

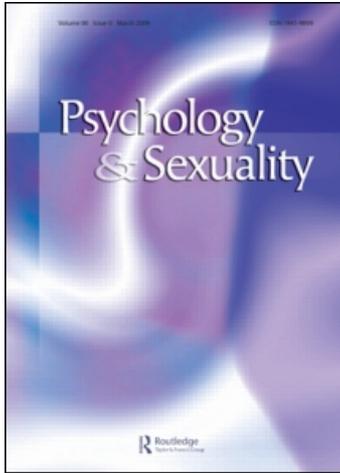
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Speculating on sexual subjectivity: on the application and misapplication of postmodern discourse on the psychology of sexuality

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Speculating on sexual subjectivity: on the application and misapplication of postmodern discourse on the psychology of sexuality

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Postmodernism, particularly within the social sciences, has served a useful purpose in subverting notions of truth, and because of this, models of positivistic linear psychological development alongside concepts of identity within psychotherapy have come under great scrutiny and deconstruction. Importantly, postmodernism interrogates the dynamics of power, calling into question the relationship between therapist and client by challenging the notion of therapist authority in relation to their clients. With regard to queer theory in particular, previous notions of gender and sexual categories have been deemed thoroughly unhinged from essentialist modes in exchange for wholly socially constructed ones; identities based on gender and sexuality are thereby seen as specifying and limiting. Many queer theorists encourage a postmodern perspective within psychotherapy where identities are subverted and undermined in the name of freeing individuals and society at large – ‘fluidity’ is seen as the developmentally desired position. Psychotherapists, however, must ask whether the paradigm of fluidity and the deconstruction of identities are simply replacing one powerful discourse with another. Furthermore, should a discourse that comes from a philosophical/political background (one that is a-clinical) inform therapeutic practice? How psychotherapeutic practice and theory can take on the insights of queer theory while at the same time honour the phenomenological experience of clients, which frequently adheres to strong notions of gender and sexual identity, will be of great importance. Queer insights cannot be applied to psychotherapy in toto. A relational approach to rework postmodern theory in relation to the practice of psychotherapy is needed: one that reassesses the relationship of post-Foucaultian gender theorising in relation to an understanding that gender and sexual identities in addition to being specifying can also be personally and politically liberating.

Keywords: relational psychoanalysis; queer theory; postmodernism; psychotherapy; fluidity; gender theory; sexuality; identity; Foucault

Introduction

Discourses that inform contemporary psychology and psychotherapy perform a theoretical balancing act that straddles a variety of dialectics that broadly fall under the rubric of modern versus postmodern. Contained within the architecture of this matrix lie binary dialectical themes such as essential versus constructed, binary versus fluid, fixed versus relative and so on. The presence of these dialectics can be readily found within a raft of different discourses within the academy: most prominently inside subject areas as diverse

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as the social sciences, identity politics, cultural studies and the humanities and as will be dealt with particularly here, sex and gender politics and their relation to human subjectivity, identity politics and their potential usefulness for clinical work in the depth psychologies with individuals. I will be arguing that though postmodern perspectives offer a fresh way of looking at cultural productions that may have been unconsciously hardened into specifying social structures needing critical deconstruction, such deconstructions are frequently speculative and divorced from many individuals' phenomenal experience; hence it would be a mistake to directly apply postmodern discourses to the theory and practice of psychotherapy without seriously interrogating both the aims and the consequences of doing so. Relational theory as inspired by Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell (1983) and further developed by Mitchell (1997, 2000) and others, including Aron (1996), Benjamin (1995, 1998) and Dimen and Goldner (2002), for example, will be offered as a way of integrating these disparate paradigms in a clinical setting. Relational theory is a contemporary psychotherapeutic perspective that developed out of Object Relations Theory and incorporates many insights from postmodern and feminist thought.

Relational theory is particularly interested in the construction and use of power in the therapeutic dyad. However, relational theory is not a unified theory, rather '[i]t lies on a level of abstraction different from any theory, it is, rather, a metatheory, a framework or schema that provides the necessary structure with which to go on building coherent and comprehensive . . . theories' (Aron & Harris, 2005, p. xviii). As a practicing 'integrative' psychotherapist, it is the author's approach to avoid therapeutic and theoretical dogmatism and remain open to therapeutic and theoretical innovation; the relational approach, in the author's opinion, is both cross-theoretical and integrative, offering a non-dogmatic yet theoretically concise view of the therapeutic relationship.

To much 'post' in postmodernism

Rational modernism understands knowledge to be a relatively value-free endeavour that can bring light to previously undiscovered domains of experience; postmodernism shows such knowledge to be value laden within its social context, reproducing and replicating the power structures inherent to that context. Furthermore, postmodernism has re-evaluated the concept of identity all together – it is seen in this perspective as neither essential nor solid: rather it is something that is created within a social context, and hence comes along with all the social values and inherent epistemic power mechanisms as a result of this construction. Furthermore, the specifying and disciplining nature of identities has taken the foreground, resulting in a general suspicion of identity categories: this is an inheritance that can be traced back to Foucault (1978).

Foucault, though famously known as a theorist of sex, talks very little about sex and sexual desire as experienced by individuals. Commenting on Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Danaher, Shirato, and Webb (2005) state that 'Interestingly, it had very little to say about sex as such, but instead closely examines the history of thought on sex and sexuality, and the discourses on sex which are used to manage populations. So, for Foucault, sex is less about bodies, erotics and desire than it is about technologies of government and technologies of the self' (p. 133). Bristow (1997) takes this argument one step further by noting that Foucault avoids describing the subject:

in relation to affective or emotional response. His research has little or no interest in the subject's inner life. Such is Foucault's anti-humanism that he denies the subject any depth or

psychological complexity. In this spirit, he firmly repudiates the realm of conflict between conscious and unconscious processes that fascinated Freud. (p. 196)

Foucault's focus on specification and discipline alongside his lack of attention to sexual desire and personal subjectivity has deeply impacted the theorists that followed in his wake; his work with regard to sexual identities as laid out in *The History of Sexuality* (1978) have become the benchmark text and body of theory in this field. Eve Sedgwick (1990) takes Foucault's results to be 'axiomatic' (p. 3); Diana Fuss (1991) takes the concept of the 'birth of the homosexual'¹ as a given, though she disputes Foucault's notion of epistemological breaks (p. 7); Michael Warner (1993) has described *The History of Sexuality* as an 'inescapable text' for intellectuals (p. viii); Dean and Lane (2001) note that the *History* has been 'canonized' by queer theorists (p. 8); Joseph Bristow (1997) states that Foucault 'was the first modern intellectual to present a critical paradigm that broke decisively with the sexological and subsequent psychoanalytic models that assumed dominance in both academic and popular cultures' (p. 169); David Halperin (1995) saw fit to entitle his book *St. Foucault; towards a gay hagiography*, a book in which he examines what he calls the 'Foucault effect' on various academic disciplines that followed his death in 1984 (p. 14). This small selection alone alerts us to the massive impact that Foucault had on the development of modern theories of gender and sexuality.

In many ways this turn in thinking was necessary. A postmodern response to its modernist predecessors rose up in much the same way that feminism rose up in response to its perception of a dominant patriarchal paradigm: gay, lesbian and queer theory rose up in contrast to its perception of the heterosexism embedded in the psychological discourses of pathology of homosexuality; and humanistic psychotherapies rose up against psychoanalytic hegemony and dogma. It must also be remembered, however, that the history of *discourse* is rooted in a history of personal liberation as well; without events such as the Stonewall riots of 1969, we would not have the discursive revisions of which we now speak. Warner (1993) reminds us that '[t]heoretical writing has come to recognize more and more what activists have been learning for years – that queer politics brings very differently sexualized and differently politicized people into a movement that, despite its heterogeneity, must address broad questions and common identifications' (p. xvi). In this statement Warner is drawing attention to the dialectic that exists *within* the queer theories themselves (as opposed to the dialectic *between* postmodern and modern theories) with regard to its pull to deconstruct broad identity specifications that strains against its acknowledgement that there are indeed important common identifications. Steven Seidman also delimits the tension embedded in queer discourses within what he denotes the 'postmodern' in gay culture. Seidman (1993) describes a Queer Nation in which the thing uniting queers is no longer same-sex object choice (or, more broadly, non-conventional sexual behaviour or identity), rather it is 'their opposition to disciplining, normalizing social forces' (p. 133). The problem with this situation, Seidman reminds us, is that '[t]his very refusal to anchor experience in identifications ends up, ironically, denying differences by either submerging them in an undifferentiated oppositional mass or by blocking the development of individual and social differences through the disciplining compulsory imperative to remain undifferentiated' (p. 133). Where the initial aim of queer theory had been to deconstruct the specifying and disciplining nature of psychoanalytic, medical and judicial discourses, it has created a prison of its own within an undifferentiated mass; the desired solution has turned into yet another problem. This problem is a direct inheritance of the Foucaultian paradigm as it was picked up by the theorists who followed him in the development of queer theory.

Jeffrey Weeks, an important early British theorist of sexuality, has a position that differs in many important ways from more contemporary queer theory in that his method is sociological, rather than an engagement with psychoanalysis (a position more associated with Judith Butler). Peter Hamilton, in his foreword to the first edition of Weeks' book *Sexuality* (first published in 1986), notes, 'it is the task of sociology and other social sciences to "deconstruct" naturalism, and to determine how actions are given their meaning and significance via social interaction. Why in principle should not sexuality² be treated as socially conditioned a phenomenon as, say, chess-playing, or cuisine' (Hamilton, 2003, p. vii). Although many sociologists may disagree that their primary role is to 'deconstruct naturalism', the greater problem with this perspective is that sexual *desire*, at least, is plainly *not* like chess-playing or cuisine – despite the fact that sexuality is more than a simple biological drive. Hamilton's analogy may be of some use by co-opting it and replacing 'chess-playing' and 'cuisine' with 'desire to play or compete' with 'hunger'. This shift of meaning is essential here because although chess-play and cuisine are likely to be contingent cultural constructs, desire for play and hunger are not – cultural constructs lay atop these more essential desires.³ Weeks (2003), in his own words, states the following:

Against all these [essentialist] arguments I want to stress that sexuality is shaped by social forces. And far from being the most natural element in social life, the most resistant to cultural moulding, it is perhaps one of the most susceptible to organization. Indeed I would go so far as to say that sexuality only exists through its social forms and social organization. (p. 18)

I would not go as far as Weeks here, instead I argue for the rehabilitation of the personal experience of sexuality as axiomatic – especially with regard to the practice of psychotherapy (which was not of central interest to Weeks). Sexual desire and the multiple sorts of sexualities that lie atop it are neither like chess nor like cuisine; although societies certainly encourage and create meaning-making around sex, society does not create sexual desire itself. The logical endpoint to this theorising can be seen in the following example by David Schwartz (1995) where he argues that sexual desire does not even need the body to exist; Schwartz deconstructs the link between sexual pleasure and physiology itself: 'none of the claims that sexual pleasure hinges on a bodily interaction turns out to be true. The extraordinary economic success of telephone sex certainly testifies to this' (1995, p. 123). Schwartz's example here takes the chess analogy one step further into a zone that I argue simply goes too far, ultimately damaging and undermining the important impact that postmodernism can and should have on contemporary therapeutic discourses. Schwartz's example does not take into account the obvious conclusion that what goes on in telephone sex is explicit fantasy play based upon imagined sex acts with an imagined body; the pleasure hinges on this association with the body – even in fantasy. Furthermore, it is more likely than not that the individual phoning such a sex line would be masturbating with his or her *actual* body even though the sexual interaction may be aural and fantasised in his or her mind; the aim of the caller is most assuredly some sort of sexual gratification. The real question to be investigating here is what kind of imagining is being accomplished over such a venue and why. The dislocation of sexual desire from the body and from biological drives can give us no hope in the desired quest to find meaning (social, individual or fantasised) within the sexual landscape. Although the interrogation of identities as being potentially limiting and specifying is an important insight of postmodernism, such stylistic speculation upon the nature of bodies as totally constructed may detract from its import, especially in the context of psychotherapy where attention to an individual's phenomenological subjectivity is paramount.⁴

Eve Sedgwick takes the tension between the limiting and liberating conceptions of identity as axiomatic within her oeuvre. Her seminal work, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), opens with a description of her conception of this dialectic in what she describes as the ‘minoritizing’ and ‘universalizing’ views within gay discourses, that is ‘between seeing homo/heterosexual definition on the one hand as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority (what I refer to as a minoritizing view), and seeing it on the other hand as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities (what I refer to as the universalizing view)’ (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 1). Here, Sedgwick draws attention to the fact that there is an inherent struggle going on with regard to gay identities, one that allows a broad identity based on sexual desire for a minority population, and another represented later by ‘queer’ that applies sexual fluidity across universal human experience. Seidman (1993) has a similar sentiment: ‘Identity constructions are not disciplining and regulatory only in a self-limiting and oppressive way; they are also personally, socially and politically enabling; it is this moment that is captured by identity political standpoints that seems lost in the post-structural critique’ (p. 134). Certain readings of queer theory seek to take away the aspects of sexual identity that are available to a minority (such as same-sex desiring individuals, differently gendered subjects or those involved in unconventional sexual behaviour); such readings effectively remove the possibility for liberating or ‘enabling’ identities to develop, or if they do, these identities are seen as being negatively specifying and particularly un-liberating. I understand these particular readings of queer theory to lie within some rather reductive understandings of Judith Butler’s early work that, Butler (1999) herself concedes, relied too heavily on the notion of performativity (p. xiv)⁵ at the expense of other processes (discussed below). This particular trajectory of queer theory that refuses or condemns minority identities stems from this and runs contrary to Foucault’s (1978) perspective that acknowledges a ‘reverse discourse’ (p. 101) in which what may be marked out as ‘other’ (e.g. the homosexual) gains resistive power in response; the sophisticated multiple operations of power as described by Foucault are frequently lost in more contemporary queer theories.⁶ Furthermore, the fear of the disciplinary powers of such an identity has, in fact, disabled the liberating capacity of such an identity.

Judith Butler’s (1990) book *Gender Trouble* represents probably the most influential contribution to gender and sexual identities and has been credited with inaugurating queer theory as it is understood today, though Butler herself would probably not identify herself as a ‘queer theorist’ (Salih, 2002). Whereas Sedgwick and Seidman engage with how identities themselves can be liberating or disciplining, Butler focuses on the slippage between anatomical sexuality and gender. Butler, using examples such as drag, implores us to think of gender differently, considering drag as a representation or ‘performativity’ of a gender that is itself performed. In the case of drag, the drag queen performs his understanding of ‘femininity’ that Butler herself claims is already performative (Butler, 1999, pp. 171–180). Following the publication of *Gender Trouble* Butler has been criticised, rightly I think, of severing any notion of a connection between sexuality and gender. In the 1999 preface to the second edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler addresses this:

[S]ome queer theorists have drawn an analytic distinction between gender and sexuality, refusing a causal or structural link between them. This makes good sense from one perspective: if what is meant by this distinction is that heterosexual normativity ought *not* to order gender, and that such ordering ought to be opposed, I am firmly in favor of this view. If, however, what is meant by this is that (descriptively speaking), there is no sexual regulation of gender, then I think an important, but not exclusive, dimension of how homophobia works is going unrecognized by those who are clearly most eager to combat it. It is important for me to concede,

however, that the performance of gender subversion can indicate nothing about sexuality or sexual practice. Gender can be rendered ambiguous without disturbing or reorienting normative sexuality at all. Sometimes gender ambiguity can operate precisely to contain or deflect non-normative sexual practice and thereby work to keep normative sexuality intact. (Butler, 1999, pp. xiii–xiv)

Butler here is drawing out the consequences of the unhinging of gender from sexuality and demonstrating that this political act (undermining heterosexual normativity by deconstructing sex and gender) is not necessarily accomplished so simply. In fact, Butler continues, it can fall right back into the trap of keeping such normativity active. Butler's response above is reflective of the huge impact *Gender Trouble* had on gender theory and her own response to the criticisms it received. Butler's work continues to be boldly philosophical, radical, and not intended to be read with an eye to clinical practice. Its impact in the academic cultural field of gender and sexuality studies has been immense. The incorporation of Butlerian theorising into psychoanalytic theory and practice is most apparent in the development of relational psychoanalysis. Butler's (2002) engagement with Freud, most notably in her essay 'Melancholy gender-refused identification', has done much to emphasise much of the 'queerness' evident in Freud's own writing, importantly highlighting the distinction between Freudian theory and the more conservative developments that followed his death in 1939 (Lewis, 1995). Butler (2002) hypothesises the potential 'ungrieved loss' (p. 7) associated with the acquisition of gender through the mourning process outlined by Freud, ultimately making the ego gendered.

Individuals, especially those who experience themselves at the margins of 'conventional' sexual and gender identity, derive great succour as well as individual and political power from their identities, identities that many individuals feel are at least relatively fixed.⁷ The imposition of a postmodern discourse upon notions of identity risks undermining the positive nature of such identities leading towards a fluid relativism that leaves everything unbound. Although Freud (1905) acknowledged polymorphous perversity and the mix of masculinity and femininity in all of us, he also recognised that, in practice, we are working with 'actually existing masculine and feminine individuals'⁸ (Freud, 1905, p. 219); the task of moving from theory to the clinic is a complex one. Part of my criticism of queer theory and postmodern approaches has been that they frequently foreground political motives at the expense of actual subjective experience. Furthermore, much queer and postmodern theory is not particularly interested in commenting on clinical work with individuals, that is, outside of its aim to deconstruct psychotherapy (and particularly psychoanalysis) as an unwitting tool of social control. Queer and postmodern theories do, however, have a place in developing ethical and effective contemporary clinical practice.

There is little doubt that postmodern critique is a powerful influence on contemporary clinical thinking – how this operates in actual practice is another question. As Loewenthal and Snell (2003) have demonstrated, there is certainly a call for therapists and counselors to become more familiar postmodern thought. Tellingly, however, the authors are more interested in postmodernism's 'implication rather than application, in thoughtfulness rather than technique' (Loewenthal & Snell, 2003, p. 2). Loewenthal and Snell are not alone in their difficulty in finding an adequate way to enable postmodern 'implications' to inform psychotherapeutic theory and practice. The implications are no doubt important, but we must not forget that postmodernism did not develop out of clinical practice, rather, it developed out of philosophy and social/cultural criticism – a different category from individual phenomenal subjective experience all together. Stephen Frosh (2006), establishing what he sees as the difficulty in the postmodern project, draws a distinction between the possible uses of postmodern thinking, while at the same time addressing its formal difficulties:

[D]espite the deep seriousness of the postmodernist project, its intellectualism and tendency to mesh deconstructionism with autocritique has sometimes made it seem cynical and anarchic, as if it had no values at all . . . this is a *misrepresentation* of the postmodern position, but it is nevertheless *symptomatic* of the postmodernism condition, in which meaning is sacrificed in the name of style'. (p. 370, my italics)

Though Frosh credits the important insights that postmodernism brings to notions of subjectivity, particularly with regard to psychoanalysis, he also sees that its careless application may symptomatically be swallowed up 'in the name of style' (Frosh, 2006, p. 370). This 'style' promotes an unbounded deconstruction of identity that eludes the subjective experience of most individuals: such an unbound and stylistic promotion of postmodern thought risks subverting or rendering senseless the important insights that postmodernism can lend to the practice of psychotherapy with individuals. Later in the same essay, Frosh comments on the necessary self-reflexivity that postmodernism brings to our understanding of knowledge, and in this particular case, psychoanalysis: 'All the talk of reflexivity, co-constructionism of reality, alliance, and recognition, may miss a necessary perception: that the democratising project becomes another colonial one if it is not based on awareness of how different – how alien and other – we can be from each other and indeed from our selves' (Frosh, 2006, p. 375). Of course we must acknowledge the dangers of this kind of colonialism that has caused so much damage in the past,⁹ but we must also avail ourselves to its potential use as a subversive tactic in encountering and challenging introjected negative conventional paradigms. Such a strategy will be necessary to avert shifting from thesis to antithesis without achieving any sense of synthesis or balance. One wishes to avoid a situation whereby postmodernism fools clinicians into believing that the practice of psychotherapy can be truly mutual and democratised, and furthermore that we do not end up with, as Frosh succinctly puts it, 'an imposition of a certain mode of therapeutic ideology' (Frosh, 2006, p. 376). My concern about the misapplication of postmodern thought to psychotherapy is exactly this, a worry that the postmodern move simply becomes a new therapeutic ideology – one that can be seen in the following quote:

Clinicians find that those who do not have a conviction of being either male or female do not usually enjoy the fluid identity that postmodernists hold out as ideal but instead often hate themselves and are riddled with shame. A fluid identity is a desirable outcome, but clinical work suggests that fluidity is an accomplishment, not a given. (Layton, 2002, p. 303)

There is clear imposition of political values in this statement in the sense that 'fluidity' is considered both a 'desirable outcome' and an 'accomplishment'. Despite all the talk of mutuality, the subjective experience of patients who do not enjoy their sense of a fluid identity seems to be relegated to the political aim of a postmodern fluid agenda: it continues a notion of 'therapist knows best' whereby the most 'accomplished' and developed position is fluidity. If one replaces the word 'heterosexual' for 'fluid' in the final sentence of the quote above, we can see the exchange of one socially dominant discourse for another, whereby fluidity simply becomes the new normative paradigm. I stress again that a balance needs to be struck here, a balance in which the postmodern notion of unstable identities is engaged with, while at the same time not used as simply another monolithic approach.

Towards a relational practice

The relational approach,¹⁰ which takes the notion of knowledge, power and mutuality in creating meaning to its very heart, still risks taking a position in which its reflexivity and

self-criticism expose it to yet another expression of hubris – that is, a notion that it is so democratised as to solve the problem of the imposition of meaning from one on to another.¹¹ The danger here, of course, is that there is an overestimation of the safety of therapeutic practice due to the deconstructive paradigm that fools analysts into believing that the process is truly democratic and mutual: ‘there is a strong argument that the act of recognition can never be entirely distinct from that of appropriation; that it is impossible to communicate with the other without translating the other’s language into one’s own’ (Frosh, 2006, p. 374). I, however, take the position that this is an inevitable dynamic in the therapeutic encounter¹² – but such an appropriation need not be seen as being always a negative one (though the risks, of course, are ever present). The very nature of ego development is embroiled in this dynamic of the other defining the self¹³ – but also, the self cueing what it needs from the other. Trevarthen (2007) has demonstrated such cueing between mother and infant through ‘synrhythmic regulation’ where ‘mother and infant communicate psychologically, regulating sympathy by expressions of emotion, passing expressions of face, voice and hands back and forth, rhythmically, imagining each other’. Trevarthen goes on to explain that infants have ‘innate intersubjectivity’ and such intersubjectivity informs and regulates the reactions and responses between mother and child. Such language will be familiar to a therapist who is working relationally, as is the position that the co-creation between self and other is persistently active in all relationships. The therapeutic relationship is no exception, of course, except that the therapeutic relationship does bring with it an extra notion, the imperative to draw conscious attention to these unconscious processes as they are activated in the therapeutic encounter; the discussion and working through of such enactments is central to relational practice.

How therapists and analysts learn to navigate around the political and ethical quandaries described above, and then how they operate around the difficult nature of identities in the clinical setting, is of vital importance. Stephen Mitchell draws attention to the potential gap between postmodern theory as it is worked through discursively, and clinical practice as it applies to the contemporary analysand. Mitchell (1996) asks of such an analysand:

What constraints do *their* biology, *their* anatomy, *their* temperament, *their* developmental history pose? How are *their* models, identifications, choices moulded together to create a gendered self-experience? . . . One of the most important features of the analyst’s role is to encourage the cocreating, with the analyst’s participation, of each analysand’s personal mythic imagination and metaphors, rather than borrowing Freud’s or those of a currently fashionable ideology. Contemporary analysands, women and men alike, are faced with the same dizzying choices that confront analytic theorists, and it is the task of the analyst to help the patient confront those choices not with vertigo, but with a sense of extraordinary opportunity. (p. 72)

Mitchell recapitulates the mantra that the phenomenon of patient experience is paramount. Yet he reminds us of this in the context of a ‘co-created’ matrix where the analysand’s confrontation with his or her gendered identity is affected by both their analyst’s and their own narratives. Mitchell also brings the idea of a ‘fashionable ideology’ into the frame. In this he is referring to discourses of the postmodern condition, which he warns can become an ideology much like Freudianism. Both Frosh and Mitchell cast a critical though broadly approving eye over the nature of postmodern theory on clinical practice; both are aware of the possible appropriation of client material in the unconscious aim of aligning it with the latest ‘fashionable’ theory. The aim of this article has been to work through the uncomfortable integration of such theories within the frame of multiple sexual and gender identities, and trying to do so without unconsciously colonising the other (in the sense of Frosh), rather, as advocated by Mitchell, carefully navigating our way through

these ‘dizzying choices’ with a sense of opportunity. Although deconstructive tendency of some postmodern perspectives encourages us to throw up our hands in defeat at the fear of colonisation (read categorisation, specification, etc.) and despair our inability to *really* understand each other due to the falseness of ego and the instability of identity, there is another option; we must acknowledge that some colonisation or appropriation is bound to occur (it is inevitable) and that despite the clear challenges to intersubjective understanding, therapists and analysts may be able, at least to some degree, to get the measure of their clients.

Although there is no room in this article to describe in fine detail how psychotherapeutic practice¹⁴ could best respond to the complexities outlined above, it is my hope that I have outlined the fundamental problem to be investigated – that is how one may thoughtfully apply (and refuse to apply) postmodern theories to contemporary therapeutic practice in the face of the described dangers of ‘colonialism’ and ‘identity instability’ especially in relation to sex and gender. Although the reader is encouraged to read up on the details on his or her own, I will finish by pointing out the areas in which impact between theory and practice is played out. The relational approach allows and expects personal constructs of sexuality and gender to come alive, intersubjectively, in the therapeutic dyad – and this is a great advantage over the simple application of postmodern or queer approaches that, valuable as they are, do not inform psychotherapy practice from a process level. I advocate that the most ethical position one can take is to acknowledge, as much as possible, the felt dynamics of the therapist in relationship with his or her client even when this involves events of ‘colonialism’, specification or encounters with multiple aspects of client *and* therapist identity. This positioning does not require that the therapist allies himself or herself in any way with a particular sexual or gender identity, only that they make room for any sexual or gendered experience that they may have in the room in relation to their client, and then make use of that in a way that may be most useful *for* the client, *between* therapist and client.

It has come to pass that the events occurring in the here-and-now of the therapeutic encounter provide the opportunity to experience and open up the relational world of the client as they respond to the presence of the therapist. Benchmark concepts in psychoanalysis such as transference and countertransference are reworked in response to the insight that the therapeutic encounter is no longer a ‘one person’ psychology where all of the psychological process lies in the lap of the client waiting to be analysed by the opaque and omniscient analyst. Rather, the notion of ‘enactment’ has come to the foreground: a term that denotes a ‘two person’ psychology whereby the event that is occurring is mutually co-constructed by psychic components of therapist and client. Jacobs (1986) describes an enactment as an event that takes place within the psychotherapist, in which feelings or memories are evoked within the therapeutic situation: such memories occur ‘outside awareness’ and ‘can alter and distort his [the therapist’s] perceptions and understanding’ (p. 296). The term enactment has developed through relational theory, though its use is paradoxical and not at all straightforward as Aron (2003) explains:

The term enactment has been used, on one hand, to create a conceptual space within which to house interactional concepts within psychoanalytic theory; in this regard it has represented an expansion of our theory. On the other hand, the term also contains and constrains the interactional dimension of psychoanalysis. By being given a limited place under the rubric of enactment, interaction is safely sealed off, limiting our recognition of its centrality, and hence setting limits on the interpersonalization of psychoanalysis. By referring to both the continual interactive dimension of all psychoanalytic process and to special and unique incidences in which unconscious variables are played out in either subtle or more dramatic form between

patient and analyst, the term enactment remains usefully ambiguous and holds the tension created by these different emphases. (p. 627)

Aron is wary of the term as used in classical psychoanalysis because it brings with it the assumption that ‘these “events” happen from time to time, maybe even with some frequency, but it denies that the patient and analyst are always enacting, that analysis is interactional from beginning to end’ (Aron, 1996, p. 212). He goes on to argue that the notion of the analytic encounter itself is a constant state of enacting – though he values some use in making distinctions in terms, he implores us not to be fooled into any sort of ease in distinguishing them in vivo. He continues, ‘Once we recognize the continual nature of enactment and interaction, once again we recognize that our words are actions and our interpretations are suggestions, the standard rules of analysis do not hold up (Aron, 1996, p. 219). By recognising the nature of enactment and continual client/therapist interaction, we come to a new conclusion with regard to the working through and re-working through of gender and sexual identities in the therapeutic situation.¹⁵ Rather than a binary or fluid narrative of gender/sexual identity formation and contemporary experience, it is replaced with a live relational working through. The function of the postmodern criticism towards psychoanalysis was to challenge the underlying power structures that were seen to exist within its theory and practice. Relational psychoanalysis has aimed to take these criticisms on board, and the notion of intersubjectivity alongside an open-eyed critical position with regard to the theory and practice of psychoanalysis has aimed to mitigate such power mechanisms. Allowing for the vulnerability of the therapist’s subjectivity is a necessary component of the reworking of contemporary psychoanalysis in response to these challenges. Such a reworking of these dynamics enables individual subjectivities to better flourish in the analytic encounter. Therapist and client arrive for the therapeutic encounter as complex individuals who will be immersed in an encounter that will provoke the internal object worlds of *both* therapist and client. Although it would be nearly impossible for a therapist to arrive at this scene absent of any kind of agenda or *weltanschauung*, it is possible to put this worldview in a sort of reserve, and then observe how it is being affected by the client, and to wonder why. Because individual constellations of sexual and gender identity are so complex and so open to experiences of shame, it is crucial that experiences occurring in therapy between therapist and client on these issues are handled with care.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this article has been to look closely at the development and impact of postmodern theories on the theory and practice of psychotherapy with an aim to achieve some clarity about how such theories may be applied or misapplied. Undoubtedly, the speculative nature of these theories has enabled us to think about our world in ways that can release us from tired paradigms that can often stand in the way of getting a fresh perspective on these issues. Freud, who was known for doing a bit of unbounded speculation himself, warned us that ‘we are justified, in my view, in giving free rein to our speculations so long as we retain the coolness of our judgement and do not mistake the scaffolding for the building’ (1900, p. 535). Whatever great purpose postmodern speculation may have, when we tie it down to the theory and practice of psychotherapy, we must also tie it down to the experience of the living individual.

Notes

1. Foucault (1978) famously dates the birth of the homosexual subject to Karl Westphal's 1870 essay 'Contrary Sexual Sensation'. Elsewhere, I (Balick, 2006) have disputed this; it is also heartily and comprehensively disputed by Norton (1997).
2. Hamilton's use of the word 'sexuality' here (and Weeks' use of it to follow) is overdetermined and inclusive seeming to include sex, gender, sexual identity and so on. This is representative of the difficulty in theorising the subject: sexual desire itself (and its relation to sexual subjectivity) is often referred to obliquely, or is absent all together.
3. Pinker (1997) notes that the dichotomy between what can broadly be understood as the 'nature/nurture' debate 'shows a poverty of the imagination, because it omits a third alternative: that some categories are products of a complex mind designed to mesh with what is in nature' (p. 57). This third alternative, also demonstrated by the biopsychosocial approach supported by Denman (2004), broadly underlines my approach.
4. For more on the intersection between existential/phenomenological perspectives and relational theory, see Balick (2009).
5. This is further supported by Salih's (2002) reading of Butler in which she states, ' . . . Butler is less interested in "the individual" and "individual experience" (if there is any such thing), than in analyzing the process by which the individual comes to assume his or her position as a subject' (p. 10). The simplicity of the bracketed statement in which Salih disposes of 'individual experience' is representative of such thinking.
6. Although Wikipedia may not be the best source from which to access thoroughly reviewed and worked-through academic concepts, it can be relied upon to give a condensed and conventionally understood appraisal of a subject. Wikipedia (2010, 16 April) describes Queer Theory's main project as ' . . . contesting of the categorization of gender and sexuality. Theorists claim that identities are not fixed – they cannot be categorized and labeled – because identities consist of many varied components and that to categorize by one characteristic is wrong'. Although I would not disagree that basing an identity on 'one characteristic' is not wise (though I would not say 'wrong') I believe that this particular perspective has made the notion of identities of any kind suspect in many a queer theorist's eye.
7. Even those individuals who experience themselves as queer or fluid in their gender or sexual identities tend to gravitate towards an identity that indicates this fluidity.
8. I would widen this to explicitly include everyone in between as well (i.e. inclusive of transgender and intersex experience).
9. See Lewis (1995) for a survey of how such 'colonialism' was used by psychoanalysis to pathologise homosexuality for so many years.
10. The use of the word 'approach' here is intentional because relational theory is self-consciously not a particular school of thought, but rather a broad way of conceiving of therapeutic process and sees itself as influenced multiply by 'self psychology, particularly intersubjective theory; social constructivism in its various forms; certain currents within contemporary psychoanalytic hermeneutics; more recent developments in gender theorizing . . . the centrality of transference-countertransference interaction . . . [and the rediscovery of Sandor Ferenczi's work]' (Mitchell & Aron, 1999, pp. xi–xii).
11. The quote by Layton, above, is a good example of this as it was found in a paper on relational practice!
12. One could extrapolate this notion of appropriation as a process that occurs in all relationships to a greater or lesser degree: the strongest appropriations being activated in relationships with primary caregivers through to important personal relationships, social groups and wider social networks. The power of such appropriation in the therapeutic encounter in relation to these earlier relationships is anyone's guess.
13. See Butler (2002) for an excellent and comprehensive perspective on gendered ego formation.
14. My own professional designation as a psychotherapist is 'integrative' – this is due to the defining and schoolist practices of registration in the field. Relational theory is applicable across all modes of insight-oriented psychotherapies – each therapeutic perspective will integrate relational (and postmodern) thought in its own way. What makes the practice relational are the main tenets discussed in this article, namely acknowledgement of the interactional nature of the work and the way in which both therapist and client co-create and enact throughout the therapeutic process.

15. For a clinical example of the therapeutic use of an enactment with regard to sexual identity, please see Balick (2009).

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