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Attribution Errors in the Postmodern Landscape

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Psychology's history can be studied as a history of fads. Some fads live on for centuries, whereas others receive attention for only a decade. Some research programs are abandoned when their founders

die, and others when the zeitgeist or political, social, or economic conditions change. There are fads in the mainstream as well as at the margins of psychology. Postmodern psychology, which really never influenced the course of traditional research and, as Gergen (October 2001) emphasized, has never existed in a coherent fashion, was an exciting, challenging, and "enlightening" Euro-American intellectual movement in the 1980s and 1990s. When its critical arguments became repetitive, however, postmodernism was required to turn to positive knowledge. Yet, it was soon evident that this knowledge could not be gained within a postmodern framework.

The zenith of postmodern discourse passed some years ago. But Gergen (2001), who has been a major promoter of postmodern psychology and whose analyses are well articulated, insightful, and informed, attempted in this latest article to breathe life back into postmodernism. However, this effort is plagued with what we consider attribution errors. Specifically, we suggest that what Gergen sold as the promises of a postmodern psychology cannot, in any historically informed way, be attributed to the postmodern. In addition, we question whether modernism can be blamed for all the shortcomings discussed in Gergen's article. Finally, we argue that it is problematic to reduce the analysis of power to textual forms of life.

Attribution Error I

Gergen's (2001) article is innovative in its focus on the positive consequences of postmodern discussions. However, in the process, he colonized a variety of discourses and represented them as outcomes of the postmodern. He stated that postmodernists ask empirical researchers for the pragmatic implication of their studies (Gergen, 2001, p. 808). However, the need for pragmatics can be historically traced back much further; for example, Beneke (1853) wrote a textbook on this topic in the middle of the 19th century. It was addressed by the antipostmodernist Holzkamp (1972) as the problem of the relevance of psychology. The idea that psychology should intensify its reflexive deliberations (Gergen, 2001, pp. 808–809) was promoted in an entire book by a foe of postmodernism, the social philosopher Habermas (1968/1972). Gergen (2001) mentioned the historical restoration and revitalization of psychology (p. 809); however, these are, of course, ongoing topics for historians of psychology and are regularly discussed in books on the history of the discipline. The need for intercultural dialogue (Gergen, 2001, pp. 809–810); the flowering of methodology (Gergen, 2001, pp. 810–811), which includes the recognition of qualitative research; and the enrichment of practice (Gergen, 2001, p. 811) have all been addressed in psychology on an ongoing basis—long before the advent of postmodernism. Similarly, "functional intelligibilities" (Gergen, 2001, p. 810) have been created by traditional as well as critical academics on a regular basis. How can one seriously attribute all these promises to postmodernism, even if one opts for its widest possible definition?

Attribution Error II

We agree with Gergen (2001) that interpretations are located within worldviews. But this also means that the idea that modernism is responsible for a variety of epistemological, ontological, and ethical shortcomings in psychology is based on a postmodern interpretation. If one were to endorse a modern analysis, in contrast, then the course of psychology could be understood as a history of progress with minor or major setbacks. Unfortunately, the intellectual responsibility to provide arguments or evidence regarding which interpretation is more convincing is defaulted because, according to Gergen (2001), knowledge is about engaging in a "cultural practice of sense making" (p. 807).

Gergen (2001) blamed modernity for all kinds of flaws in psychology (pp. 803–805), but perhaps it is not modernism but romanticism that was responsible (see Malik, 1996); perhaps it was a premature alliance of psychology with natural science; or perhaps it was the advent of capitalism and its interest in individual knowledge, responsibility, and action. Unfortunately, these issues cannot be resolved a priori within a postmodern framework; rather, they require detailed intellectual and sociohistorical studies. The need to attribute deficiencies in psychology to a single historical phenomenon such as modernism may be part of cultural sense making, but it does not do justice to historical complexity.

Attribution Error III

It is laudable that Gergen (2001) addressed issues of power, which are indeed neglected in psychological research. Again, he blamed modernism and pointed to the "oppressive potential inhering in the modernist view of individual rationality" (Gergen, 2001, p. 805). Gergen himself located oppression primarily within language. No doubt, language can be oppressive (see Chrisjohn & Febbraro, 1991; Teo, 1998), but equally important are objective social realities, which the postmodern thinker is unable to conceptualize. Gergen rejected the modern idea of an observable real world. Yet, instead of the world, he established language as a reality, a "system unto itself" (Gergen, 2001, p. 805), a "system that is already constituted" (Gergen, 2001, p. 805). His location of oppression in language and not in objective social realities is not only an attributional shortcoming but also a form of power, as it neglects concrete experiences of oppression.

Gergen (2001) is right by pointing to non-Western alienation regarding the language games of Western psychology. But is the language game of postmodernism, a Euro-American invention, not equally alienating? Gergen cannot fathom that postmodernism is part of the same Eurocentrism that he is criticizing and that, indeed, academics of the so-called third world are critical of modernism as well as postmodernism (see Dussel, 1992/1995). Further, one wonders what passionate postmodern social analysis can really offer, in pragmatic or cultural terms, if it merely provides another reading or interpretation of reality.

Conclusion

Within a postmodern landscape, it may not really matter whether researchers commit attribution errors. Perhaps it is considered a problem of the past, academic stubbornness, and epistemological pedantry. However, if knowledge is based solely on sense making, without even considering the quality of sense making, then psychology will become a commodity, much like a product to be bought in the supermarket. Psychologists' tasks will be to hire the best salespersons, create the most intriguing commercials, or invent the fanciest packages for their sense-making goods. They would offer mass-produced items on sale or, for the distinguished buyer, a high-end line of sense-making wares. Although one may observe such elements in the discipline of psychology—regardless or because of postmodernism—we think that such a scenario should not be the epistemological, ontological, or ethical aspiration of contemporary psychology.

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