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Phenomenology and HBSE: Making the Connection

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A number of postmodern practitioners have turned to theorists such as Foucault, Derrida, and Wittgenstein to inform their intervention efforts. Yet it may be difficult for the average practitioner, or educator teaching HBSE, to make the connection between these theorists and human behavior. Phenomenology, as a theory of ontology, serves as a fundamental theory of the postmodern paradigm. As such, phenomenological concepts such as existence and essence, presence and absence, and distinctness and vagueness offer much in illustrating the link between postmodern theories of meaning-making and intervention efforts seeking change in human behavior.

Key words: Phenomenology, HBSE, Foucault, Derrida, Wittgenstein, narrative

In the past twenty years, there has been growth of social work practices inspired by postmodern thought. The strengths perspective, narrative therapy, and solution-building therapy are three prominent examples. Authors of these approaches have turned to literary and philosophical theories as a means to further elaborate their practice approach. For example, De Shazer et al. (2007) refer to Wittgenstein's theory of language games. De Shazer and Berg (1992) and White (2004) make use of Derrida's theory of deconstruction. White and Epston (1990) draw upon Foucault's theory of power-knowledge. Saleebey (2000) refers to Friere's theory of dialogue in fostering empowerment. These are all literary and philosophical theories that speak to the human condition.

Yet, these theories are not covered or even mentioned in typical HBSE textbooks (e.g., Ashford & LeCroy, 2009; Dale,

Smith, Norlin, & Chess, 2008; Van Wormer, 2010). Rather, social scientific theories are covered—such as ecological systems theory, behaviorism, life span theory, etc. These scientific theories provide solid answers to the question, “How do human beings function and adapt?” But are we to assume that these answers adequately capture the human condition in its entirety? This paper argues that they do not, and agrees with the above authors that when employing postmodern practice methods, literary and philosophical theories hold a particular relevance. For example, scientific theories cannot answer the question, “What does it mean to be human?”

Saari (1991) poignantly captures a fundamental difference in the relevance of theory between modern, traditional approaches and postmodern approaches, such as those named above:

The perspective taken in this book asserts that the adaptive point of view has provided an inadequate foundation for clinical social work theory. A theory of meaning in which psychological health is indicated by a constructed personal meaning system (or identity) that is highly differentiated, articulated, and integrated is proposed to take the place of conceptualizations about adaptation (p. 4).

If the task at hand is viewed as assisting the client in articulating his/her identity, as many postmodern practitioners propose (e.g., Sari, 1991; Saleebey, 2006; White & Epston, 1990), then asking the question, “What does it mean to be human?” or more specifically, “What does it mean to be me?” takes on a particular importance. Theories employed to answer this question will be generative in nature, as opposed to the normative theories that comprise the scientific response to explaining how human beings function and adapt.

As a fundamental theory of ontology, phenomenology is uniquely positioned to support the theories of meaning making put forth by scholars such as Wittgenstein (1958), Foucault (1981), and Derrida (1967/1997). This paper gives attention to elaborating some primary concepts of the phenomenology of both Husserl (1913/1982) and Heidegger (1927/1962),

with special attention given to how these concepts serve to link various postmodern literary and philosophical theories to human behavior, and thus, inform postmodern practice approaches.

Phenomenology

The following concepts of phenomenology are taken from the writings of Husserl (1913/1982) and Heidegger (1927/1962). Various concepts of phenomenology have long been discussed by numerous past philosophers, such as Hegel (1813-32/2010), Kant (1786/2004), St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1250/2007), Plato (c. 370 B.C.E./2008), and Aristotle (c. 330 B.C.E./2007). However, phenomenology as it is best understood today arises from the foundational writings of Husserl and Heidegger.

Existence plus Essence

One of the main foundational concepts of phenomenology is that the objects that make up the universe are not simply just objects, but rather are phenomena. This notion arises from the proposition that when one encounters these objects, and thus attempts to understand them, one cannot remove oneself from the equation. Thus it is first recognized that the object contains various physical properties and qualities that make up its existence. Furthermore, it requires accurate perception on the part of the observer to recognize these properties and qualities. In this regard, phenomenology takes the same stance as the modernist conception of reality via the correspondence theory of truth; thus when humans are the object of study, they are viewed as comprised of various bio-psycho-social-spiritual qualities of functioning. One employs observation—relying upon accurate perception of these qualities—in order to know the reality of a particular person. However, phenomenology further proposes that the object also has an essence, which represents the object's identity. And it is this combination of existence plus essence that transforms the object into a phenomenon that is experienced by the human observer.

When the phenomenon of study is a person, this notion of existence plus essence is well illustrated by Hermans and Kempen's (1993) application within Dialogical Self Theory of

James' (1890/2011) distinction between the "I" and the "me": The "me" (or self-as-known) consists of the empirical bio-psycho-social elements comprising oneself (i.e., existence). The "I" (or self-as-knower) consists of one's identity (i.e., essence). According to Hermans (1987), one's identity or "I" uses valuations "as a selecting, interpreting, and organizing process of the self-as-knower" (p. 10) upon the empirical elements of the "me" (self-as-known).

Early notions of essence, elaborated by Aristotle (c. 330 B.C.E./2007) and St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1250/2007), proposed that the essence of a phenomenon was a distillation of the essential qualities of its being. This distillation was captured by an abstract concept, similar in nature to Plato's (c. 370 B.C.E./2008) notion of ideal forms. Thus one might observe the qualities and properties of a particular dog (its existence, or in Plato's words, its substance). Of all the qualities this particular dog possesses, there will be some essential qualities of "dogness" that allow us to identify this entity as a dog. Two important conclusions flow from this definition of essence. First, while being an abstract concept, the essence of a phenomenon was conceived as lying within the phenomenon itself. And two, it required accurate perception in order to reveal the essence of a phenomenon. This definition of essence dominated philosophical thought until the 20th century, when Husserl (1913/1982) offered a radically new definition.

Husserl (1913/1982) dubbed this earlier view of existence and essence as the "natural standpoint" due to its assumption that the essence of a phenomenon was hidden within the nature of the object itself and due to the primacy given to the physical properties of a phenomenon for defining its existence. By contrast, Husserl (1913/1982) offered a radically re-conceived notion of existence and essence. When viewing a spatial-temporal phenomenon, Husserl gives primacy to the field of time for defining existence. Observation can only happen in the present. For Husserl, what gives an object existence is its persisting presence in time: the fact that when one's current present or "now" becomes past, and the following present occurs, one is still able to observe the object. Flowing from this conception of existence, the essence of a phenomenon is the rule operating to organize the empirical properties of the entity as it passes through time and is observed by humans. Mensch (1988) offers the following explanation of Husserl's concept:

An entity exists in so far it is now and continues to be now.... Granting this, a concrete being is both existence and essence. Existence (or continued newness) is required if it is to pass from present to present. Its essence is required as an ordering of contents involving this passage. What existence does is make the essence into a rule that obtains for an actually occurring temporal passage. It becomes an actually obtaining "what"—i.e., a rule for successfully ordering contents which is embodied in an actually given "persisting presence." (p. 72)

There are a number of implications that arise from Husserl's definition. First, by emphasizing that an essence arises from the temporal quality of the phenomenon, he opens the door to the notion that an essence may be unique to a particular entity rather than an ideal form. Heidegger (1927/1962) would walk through this door and fully elaborate this notion. When examining the essence of being human, Heidegger (1927/1962) created the word "Dasein" to capture this notion of a unique individual revealing oneself temporally, rather than the general term "human" (a categorization based upon normative qualities). Furthermore, Heidegger's (1927/1962) analysis argues that the essence of being—and thus the rule for ordering contents (i.e., physical properties and actions) of existence—is located in our use of language and culture, rather than in one's consciousness, as Husserl (1913/1982) proposed.

The ramifications of Heidegger's move are quite dramatic. To accurately understand the essence of a phenomenon—and thus gain knowledge of reality—one must accurately decode the linguistic and cultural factors contributing to the formation of the essence. Consequently, this becomes a project in defining meaning via interpretation, not one of accurate measurement via perception. This is why his approach gained the moniker of *hermeneutic* phenomenology.

Connections to Postmodern Theory—Wittgenstein's Language Games

The essence of the person is his/her identity, which is comprised of many facets (Hemans & Kempen, 1993). Phenomenology proposes that the essence of a phenomenon

acts as a rule ordering its qualities of existence. Consequently, these facets of identity offer many possible rules for ordering one's empirical bio-psycho-social qualities of existence, giving importance to some while diminishing the importance of others, and thus ordering one's behavior according to the emphasized qualities. This dynamic can take on an oppressive cast, as many postmodern social work scholars have noted (Gergen, 1994; Saleebey, 2009; Walsh, 1998), when the client comes to primarily view her/his essence as being the diagnosis (e.g., a schizophrenic)—a diagnosis that arises from the rules for clinical observations made by society.

If we accept the position of Heidegger (1927/1962) that the essence of a phenomenon (and hence the rule for ordering one's behavior) arises from language use within a particular historical-cultural context, we can thus turn to Wittgenstein's (1958) theory of language games to further elaborate upon this dynamic as it speaks to this process of rule formation within language use. Making such a connection involves perceiving one's lived experiences as a behavioral text (White & Epston, 1990), thus lived experiences function just like statements in a language game.

Wittgenstein's concept of language games is a theory of semiotics—it explains how meaning is created. A language game is an endeavor of socially constructing the essence of a phenomenon. This endeavor takes on the qualities of a game, as the players abide by fundamental rules and make various moves in the construction process. By using phenomenological terms to elaborate Wittgenstein's concepts of a language game, one can say that Wittgenstein (1958) argues that there is a mutual occurrence of existence shaping essence and essence shaping existence of a phenomenon. This is an important consideration to postmodern practitioners, as they focus their change efforts upon the essence (i.e., identity) of the client as a way to reshape problematic qualities of existence (human functioning and adaptation).

Key in differentiating his theory from traditional scientific theories is that it is a generative theory rather than a normative one. This is a key difference noted by postmodern practitioners (Cooper, 2001; Saleebey, 1993), as the interventions focus upon generating possibilities of essences; this is the method for aiding the client in his/her articulation (i.e., social construction)

of identity. By contrast, more traditional approaches—such as cognitive-behavioral theory, family systems theory, etc.—rely upon normative theories of human functioning to directly promote change in bio-psycho-social qualities, and through this route produce change in clients' behavior. Normative theories, by definition, already have a normative ideal that represents the sought after state. Generative theories, by definition, seek to generate new possibilities of meaning. As Wittgenstein (1958) notes,

our investigation, however, is directed not towards phenomena, but, as one might say, towards the 'possibilities' of phenomena. We remind ourselves, that is to say, of the kind of statement that we make about phenomena ... Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. (pp. 42-43)

Wittgenstein equates the role that grammar plays in ordering a sentence to the role that rules play in ordering statements (about qualities of existence) in a language game: following these rules is what makes comprehension possible. Wittgenstein (1958) also states that the grammar we use in many of our language games is so familiar to us that the rules of the game become invisible. We think we are declaring an observable fact about reality, but in truth, we are simply making a move in a language game according to well established rules.

Wittgenstein (1958) then goes on to add that in order to examine these rules—and consequently, how they act to shape human behavior—one must approach the various behaviors as belonging to a language game in which one does not know the rules. By watching in such a not-knowing stance the various moves of the game—the ordering of the qualities of existence, and thus, the meaning assigned to them—one is then able to begin consciously elaborating the rules guiding this ordering. This dynamic speaks to the not-knowing approach made popular by Anderson and Goolishian (1992) and adopted by many postmodern practitioners (DeJong & Berg, 2008; White & Epston, 1990).

Conscious awareness of the rules allows one to then question their usefulness. Are these rules shaping a positive, empowering identity for yourself (i.e., the client)? If not, then one

can now consciously choose to disregard that language game and choose to enter into another that serves to construct an empowering identity. This new, empowering identity will order one's bio-psycho-social qualities of existence in a different manner (placing higher importance on client strengths), and thus, promote one to engage in more empowering behaviors. This dynamic is well illustrated by the following quote from the strengths perspective literature:

These individuals, almost without exception, began to construct a life—collaboratively—that no one could have predicted. The interesting thing is that they did this “in spite of their illness.” In fact, their symptoms may have occurred at the same level, but the other parts of them became part of their unfolding story: “me as employee,” “me as piano player,” “me as driver,” “me as spouse and parent.” The symptoms move into the background of a much richer symbolic ecology. (Saleebey, 1994, p. 357)

Connections to Postmodern Social Work Practice

Phenomenology's position that reality is comprised of an essence (as well as existence) is what defines the fundamental conceptual rift between a modern and postmodern approach to practice. The modern discourse views reality as being comprised solely of existence (via the correspondence theory of truth). Thus, the social worker's efforts at facilitating a change in the client's life (i.e., a change in reality) focus upon affecting a change in the actions-reactions of certain bio-psycho-social qualities (that comprise the client's existence) among the various environmental systems of which the client is a part. This concern over actions-reactions leads to a focus upon human functioning within the rubric of adaptation to one's environment.

Within the postmodern approach to practice, the main site of intervention is upon the essence of reality. Thus, the social worker's efforts at facilitating a change in clients' lives (i.e., a change in reality) focus upon stimulating clients to imagine new possibilities of essence (i.e., “who I am” and “who I can be”). Generating an empowering “who I can be” leads clients to change present actions to meet this more empowering goal

(i.e., essence shaping existence). Generating an empowering “who I can be” makes the intervention more of a consciousness-raising effort (Dybicz, 2010), with the focus being upon assisting clients in the articulation of their identity within a narrative framework (Weick, Kreider, & Chamberlain, 2006; White & Epston, 1990). Thus, this is where the description arises of the client–social worker relationship being akin to that of an author–editor (Goldstein, 1990).

Presence and absence. In order to understand a phenomenon, one must both observe its existence and interpret its essence. Presence and absence refer to the process of how qualities of existence are revealed to the inquirer. Let’s first examine how these concepts are applied to making observations. Existence is defined as a persisting presence in the now (i.e., present). Consequently, observation of this existence always takes place in the present time. For example, let us say we are observing a house from the vantage of the front yard. The qualities of the house that are *present* (as in here before us) are those that are immediately observable to us: the front of the house, part of the roof, and perhaps one of the sides. Yet we bring to our observation a foreknowledge of understanding about houses: even though the back of the house is not directly observable (i.e., *absent* from our observation), we imagine it to exist. Thus if we go to look for the back of house, we expect to find it. Consequently, both what is present and what is absent speak to the phenomenon’s essence.

Now, our foreknowledge can be general knowledge about houses or specific knowledge about this house. Perhaps in the past, I have walked around this house and observed the back. So I have a memory of this house. This speaks to another dynamic of absence: absence in time. Hence, through use of imagination (i.e., memory), we are able to bring past observations to the present (i.e., make them pseudo-present). Again, both present and absent qualities speak to the phenomenon’s essence. In addition, we can also use imagination to make predictions about future existence based upon our knowledge of cause and effect (e.g., if I return tomorrow, the house will still be there).

Furthermore, I do not have to simply rely upon my own observations to understand the world. I am able to benefit

from the observations of others. In fact, by living in society, I am unable to escape them. These (absent from my present) observations of others are made pseudo-present to me via the symbolic activity of language, captured in both speech and writing (books, media, everyday conversation, etc.). Thus, for example, I do not have to directly observe the country of Japan before I recognize that it exists. All evidence-based research, human behavior theories—in fact the entire social work knowledge base—falls into this category of observations by others.

Heidegger's phenomenology takes the stance that one cannot escape this knowledge of others, or to put it another way, the cultural knowledge of one's society. One always brings this knowledge to bear when trying to understand a phenomenon. For example, learning to stop one's car at a stop sign is not achieved solely through the trial and error of one's own experience. It is achieved through one's cultural knowledge (made pseudo-present via the symbolic activity of language) reinforced by one's experiences. Hence, understanding a phenomenon is always a symbolic activity. The essence of the phenomenon arises from this co-joining of observation with cultural knowledge. As this is a symbolic activity, the meaning of the symbols must be interpreted.

There are two important implications when this dynamic of presence and absence is applied to the essence of Dasein (i.e., a unique individual). First, human behavior represents qualities of existence, or to put it another way, one is defined by one's actions. The social worker does not directly observe all the behaviors of the client; most of these behaviors are made pseudo-present via the symbolic activity of language (i.e., speech). Thus White and Epston (1990) use the term "behavioral text" to describe the collected observations of an individual's behavior. This behavioral text lends itself to many possible different orderings, or interpretations, and thus, lends itself to many possible different essences.

Secondly, the meaning of present behaviors will not arise from some type of standardized rubric. Rather, co-joining with one's cultural knowledge will be the context and the storyline of *this particular* behavioral text (qualities of existence for Dasein). So for example, if I surprise my wife with a gift of flowers, the meaning of this behavior will not only arise from

my wife's cultural knowledge about gift-giving and flowers, but also, my past behavior in performing this action (storyline) as well as recent behaviors on my part (context). As such, this act may mean "I love you," or "I am sorry," or "let's celebrate." By granting importance to client strengths and successes, post-modern practitioners help clients give new meaning to often overlooked accomplishments, and consequently, less importance to symptoms of the problem. In so doing, the meaning of these problematic behaviors changes from being interpreted as "this is who I am" (categorically defined by normative models of human functioning) to "this is covering over who I am, and who I can be" (as a unique individual) as reflected by the client's particular successes.

Connections to Postmodern Theory—Derrida, Deconstruction, and the Absent but Implicit

Above, it was noted that the understanding of a phenomenon (e.g., client within a certain life situation) occurs via the co-joining of cultural foreknowledge with observations of various qualities of existence (i.e., human behaviors which, via symbolic activity, form a behavioral text). When employed in social work, Derrida's (1967/1997) theory of deconstruction targets this behavioral text—thus it is a direct comment upon human behavior. In his well known position that "there is nothing outside the text," Derrida (1967/1997) stakes the claim that there is no inherent meaning to any symbol found in a text, rather its meaning arises from relationships to other symbols in the text. In addition, Derrida (1967/1997) applies the concepts of presence and absence to the qualities of symbols (i.e., words, statements, etc.)—noting that meaning arises not only from what is present and affirmed in the symbol, but also by what is absent. So for example, present in the simple statement "I am at the airport to meet my wife" are the meanings that I am at the airport and that I am married. Absent from the statement, but nonetheless contributing meaning, are such statements as "I am alive," "I did not go to the train station," and "I am not seeking to meet someone who is not my wife." In addition, as one connects this statement to surrounding statements of text, many more potential meanings may arise from this statement, such as "I am excited" or "I am worried" or a multitude of

other possibilities. One's interpretation will depend upon how one connects this relationship to the surrounding text.

When applied to a client's behavioral text, deconstruction claims that a client's particular behavior has no inherent meaning. The meaning of the behavior—and the essence/identity it serves to reinforce—will be determined by its relationship to the other behaviors that are selected for this text. White and Epston's (1990) often cited case study of Nick, a six-year-old boy soiling his pants, serves as an excellent example of this dynamic. In the problem-saturated narrative that Nick begins with, his recent incident of soiling his pants carries with it the meaning of failure. Within the new narrative that White helps Nick to create, an absence implicit in this statement (i.e., behavior) is emphasized, due to its connections to new behaviors selected for Nick's behavioral text. This absence is that Nick chose not to smear his feces on the wall or the furniture. Within this new narrative, this same behavior of Nick soiling his pants carries with it the meaning of a partial success because he was able to resist the influence of 'sneaky poo' at this level.

Connection to Social Work Practice

Many postmodern social work scholars have embraced, in the form of metaphor, this notion of helping clients to write a "better text" of their life story (e.g., Saleebey, 2006; Weick et al., 2006; White, 2007). They take the stance that creating new interpretations of one's behavioral text results in new behaviors. Phenomenology's notion of presence and absence gives a theoretical grounding to this position by clearly elaborating how human behavior is made pseudo-present to us via symbolic activity. In addition, the concept of absence relates to the observation of client strengths. Just like when observing a house from the front yard, one's foreknowledge of houses lends faith to the notion that if you go look for the back of the house you will find it, practitioners embrace a similar faith (arising from foreknowledge of human beings) in the notion that if you look for client strengths, you will find them (Rapp & Goscha, 2006; Saleebey, 2006).

Derrida's theory of deconstruction speaks to the creation of new interpretations of the behavioral text, and thus, new behaviors. White (2005) offers a poignant example of how Derrida's

theory of deconstruction, and the notion of the absent but implicit, can be applied quite effectively for children who have faced severe trauma via abuse. He does this by concentrating upon the absences that contribute to the meaning of the deep emotional pain that haunts these children: this absence being a fundamental value that was violated, a value that the child holds dear (e.g., "fairness"). Furthermore, the child's pain is testimony to the fact that despite the horrors that they faced, they did not abandon this value. Consequently, White (2005) starts with this absence; he gets the child to elaborate this value in other areas of the child's life not defined by the trauma. This provides a safe area to begin the process of constructing a new behavioral text—avoiding the risks of re-traumatizing the child via directly discussing these traumatic events (i.e., making them pseudo-present again via symbolic activity). Once strong identity conclusions have been developed via this alternative behavioral text, the events of trauma are then slowly discussed and incorporated into this new, empowering text. This is a project of identity articulation—an area that traditional normative approaches do not address.

Distinctness and vagueness. As stated above, when attempting to understand a phenomenon, one co-joins one's observations with cultural foreknowledge (i.e., observations of others). These absent observations of others are made pseudo-present via symbolic activity. Distinctness and vagueness speak to a quality of these absent observations of others within one's awareness, as one seeks to employ them in understanding the phenomenon at hand (Sokolowski, 2000). *Distinctness* means that the particular observation is in the foreground of one's awareness: One is critically conscious of the observation and its supporting truth claim. Once this truth claim is satisfactorily established, additional truth claims (along with their accompanying observations) are made and critically examined, that build upon the initial truth claim. It is at this point that the initial truth claim (and accompanying observations) falls into *vagueness*: it becomes so commonplace a truth claim that one no longer critically examines it. It simply becomes a pre-supposition upon which additional truth claims are built. This process of falling into vagueness—as it is being applied here to cultural foreknowledge—is called *sedimentation*. The term sedimentation is a metaphor to describe this layering process

in which earlier truth claims get “covered over” by later ones. These “covered over” truth claims may be recognized to some extent, but they are no longer critically present in one’s awareness when attempting to observe the phenomenon at hand.

These sedimented truth claims provide coherence and intelligibility to future truth claims. The important thing to note here is that even if you find various future truth claims to be incorrect, the very fact that they are coherent expresses the notion that the various presuppositions, or sedimented truth claims, supporting it are part of one’s cultural foreknowledge. So for example, when various religious conservatives and politicians describe homosexuality as a sin, it is an intelligible statement even when we disagree with it. This is because it is built upon a presupposition that the gender of one’s sex partner is a significant quality in defining the sex act (as opposed to one’s partner’s hair color, weight, height, etc.). In fact, this quality is granted so much significance that it becomes a defining quality of one’s sexual identity. Thus it is revealed that the social construct of sexual orientation maintains a hard and fast reality for most people in society.

The opposite of this dynamic occurs when presuppositions make statements unintelligible, and thus, cut off new potential truth claims. For example, in the not too distant past in American society, the concept of marital rape was an unintelligible statement of behavior. Rape being defined as “forced, nonconsensual sex” contradicted understanding of the “marriage contract,” which by its consensual nature, implied a consensual agreement to sex for as long as the contract lasted. This unintelligibility was backed up by court rulings (Thomas, 2001) as late as 1977 (State vs. Bell in New Mexico). However, due to the feminist movement during the 1960s and 1970s, various presuppositions concerning the marriage contract were “unearthed” from their sedimented state and brought back into critical awareness and examination. Consequently, the forcible compulsion quality of rape began being the defining quality of rape, regardless of marital relationship. And in the 1980s, various court rulings supported this new understanding (Thomas, 2001).

Connections to Postmodern Theory

Foucault's (1975/1991, 1981) theory of power-knowledge can be viewed as a macro theory of human behavior. As mentioned earlier, the co-joining of cultural foreknowledge with observations of various qualities of existence (i.e., the behavioral text) leads to the understanding of a phenomenon (e.g., client within a certain life situation). Whereas Derrida's (1967/1997) theory focuses upon meaning making in the behavioral text, Foucault's theory of power-knowledge targets meaning making in one's cultural foreknowledge. Heidegger (1927/1962) proposed that the essence of a phenomenon is granted to it by the social discourse operating within a particular cultural and historical era. Foucault turns his eye to the power that circulates within this social discourse. Power is intimately linked with knowledge because previous social constructions serve as presuppositions for later social constructions and thus directly influence what new social constructions are possible: "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations" (1975/1991, p. 27). Consequently, Foucault (1975/1991, 1981) views power as a producer of reality: it does this by influencing the construction of the essences of phenomena. These constructed essences occur within the societal discourse, and thus become the cultural foreknowledge (i.e., observations and consequent truth claims of others) that one uses when trying to understand one's own behavior. So for example, ecological systems theory is simply the latest iteration arising from a sedimented truth claim of the 20th century that human behavior is an activity of adaptation.

Examining these sedimented presuppositions is an activity Foucault first described as an archeology of knowledge (1966/1994). Later, he refined the description by embracing the term genealogy (1975/1991), tracing the lines of development giving life to a particular social construction. Cultural foreknowledge speaks to what are intelligible actions (various possibilities you act upon) and unintelligible actions (possibilities your mind never considers). A genealogical investigation confronts what are first believed to be hard and fast realities,

then opens up a space for alternative social constructions to be considered.

Connection to Social Work Practice

White (2004) does an excellent job applying Foucault's theory of power-knowledge in his case study of Larry, a teenage boy who held a knife to his mother's throat. Believing that this act of violence stems from cultural foreknowledge on "maleness" and what it means to be a man, White tests his hypothesis by asking Larry if, when he's been angry at his father, he ever considered the possibility of taking a knife to his father's throat. This is an unintelligible act for Larry, that is, something he never considered. White then proceeds to trace the line of development supporting Larry's understanding of men's relation to women—and thus, what made it an intelligible act to do regarding his mother. Larry's understanding of maleness is not shared by Eric, his father. White (2004) then proceeds to enlist first Eric, and then the grandfather, in tracing their cultural foreknowledge concerning men's relation to women. Consequently, the therapy sessions develop into a "men's group" where this cultural foreknowledge is shared, thus creating a space for Larry where new possible constructions are considered, and thus, new actions based upon these constructions are made intelligible. This allowed Larry to reconsider the question, "What does it mean to be me?"

By contrast, by focusing upon the qualities of functioning, previous approaches utilizing family systems theory directly attacked the problematic interaction between Larry and his mother in order to address the question, "What should be done to help Larry function and adapt better?" Consequently, the mother was an integral member in the therapy sessions with Larry. And thus, even though the mother was the victim in their interaction, part of the responsibility for remedying the situation rested upon her shoulders.

Conclusion

The scope of this paper has only allowed for a brief discussion of the theories of Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Foucault, yet the brief discussion usefully illustrates that these are all theories of how meaning is derived. If we are asking the question,

“What does it mean to be me?” these theories become very relevant in helping to answer this question. If we take the next step of accepting that the answers to this question explain how human behavior is shaped, these theories become a comment upon human behavior and a guide to intervention efforts.

When applying postmodern theories to practice, it must be kept in mind that these theories are generative in nature, not normative. This is a key distinction. If the task at hand is viewed as assisting the client in articulating his/her identity, as many postmodern practitioners propose (Saari, 1991; Saleebey, 2006; White & Epston, 1990), then generative theories serve the purpose of generating various articulations for consideration. These new possibilities arise because a client’s behavioral text is always open to new interpretations: events deemed unimportant can always be deleted, and previously omitted behaviors can always be included.

Phenomenology—being a theory of ontology—is a core fundamental theory informing a postmodern paradigm. Its relevance is not achieved via direct application to practice, rather, it acts as a floor upon which can be built theories of meaning-making. Similar to how the correspondence theory of truth and positivism (as a theory of epistemology) supplement each other to inform social work practice—not directly per se, but as fundamental theories supporting ideas such as evidence-based practice—phenomenology can be utilized with its ally social constructionism (as a theory of epistemology) to inform narrative approaches to practice, and the various theories that speak to meaning-making within narratives.

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