The Postmodern Turn in Counseling: Implications for School Practice in Hong Kong

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In examining the postmodern turn in counseling and its implications for school counseling practice, it is suggested that in postmodern approaches, there is a change in the use of the narrative metaphor, a shift from the therapeutic focus on problems to solutions, and a reinterpretation of the meanings of the core counseling values that sustain the client-counselor therapeutic relationship. An integrated postmodern approach based on narratives and solutions is then suggested as a viable alternative to traditional counseling approaches. Finally, bullying as an example of school problems in Hong Kong is discussed from the perspectives of the traditional approaches and this integrated postmodern approach, emphasizing the need for research into the effectiveness of this integrated postmodern approach to school counseling.

Key words: school counseling; postmodern approaches; Hong Kong

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The second half of the 20th century has witnessed radical changes in Western culture, changes that have been described as representing a paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism (see Geertz, 1983; Gergen, 1985, 1991). It is said that practices developed in the modernist era have now become outdated and incongruent in this postmodern era when the inevitable movement toward globalization requires that theorists, practitioners, and researchers accept greater flexibility and inclusiveness in their practices to accommodate diverse populations and cultural settings. Indeed, it appears that no area of human endeavor has been left untouched by this paradigm shift. The arts, the natural sciences, and the social sciences are now questioning their basic assumptions regarding the nature of reality, the impact of culture and technology, the essence of humanity, and the meaning of life. Specifically, in these domains, the paradigm shift has initiated changes that challenge the dominance of scientific knowing, and give equal status to and recognize both scientific and narrative knowing as ways of describing the world and human life (Bruner, 1986, 1990). Yet, in view of the traditionally more privileged status of scientific descriptions, the undervalued narrative mode tends to be given more attention in postmodern expositions.

In the counseling profession, many practitioners influenced by this paradigm shift have started to question the dominance of traditional counseling approaches that have their basis in the medical model, which assumes a real world with preexistent truths that could best be discovered by scientific methods and inductive logic (see Freedman & Combs, 1996; McLeod, 1996). Specifically, the postmodern turn in counseling can be viewed as changes characterized by an erosion of the foundations for objective knowledge as well as an increasing recognition of multiple perspectives. These changes as embodied in postmodern approaches highlight the use of the narrative metaphor, the focus on solutions rather than problems, and the broadening or reinterpretation of the meanings of counseling values that underlie the therapeutic relationship.

Metaphors and Counseling

In line with the medical model of diagnosis and treatment, traditional counseling approaches employ mechanistic or organismic metaphors that treat clients as defective machines or pathological organisms (McKenzie & Monk, 1997). Using the faulty machine metaphor, counselors aim to locate and repair defects in the machine, be it a steam engine or a computer. In this manner, counseling is viewed as the process by which counselors attempt to identify and label problems in the client, employ techniques and strategies to correct the deficits, inadequacies, and malfunctions within the client, and help the client develop competencies and skills. The counselor is encouraged to take up the expert role, with expert knowledge to be transmitted to the client who is impaired by disabilities or deficits. Counseling success is then measured by the extent to which the counselor's expert knowledge is accepted, as evidenced by new skills, correct or rational thinking, and effective problem solving.

Equally prevalent in traditional counseling approaches is the pathological organism metaphor. One example is the "peeling the onion" metaphor (McKenzie & Monk, 1997). Using this metaphor, counselors aim to cut through the protective defenses of a client like cutting through the layers of an onion to expose the inner core or essential self of the client. These layers or defenses have been put up in the client's growth and development to protect the inner self from harm and pain. Thus, counseling is the surgical peeling away of the outer layers to expose the inner core and release the true feelings of the client who has been dissociated from his or her life force or passions. In this connection, the extent to which the client is able to express his or her inner truth, authenticity, and spontaneity is the measure of success in counseling. While this organismic metaphor can be viewed as pathology or problem focused, there are variations that are more positive. One notable example is the developing organism metaphor in which the natural development of an organism's growth into maturity, like the growth of an acorn into an oak tree, is compared to the process of counseling that

provides the appropriate contexts and conditions for the client's development. Interestingly, these traditional humanistic notions of human potential and growth are paradoxically being vindicated by postmodern notions and approaches to counseling.

The postmodern forms of counseling represent a rejection of modernist practices that are based on the mechanistic and the organismic models. One approach in postmodern practice uses the narrative or story as the guiding metaphor (McLeod, 1996). Contrary to the view that this is something new, the narrative or story metaphor has long been associated with traditional or modernist counseling. The analogy between the process of counseling and storytelling is highlighted by, for example, the description of psychoanalysis as "talking cure," and the development of a "conversational" model of therapy (Hobson, 1985). Many modernist theorists have also employed the narrative metaphor to make sense of aspects of their therapeutic work (e.g., Berne, 1972; Gustafson, 1992; Polster, 1987).

However, it is only the postmodern approaches that have brought into sharp focus the association of the narrative metaphor with meaning-making and social construction (see Freedman & Combs, 1996). In this regard, the narrative metaphor is well suited to describe postmodern approaches that do not aim to discover the truth. The narrative metaphor is also compatible with the postmodern assumptions that objective reality is not knowable, that all knowing requires an act of interpretation, and that knowledge is socially or consensually constructed. Essentially, a narrative has the advantage of a temporal dimension that emphasizes order and sequence. A narrative also embodies an active protagonist who represents an image of a person or agent through time, and who can reflexively monitor the story he or she tells. More importantly, in line with postmodern thinking, a narrative is always selective and does not encompass the totality of one's lived experiences, so there are always some isolated experiences that are unnoticed or unstoried. The selection of life events to be storied, however, is powerfully shaped by dominant discourses that are sustained by taken-for-granted assumptions and shared viewpoints. Thus, people make meaning of them

and of their lives through storying their experiences, and their stories are not merely reflections of lives but are constitutive of lives in that stories shape people's lives and their relationships with others (White & Epston, 1990). They experience problems when their narratives do not sufficiently represent their lived experiences, or significant aspects of their lived experiences contradict these dominant narratives. Using the narrative metaphor, counselors assist people develop alternative stories as opposed to dominant but unsatisfying stories, clarify the choices they wish to make, and re-author their stories that they will experience as more helpful (see Berg & Dolan, 2001; Winslade & Monk, 1999).

From Problem to Solution

Irrespective of the metaphors employed in different counseling approaches, it is also said that the paradigm shift from modernist to postmodern approaches is also associated with a change of therapeutic focus from problems to solutions (O'Hanlon, 1993). For example, traditional or modernist approaches based on psychodynamic therapy are evidently pathology-based. The psyche is central, being regarded as ill or disturbed, and as in an emotional state in need of healing. Thus, the person is the problem in these approaches. Other approaches based on learning theory are also problem-focused and emphasize problem solving. The problems shift from pathologies to dysfunctions or deficits in thinking or behaviors. Again, the problem is still in the person. Counselors endorsing these approaches will analyze or understand the client's problems and develop solutions, often by coaching the client to think more rationally, to learn new behaviors, or to abandon failing behaviors (see Corey, 2005; Prochaska & Norcross, 2003).

Unlike the traditional approaches that are problem-focused and search the causes or explanations of problems, postmodern approaches shift the therapeutic focus from problems to solutions, searching for the seeds of solutions in the client's repertoire of strengths and inner resources (e.g.,

De Jong & Berg, 2002), This shift is based on the fundamental belief that reality is in part a social construction, created and maintained through the use of language (Guterman, 1994). Thus the client may frame certain events as problematic through language, and experiencing these events as problems is reinforced by the way the client thinks about and describes these events. Just as the client can construct problems, the client can also choose to reconstruct difficulties in manageable and even positive ways. Consequently, by viewing the problem as not residing within the person but as external to the person, the client can begin to construct life without the problem (White, 1993). Further, within this framework, neither insight nor emotions are the focus, although emotions are acknowledged and validated (see Lipchik, 2002). What are central are the client's goals, the sense of personal agency, and the construction of stories of success and competence based on the client's goals and strengths.

Therapeutic Relationship

The paradigm shift also includes changes in the conceptualization of the values that underlie the therapeutic relationship between the counselor and the client. These changes are characterized by the shift from an almost professional detachment in psychodynamic forms of counseling, through the unconditional positive regard of the humanistic tradition of person-centered counseling, to a more vibrant relationship that is higher on sharing with the client (Kaplan, 1992). Despite differences in emphasis, most traditional counseling approaches expect that counselors exhibit behaviors such as congruence, acceptance, and empathy to establish a satisfying and trusting relationship with the client (Rogers, 1951, 1961). In postmodern counseling approaches, many of these same core counseling skills and values first postulated by Rogers as essential for therapeutic relationship between counselor and client are rediscovered and retained. However, the postmodern approaches have given new meanings to these counseling values, which go beyond the original humanistic conceptualization.

Rogers (1961) listed six core conditions that need to be provided by the counselor in the therapeutic relationship with client in order that constructive personality changes can occur in counseling. While it is generally accepted that the presence of these core conditions are necessary for counseling to succeed, his assertion that they are also sufficient for successful counseling is controversial. Briefly, Rogers (1961) specified that the congruent counselor and the incongruent client have to be in psychological contact. The counselor experiences unconditional positive regard for the client as well as an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference, and these experiences are communicated to the client. On the basis that Rogers' six conditions are met, it is asserted that improvement in constructive personality change will come about naturally. Essentially, when Rogers' noncontextual conditions or variables of personal qualities are emphasized, they can be conceptualized as three facilitative conditions of congruence (genuineness or authenticity), unconditional positive regard (acceptance, respect, nonpossessive warmth), and accurate empathy (understanding).

According to Rogers (1961), congruence or genuineness is the opposite of presenting a façade knowingly or unknowingly. The congruent or genuine counselor will present himself or herself as a person, avoiding stereotyped counselor behaviors, keeping professional distance and boundaries by being spontaneous but not uncontrolled, being consistent with values, words and actions, and being willing to share personal experiences helpful for the client, with the consideration that not all thoughts and feelings are expressed. Thus, the counselor is expected to maintain a professional relationship in which the counselor knows how to be present and at the same time keep his or her distance. In postmodern approaches, congruence or genuineness is also highly valued, although it is believed that professionalizing a relationship as in traditional counseling may reduce counselor genuineness (Payne, 2000).

In postmodern approaches, genuineness is given more elaborated meanings in the concept of transparency (Payne, 2000). While Rogers' (1961) concept of genuineness emphasizes the counselor's self-monitoring of feelings and reactions and not hiding them from the client, the postmodern

transparency concept highlights not only the self-monitoring but also the open acknowledgment and sharing with the client the limiting factors from culturally and socially formed assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors, as well as issues related to the counselor's ethnicity, social class, age, gender, and sexuality. Thus, taking gender as an example, a male therapist will acknowledge to a female client in the session his limitations as a man subject to his living in the male culture, and he will check out with the client whether she feels the operation of such attitudes in his counseling with her.

Rogers' (1961) conceptualization of unconditional positive regard refers to the counselor's respect for the client, which entails a full acceptance of each aspect of the client's experiences as being a part of that client, and there are no conditions of acceptance. On the other hand, the counselor also respects the client as an expert in the client's life, even though the counselor may have more expertise in how changes more satisfying to the client can be effectively made. In postmodern approaches, unconditional positive regard or respect has also acquired special meanings (De Jong & Berg, 2002; Payne, 2000). Essentially, counselors abandon their expertise stance, and adopt a not-knowing stance such that the relationship is more like that of a friend who puzzles with the client over what will be happening when the problem does not occur or happens to a lesser degree (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). In this way, the counselor communicates full respect for the client with a not-knowing stance, and the client and the counselor collaborate to co-construct the future.

For Rogers (1961), communicating accurate empathy is another core condition for therapeutic relationship and effective counseling to occur. Empathy involves the counselor entering into the client's inner world and seeing the world from the client's perspective. The counselor tries to understand the client's experience as the client understands or experiences it, and reflects the feelings and even the meanings of the experience verbally to the client. In postmodern approaches, empathy is conceptualized as engaging at an emotional level rather than seeking to show understanding of emotions as in traditional approaches (see Presbury, Echterling, & McKee,

2002). This engagement involves validating any feelings that the client expresses and responding, verbally and non-verbally, to the client's communication. What is deemed to be important is that clients feel they are understood, especially with respect to what they want, or what their goals and aspirations are, rather than what counselors think would be desirable or what the causes of the problems are. It is believed that understanding what clients want will usually lead to their feeling of being understood (De Jong & Berg, 2002). Moreover, rather than aiming to facilitate clients to meet idealized notions of needs and self-esteem as in traditional approaches, postmodern approaches aim to achieve the measurable goal of enriching lives (Payne, 2000). These enriched lives are constructed by clients, who will find greater hope, more possibilities, and more personal agency and creativity in enriched lives.

In summary, the postmodern approaches share with the Rogerian approach the belief in the primacy of the person. With this view, it is believed that oppression should be overturned, that people have the inner potential to deal with their lives, and that each person is to be respected as a person of worth. However, Rogers (1961), with modernist or structuralist assumptions, also believed in helping people find their true authentic selves or who they really are. In contrast, counselors endorsing the postmodern approaches, especially social constructionist counselors, believe that clients' selves are socially constructed and cannot be known in that way even though they should be free from oppression. Thus, instead of finding true selves, clients seek to create who they want to be, which could be different from what they have been. For example, in traditional emotion-focused counseling, the commonly asserted aim of helping people get in touch with their feelings presumes that it is desirable to be emotional, and there is only one way of achieving it (see Corey, 2005). In other words, there is an assumption that a person can move on only after coming to terms with what has happened. In contrast, postmodern or social constructionist counselors do not privilege a specific viewpoint, and they do not go along with encouraging people to fit into defined concepts or to seek personal growth toward the ideal selfhood

(e.g., Freedman & Combs, 1996; Payne, 2000). Rather, the expert knowledge that defines needs, selfhood, self-esteem and stages of development is believed to constrain options, leading counselors to perceive deficits and assumed inadequacies. Thus, the aim of postmodern counseling is to assist people to refuse development toward an ideal imposed by social and cultural influences, and to enrich life whereby people are responsible for developing new ways rather than personal development (Payne, 2000).

Despite that both the person-centered approach and postmodern approaches value the therapeutic relationship, the postmodern counselor would take issue with the person-centered counselor on elevating the counselor-client relationship as primary and all-important, and as one above all other relationships with significant others in the client's life, as this elevation would serve to exclude and marginalize the contribution of the client's relationships and life outside the counseling room (Payne, 2000). Indeed, the postmodern counselor would regard that the client's therapeutic relationships should be with the people who are important to the client in his or her real life. As a consequence, one implication of this reconceptualization of counselor-client relationship is counselor-decentering in postmodern approaches, which is in sharp contrast to the person-centered approach where the counselor is regarded as central in providing the core conditions for the client to effect constructive personality change (Besley, 2002; De Jong & Berg, 2002; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Payne, 2000).

Postmodern School Counseling Practice: Solutions and Narratives

School counseling practices have also undergone great changes in the 21st century (see Galassi & Akos, 2004). Under postmodern assumptions, schools can be conceptualized as providing many opportunities for students to have different relationships from those they have in families, and more opportunities for them to continuously reconstruct and re-evaluate their

identities, like texts being re-read or stories retold, with no notion of either true or false selves (Sklare, 1997; Winslade & Monk, 1999). However, students could also be entered into stories that have potential to totalize and pathologize them. These stories are infinitely variable, depending largely on the political climate of the school concerned and the theoretical orientation of school personnel in locating the roots of the problems of students. Thus, troubled students might be entered into stories about truancy or school phobia in terms of their early relationships. Paradoxically, the same students might be viewed as disaffected, when teachers' fault for not making learning more relevant to them is emphasized, or as disruptive, when the effects of peer group pressures and the development of anti-school attitudes are considered relevant. Troubled students could also be storied as both socially dangerous in terms of youth crime and delinquency, and as individually disturbed in terms of diagnostic categories such as dyslexia and hyperactivity. Invariably, the dominant discourses in schools tend to focus on deficit-based descriptions of students (see Gergen, 1990, 1991).

Thus, it is to be expected that students who might benefit from school counseling have usually been entered into one or more of these problem stories, none of which has the capacity to fully explain their distress since their problems or difficulties are seldom single issues. These stories might also get circulated in the school communities, shaping the identities of these students such that they could be labeled distressed, troubled or troublesome. The modernist agenda invites counselors and teachers to think in terms of identifying causes of problems and dealing with these problems by applying their expert knowledge. Given that student problems generally have a variety of explanations attached to them, the frequent association with deficits or personality traits attributed to students will likely put the blame on students rather than suggest a solution (De Jong & Berg, 2002). In contrast, the postmodern notions offer viable counseling alternatives. For example, when a student asks for help with a specific problem, a perceived failure or a weakness, the postmodern school counselor could assist the student to meet his or her preferred goals by avoiding assumptions of deficits, promote

various possibilities for building solutions, and co-author a new story of competence (Sklare, 1997; Winslade & Monk, 1999). .

While it is possible to adopt a solution-focused approach to the resolution of school problems, it is also beneficial for students when counselors could draw on narrative ideas that illuminate the oppressive potential of the school to enter students into pathologizing stories. The narrative approach seems particularly helpful for students whose lives are very complex and for whom there is no single solution that will not endanger their social selves. The narrative approach will also support the development of school-wide support groups to help students combat common school problems such as truancy, bullying, eating problems, and mood problems, and to validate students' alternative stories, supporting these students in changes they have made and wish to maintain (Murphy & Duncan, 1997; Payne, 2000; Winslade & Monk, 1999). Thus, efforts to integrate, for example, the solution-focused ideas of de Shazer (1988) and the narrative ideas of White and Epston (1990) are commendable and appropriate, as the principles of both the narrative and the solution-focused approaches are closely tied in with the social constructionist and post-structural philosophy (see Furman & Ahola, 1992; Milner & O'Byrne, 2002; O'Hanlon, 1993). Nonetheless, an integrated solution-focused and narrative approach will adopt a non-expert, curious, respectful, and not-knowing stance, focus on building solutions rather than searching for the causes of problems, and assist students to visualize a relatively problem-free future to linguistically create such a future or to co-create an alternative and more satisfying story based on student goals and strengths to the problem-saturated story.

Postmodern Implications for School Practice in Hong Kong: The Example of Bullying

School counseling practice in Hong Kong is perhaps not particularly different from practices in other parts of the world, considering that all counselors or guidance teachers (taking up the roles of counselors) working in school

settings have to address a similar set of common problems confronting today's students. However, in Hong Kong, given the large student population and the relatively small number of school counselors, the search for a practical, time-sensitive, and effective approach is particularly relevant (Chan, 2000). Postmodern approaches applied in the school setting as brief interventions for school problems are appealing in their emphasis on not privileging the school perspective, on their respect for student strengths and competence, and on empowering students to create new stories based on their goals and strengths. The applications of the solution-focused brief therapy approach, and the narrative therapy approach have already been briefly discussed as viable and alternative approaches to traditional counseling approaches in the Hong Kong school setting elsewhere (Chan, 2000, 2004). Thus, an integrated approach based on solutions and narratives will likely be particularly promising for some of the specific problems confronting students in Hong Kong schools. The problem of bullying is discussed below as an example of such problems viewed from the perspective of traditional counseling and the perspective of the postmodern integrated approach.

In many parts of the world, acts of school violence and specifically bullying have raised great concerns among educators and school practitioners (see Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004). In recent years, bullying has also become a common problem in Hong Kong schools, with some severe incidents turning into court cases. It is likely that school counselors or guidance teachers will increasingly be called upon to provide counseling to students referred because of their emotional reactions to being bullied at school. A counselor using traditional approaches might be tempted to view the problem as one of the student's low self-esteem and his or her need to develop skills in physical and emotional self-defense. The counselor might be further tempted to infer that the student's distress could be partly attributed to the student's denial of his or her feelings about the situation, and the true feelings of the student should be encouraged to find full expression in the counseling room. On the other hand, the counselor might also be tempted

to infer that the student's failure to resist to bullying is related to immaturity, which might in the first place invite bullying. Along this line, the counselor might assume that with self-acceptance, the student might begin to move toward a more mature capacity to defend himself and herself, and to learn effective ways to cope with bullies. In adopting this view, the counselor, unknowingly and inadvertently, is putting the blame on the victim and defining the situation in terms of the student's assumed and imputed immaturity, inadequacy or pathology.

In sharp contrast, different thoughts might govern the approach of the counselor endorsing the integrated postmodern view that includes the not-knowing stance, solution building, and story retelling. The counselor would take extra care of the trust issues that would inevitably come up when the student as a victim is subjected to the goals and agenda of the counselor, which would remind the student of the traumatic or abusive relationships in which the student has been violated by the bully. In adopting a not-knowing stance, the student's perceptions, feelings, and preferences are invited, valued, explored, and employed to determine the direction and process of counseling. Further, the counselor would think it appropriate to ensure that the school prevents the bullying, that the bully is offered counseling to allow him or her to address and change his or her bullying behaviors, that the victimized student is helped to recognize that he or she is not to blame for the bullying, nor has he or she the responsibility to develop new personal capacities to overcome the abuse, such as learning to fight back or to stand up for himself or herself. In case that the parents of the victimized student are urging for fighting back and the learning of self-defense, the counselor would invite parents to address the cultural discourses permeating this perspective on bullying, which might prevent parents from honoring their child's refusal to be drawn into a vengeful and violence-reciprocating position. While the counselor might assist the student to feel better about himself or herself, counseling would not be based on the assumption that the student has invited the bullying or has been inadequate in resisting or overcoming the bullying. By addressing power issues, the student is assisted to develop a clear

perspective on what he or she has been subjected to, and a clear recognition that the distress and the feelings of powerlessness are appropriate and inevitable given the imposition of bullying. In this way, the new and alternative story will not be written with the counterplot around weakness, failure and the need to improve fighting skills, but around recognition of the reality of terrorization and injustice and their effects on the student's identity. Further, to address bullying and other abusive behaviors within school, the counselor would involve the wider social context of the school. One strategy would be to initiate conversations that encourage the school-wide community to take responsibility for a safe physical and emotional environment by implementing school-wide policies and procedures to prevent the abusive behaviors.

With the brief introduction of the integrated postmodern approach based on solutions and narratives, and the discussion on its promising application on the problem of bullying in Hong Kong schools, it is not intended, however, to privilege this approach over all other conventional and postmodern approaches, which might have merits from different perspectives. While there are likely to be some anticipated and unforeseen difficulties in applying this approach to specific problems (e.g., Yeung, 1999), this integrated approach could be particularly appealing for working with specific problems arising from multiple causes and problems emerging from dominant social discourses confronting students in Hong Kong schools. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of this integrated approach in helping students with specific problems warrants careful examination and future research.

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