEOPLE	***No Choice***	Chaos	Cycles
	Choice	Chance/ Luck	Consequences

Table 1. Four worldviews based on two opposing assumptions about the human condition and two about the world, ontology and epistemology, respectively.

A Heuristic Model

If we accept the earlier discussion about the human condition and humanity's experience of the physical reality, an exploratory model of the varieties of human experience could be created capitalizing on those ideas. Ontology could be reflected in the term "People," and epistemology might be associated with humanity's ("The World") power to choose—some form of will to power. People do have "Choices" that perspective would assert. Psychoanalysts and behaviorists might emphasize genetics and history and thereby minimize a person's ability to choose, "No Choice." Two very general divisions of "People" might therefore include those who affirmed "Choice" and those who did not, "No Choice."

"The World" could similarly be subdivided into two categories: those who accepted the presence of "Patterns" and those who see randomness, "No Patterns." In today's postmodern perception, the lack of patterns dominates the discussion in the Western world, but in the East, zodiacs, seasons, cycles, tides, and rhythms of life pervade most cultures.

The resulting "window" with four quadrants summarizing a very wide range of human experience can be a useful summary of Worldviews. Four logical views of the human condition seem possible: life is "Chaos" based on people not having choices and the world not having patterns; everything occurs in "Cycles" since people are without choices ("No Choice") and the world has patterns; everything is about "Chance" or luck because people have choices but the world has no patterns; or in this world people experience the "Consequences" of their choices because a pattern exists.

The combination of a belief that humans have little or "No Choice" and the world has "No Pattern" seems to create a perspective that sounds like Chaos Theory (Kiel & Elliott, 1996). "Stuff happens" is the mantra for this view. People can believe that they are special, if they want to, but they probably are not. The really strong person, Nietzsche's superman, faces the meaninglessness and pattern-less-ness of life and goes on (1885).

The combination of "No Choice" but an acceptance of "Patterns" in the world seems very Eastern. "What goes around comes around" fits this arrangement along with the possible need to break the "Patterns" by working off karma or guilt. The caste system or feudalism places people into a certain position in life, and they and their children function at that level for the duration of their lifecycle. Personal passivity ("No Choice") is encouraged because individual efforts to work against a cycle are like protecting a sandcastle from the incoming tide.

The intersection of human "Choice" and "No Pattern" introduces chance or luck into the discussion. Some people make choices, and then the roll of the dice confirms their choice, making them "lucky" or possessing "good luck"; whereas, others' choices are not confirmed making them "un-lucky." Individuals might have the power to choose, but they are up against a random world, or at best, probability. This quadrant's interpretation of hurricane Katrina might be: "I was un-lucky enough to be born Black and poor. I was also un-lucky enough to be in New Orleans where I got hit with a hurricane (another slap from "Chance"). But I was lucky enough to be down the street

from an abandoned electronics store; therefore, I have ethical permission to take what I want (and even out the balance of good luck and bad luck). My luck has just changed." People from this quadrant buy lottery tickets. They have a choice, but chance is probably working against them.

The power to "Choose" could be combined with the possibility of "Patterns" and create a fourth standpoint that might be called "Consequences." A "rugged individualism" that typifies the United States might be what is being described in this quadrant. Individuals can decide to move West, write a book, invent something, or run for government office and experience the consequences of that choice. Sometimes the choices are not elegant, but people can choose their attitudes toward their choices. And they can choose to pursue life with courage, not fear. This fourth view would suggest the ontological and epistemological issues behind several other contemporary counseling approaches such as Glasser's Choice Theory (2000).

These four worldviews philosophically span ontological and epistemological alternatives about the human condition and humans' knowledge of themselves and the world. Next we shall connect these worldviews with modernism and more importantly postmodernism.

Worldviews and Postmodernism

The four Worldviews that combine preliminary assumptions about the human experience of themselves (ontology) and their world (epistemology) in the previous section can be utilized to clarify the earlier discussions of modernism and postmodernism. In the West, for much of the past two centuries, a modern viewpoint has dominated but is grudgingly yielding to a postmodern perspective, which is substantially different. A modern worldview can be associated with the lower right-hand quadrant that believes in choices and patterns. The postmodern view is more like the upper left-hand quadrant that is not as certain of the human capacity or the world as are modernists.

As Wiersma and Jurs (2009) explained in their overview of qualitative research, no patterns are assumed to be present when an analysis is being performed. The individual situations and people are far too unique to assume some predetermined characteristics. Whereas modernists sought to define underlying principals or Truth(s) that might be present, postmodernists do not believe that those deeper issues can be known. We might simplify a complex situation by pointing out some trends, but the pattern is only a convenience in our heads (truth with a little "t") and not a discovered Truth.

They are equally cynical about the value of human action. Whether or not people try to do something (choose or not choose), the unintended consequences of occurrences in the world tend to minimize whatever humans may have intended. No deity or Mother Nature should be ascribed as working in these events, as might have occurred in a more premodern perspective (the upper right-hand quadrant); rather, these activities are just mindless disconnected events, like the combination of temperature and moisture that creates hurricanes, which just happen.

As might be obvious in my word choice as I explore these topics, I miss the optimism of science and the belief that Truth can be found in modernistic research. I was not completely persuaded by the logical positivists and other scientists that the non-physical world and the possibility of revealed Truth should be excluded, and I am not certain that I have the faith to believe no absolutes exist, except for that one statement: no absolutes exist. But understanding the different perspectives hopefully keeps major collisions from occurring.

PEOPLE	The WORLD: *No Patterns*	The WORLD: *Patterns*
No Choice	Postmodernism (Chaos)	Premodernism (Cycles)
Choice	Pre & Postmodernism (Chance)	Modernism (Consequences)

Table 2. Inclusion of modernism and postmodernism with the four worldviews.

Conclusion

The world has certainly gotten more complicated over the past century and keeping up with all of the possibilities is not easy. While I do not believe that a brief discussion of ontology and epistemology and a couple of simple 2-by-2 diagrams can untangle the complexities of the cultural shift that has occurred, I hope that stepping back from the events and looking at them carefully might suggest some beginning points for understanding where we have been and where we are going.

Rather than have stunning “crashes” of conflicting information, recognizing philosophical underpinnings in the counseling profession, predominantly in ontology and epistemology, might alert us to a potential collision and allow us the opportunity to make a significant adjustment. From a multicultural perspective, proactively finding the unique contribution of a particular worldview and utilizing its value would be more productive than damaging “crashes” of these underlying concepts.

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