

The Intersection Between Modernist and Postmodernist Frameworks of Social Work Knowledge

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This paper explores the influence of modernist and postmodernist ideas in how social work knowledge is conceptualised. It aims to illustrate how both modernism and postmodernism provide important reference points for the analysis and continuing development of social work knowledge, and to then argue that, rather than just being antagonistic, modernist and postmodernist frameworks may actually overlap. Indeed, although there is a clear tension between modernism and postmodernism, it may actually be that this tension is useful, and a joint foundation can be provided that aids the search for robust knowledge in social work.

Although there has been a significant amount of interest in related ideas about postmodernism and postmodernity in social work theorising, the basic modernist premises of social work knowledge seem to be rarely discussed. It is useful to articulate what these premises are though, especially as it seems that social work is, in many respects, a fundamentally modernist enterprise. Modernism broadly reflects the key values of the Enlightenment era, and a belief in progress and order. Social work thus reflects modernist ideas as it is concerned with interventions to address social problems and support people, and thus, to work towards progress and social order. Social work knowledge appears to operate on modernist foundations therefore in that it is concerned with improving the ideas, systems and practices of social work to make interventions or services better, and to move them closer to achieving their stated aims. It is progress, and developing knowledge to develop practices, along with the contribution of ideas and methods to improving understandings about practices, that is the key theme of modernist frameworks. This is commonly taken to mean ensuring that standards of methodological or analytic rigour are met to show the reliability of ideas and approaches, and that there is clarity in establishing the significance of knowledge, and its significance to practice. Modernism is also said to focus on unity, and bringing together ideas into systematic, cohesive frameworks (Fawcett, 2006).

At its boldest, modernism therefore entails that if the systems could just be gotten right, and are followed by practitioners with adequate knowledge and skills, then social work can effectively deal with social problems or fulfill particular mandated roles. This is, for example, a powerful idea in children's social work, and is a particularly apparent phenomenon in the inquiries into children's social work failures (Parton, 2004). The presumption being that if the systems work, and are followed by able practitioners, then children should not be harmed. More modestly perhaps, modernist frameworks for practice have also entailed that there are particular standards of rigour and accuracy in the development and analysis of knowledge, and that the knowledge contributes to the continuing development of social work practice. A contemporary approach that illustrates such modernist frameworks is, perhaps, evidence-based practice. This emerged from debates about the attention, or lack thereof, paid to the effectiveness of social work interventions, and is broadly about continual, methodical inquiry to test the effectiveness of approaches to social work, interventions and methods (Ainsworth and Hansen, 2005).

As well as being a modernist enterprise, there are elements of social work that also appear to make it a fundamentally postmodern one. There is not the scope here to go into detail about what postmodernism is, especially given the vigorous debate that can accompany this topic, however what can be said is that it is about the contingency, dynamism and plurality of knowledge (Jameson, 1992). In social work, as such, practitioners are constantly called upon to manage uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity, and there often seems to be a plurality of ways to understand what is happening in practice contexts. Postmodernist frameworks are of benefit therefore to thinking about the multiple discourses at play in social work practices, and understandings the dynamics between them – particularly concerning power. This includes shifting our gaze from singular forms of understanding and unitary approaches to social work, to consider the diversity of knowledges at play in practice contexts, and appreciating how knowledge can be contested, and what is not knowable, rather than delving constantly for certainties that may not exist (Fawcett, 2009).

Postmodern frameworks for knowledge have perhaps most conspicuously featured in critical approaches to social work (Healy, 2000; Fook, 2002). These perspectives are based on deconstructing and understandings the different discourses and knowledges that underlie social work interventions, and then reconstructing practices to open up space for more creative and emancipatory practice relations. This can involve, for instance, reflecting on and reflexively engaging with different ethical positions about what good practice is in a particular situation, the social contexts of interventions, what social work involvement in people's lives means to them, as well as practitioners own political and socio-cultural locations: all of which involve different, potentially contrasting knowledge or ways of knowing (Fook, 2002). Developing an awareness of such complexity can be a lot to take in. It is argued though, that such plurality opens up space to reconstruct knowledge and break down barriers between practitioners and service users. For example, whilst conducting an assessment may involve particular practical skills and sorts of knowledge, including communication skills and an ability to acquire information, a critical approach also involves examining what the process of assessment actually represents, and how people being assessed experience it. Recognising and engaging with people's own knowledge can therefore be enabling, especially in a situation that may be nominally experienced as disempowering. It allows for a different conception of the intervention process, as well as allowing for people to take ownership of their assessments, and ensure they contain their knowledge as well as professionals' (Fook, 2002, pp 122-28).

This idea of there being different understandings of what social work is and what good practice means in different contexts is also central to postmodernist frameworks. It is precisely about engaging with the diffuseness of ideas about social work; such that it is not feasible to constantly strive to improve practices on a unitary understanding of what good practice is, for such an understanding is a misconception. What is important, rather, is that practitioners engage with the processes of understanding and knowing in social work, and the different forms of knowledge in practice contexts. This moves beyond positivist ideas, to explore the way that knowledges are socially constructed or reproduced. It also shifts from a view of developing, acquiring or teaching social work knowledge as cumulative, instead focusing our attention on critical, analytic thinking and reflection and reflexivity in differing contexts (ref). This is especially important in analysing and breaking down barriers and working across power differentials, and in engaging with uncertainty and the contingency of

social work practices. Power, plurality and uncertainty are all built into postmodernist frameworks of knowledge, and if knowledge at its root is understood as contingent, then this should encourage practitioners to continually engage with what they do not and cannot know, rather than constantly striving for certainties that appear unattainable (ref).

Postmodernist frameworks contain a critique of modernist ideas for attempting to integrate ideas and approaches to social work into unitary frameworks where knowledge aligns, ignoring how there are often a number of valid ideas about social work and perspectives in practice contexts. Postmodernist frameworks may be criticised also though, for being self-defeating; for postmodernism diminishes the capacity to critique knowledge and undermines value stances since all knowledges are potentially given equal weight (Wood, 1997). Social work is an activity concerned with particular ideas, groups and practices, and there seem to be evident standards of good social work – as is captured by modernist frameworks – even if there is some variance and debate about this. It is argued that the emphasis on plurality and difference of postmodernist frameworks potentially undermines value stances, and does not chime with the inherent normativity of social work (Hugman, 2003).

There seems to be good, and intuitive, reasons to therefore both support and reject modernist and postmodernist frameworks for knowledge. The advantage in making the frameworks explicit is that it casts light on the stated intentions of theories, methods and research, and their efficacy in working towards ideas about good social work, whilst also recognising the diversity of approaches to, and ways of thinking about, social work. For example, explicitly discussing modernism when thinking about evidence-based practices provides a clear basis for questioning the standards of what counts as evidence, and to assess what ideas of good practice based on this evidence involve. Questions can similarly be asked about how postmodernist ideas can actually be incorporated into practices when social workers have clear guidelines about how to practice or are looking to achieve particular ends. Modernist ideas also encourage us to constantly consider whether approaches to practice are grounded in rigorously examined theories and methods based on ideas about good practice; whilst postmodernist ideas draw out the potentially multiple perspectives on good practice, and of how social work practices occur and are experienced.

Making the differences between modernist and postmodernist frameworks of social work knowledge explicit therefore introduces a comprehensiveness to how social work knowledge can be questioned. The modernist concern with cohesive and efficacious knowledge, and the postmodernist concern with plurality and uncertainty both offer ways of developing thinking about ideas and methods in practice. This process of making frameworks explicit also begins to illustrate how we do not seem to neatly divide thinking into modernist or postmodernist frameworks, but switch between them. Whilst there is a clear sense in which the modernist and postmodernist frameworks are antagonistic, it also seems that we intuitively consider good practice in relation to notions of good practice and effective social work interventions, whilst also questioning the veracity and appropriateness of the notions in relations to other ideas. Indeed we quite naturally seem to recognize diversity in social work knowledge, whilst still working towards conceptions of good practice, and developing knowledge that adheres to standards linked to these conceptions.

It appears that in developing social work knowledge, it is useful to draw from both modernist and postmodernist ideas; and indeed, the presentation of modernism and postmodernism as dyadic theoretical concepts can get in the way more pragmatic

approaches to social work knowledge. Modernist frameworks for social work knowledge may involve ideal-type approaches, but it also that something much more modest may be what is actually often promoted using modernist ideas. Thus, it appears that an interest in steady, incremental gains in understanding that contribute to better practice in specific ways is the dominant paradigm of much contemporary work related to modernist thinking, rather than the development overarching narratives or unitary, comprehensive paradigms. Likewise, in social work, attitudes towards postmodernism seem to be similarly moderated. Postmodernism does not necessarily represent the allocation of equal status to knowledge claims, but rather, a critical, questioning of dominant ideas and ideologies. Indeed, good practice appears to remain at the heart of postmodernist frameworks for knowledge, and postmodern approaches to social work still require particular sorts of skill and knowledge, even if these may be said to become increasingly diversified (Howe, 1994).

Just as postmodernist theorists may be overstating the case when they restrict modernist frameworks to 'grand narratives' and singular approaches to knowledge, nor are postmodernist frameworks limited to the disavowal of any standards of knowledge. Rather than setting the belief in progress of modernist frameworks against the understanding of diversity and contingency of postmodernist ones, it seems that actually, there is the scope for modernist and postmodernist frameworks for knowledge to overlap. If modernist frameworks are taken to be about ensuring that there are standards by which knowledge is evaluated, in a context where there can be a diversity of approaches to practice, and postmodernist frameworks are centred on exploring the different knowledges and ways of knowing of practice contexts, whilst still working towards standards of good practice, then it appears that the frameworks can be mutually supportive. Modernist ideas can add a concern with effectiveness and a level of scrutiny and rigour to postmodernist thinking about the contingency and plurality of knowledge. Postmodernist ideas, conversely, identify the need for modernist approaches to engage with uncertainty and the diversity of knowledge in practice situations.

This is evidently a weaker theoretical sort of modernism or postmodernism than is commonly put forward, but it seems, for that, a potentially more pragmatically valuable one. There remains, of course, a potential tension between modernist and postmodernist frameworks, depending upon how vigorously ideas about certainty or uncertainty, and singular standards of knowledge or diversity and plurality are upheld. The point here is though is that there also seems to a highly productive middle ground to be explored, where modernist and postmodernist ideas pragmatically support the development of practice-focused social work knowledge. This chimes indeed, with suggestions made by postmodernist theorists who seek to develop practical approaches to social work, and who are keen to emphasise the potential of their approaches to account for the way social work remains about particular values and standards of practice (Fook, 2002; Fawcett, 2006).

Although these ideas are implicit in postmodernist perspectives, it seems that they still contribute to conceptualising modernism and postmodernism in an dyadic, oppositionary way. A questioning dialogue has long been recognized as a key feature of postmodernist thinking (Roche, 2007), but it is important to also recognize the value of modernist ideas here too. Most significantly, it appears useful to consider the potential value of the dynamic, push/pull relationship between modernism and postmodernism in these questioning processes. The tension between modernist and postmodernist frameworks actually seems to be productive, and leads us to continually question and

reexamine knowledge, and the processes through which it is constructed. Rather than focusing on one framework or the other therefore, it seems that the intersections between them are the most productive space for exploring robust, practice-focused knowledge in social work. It is in this middle ground that things become really interesting, for it is here that we can make use of the modernist search to fit knowledge together and understand how to better practice, and the postmodern impetus to appreciate different frames of reference. In this middle ground, there seems to be a multitude of ways that ideas about social work can come together, and that knowledge is formed through the questioning and challenging of ideas from different angles. We ought therefore to be wary of conceptualising the epistemological bases of social work knowledge in a way that hardens boundaries, rather than bridges them; and there seems to be much to be gained from continuing, nuanced analysis of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism in developing conceptual frameworks for interrogating, analysing and constructing social work knowledge.

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