

Postmodern Parlor Games

Joachim I. Krueger
Brown University

Gergen (October 2001) argued that postmodernism challenges both the science and the practice of psychology, while reassuring readers that this challenge is not "lethal" (p. 808). Like science, he suggested, postmodernism lacks a coherent and defensible foundation. Many of Gergen's criticisms have the ring of familiarity. Indeed, science itself has always been a self-critical and even self-devouring enterprise. Its view of knowledge as being preliminary, temporary, and concept dependent is humbling. This skeptical orientation stands in contrast with the religious dogmas that science displaced and with the anything-goes approach postmodernists mistake as progress.

Gergen's (2001) characterization of scientific activity as a mere recording of reality is overly simplified. Scientific theories are admittedly incomplete models of reality, and empirical findings help evaluate any given model against its competitors (Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998). Scientists learn from comparisons rather than from simply gazing into a microscope under the illusion of perceiving reality directly. In psychology furthermore, there is no generic sanctification of the individual mind and its presumed rationality. Studies of interdependence, group dynamics, and cultural differences are scientific staples, as are studies of rational and irrational mental processes and outcomes. Surely, the contribution of postmodernism cannot be a mere reminder that these things should be studied.

The postmodernist challenge is to deny scientific methods privileged status as ways of gaining knowledge. Again, this is not new. Arch anarchist Paul Feyerabend brilliantly argued this point in *Against Method* (Feyerabend, 1975) before any of the assorted deconstructionists, poststructuralists, or arm-chair pundits that Gergen (2001) threw into the fray. Feyerabend (1975) also made his point through a psychological rather than a rhetorical prism. Visual perception requires assumptions about what it is that might be seen. When different assumptions are made, the resulting perceptions are incommensurable, which means that they cannot be compared. Like a latter-day postmodernist, Feyerabend delighted in methodological diversity, pleading for inquiry unconstrained by convention. Where Feyerabend sought entertainment, Gergen sought advocacy. Feyerabend's championship of methodological diversity sought to turn psychology away from learning and toward group interests.

Without judging the legitimacy of any particular group interest, it is fair to say that the pragmatic benefits of research have long been considered important. Good theories are useful; even today's granting agencies demand that investigators predict the good that will come from their research. Gergen (2001), however, worried either that scientific methods are unrelated to communal benefits or, worse, that they are counterproductive. If psychological science contributed to human misery, would a lethal blow not be the right thing? Why would one suggest that the historically frozen truth game abets the oppression of women or indigenous peoples and not advocate the wholesale abandonment of this game? Again, such a conclusion was not drawn because it would lack any foundation. Gergen suggested only that science should take a seat among the many varied efforts at storytelling.

Many scientific methods are distinguished by their ability to predict and thereby potentially control behavior. Predictive power is the hallmark of knowledge, because it provides a bridge from the known to the yet-to-be-observed (Reichenbach, 1951). If the power to predict entails the power to exploit, opposition to prediction would seem like the moral stance. Never mind that many good things (e.g., knowledge of how to live a healthy life) would also be lost, it is not even true that experiments necessarily increase the predictability of behavior. Asch (1956) and Milgram (1974) actually decreased predictability by bringing destructive situational forces to bear on their participants. When left to themselves, Asch's participants reported their perceptions truthfully, and Milgram's participants did not harm others. Behavior was perfectly predictable because there was no variability. In the experimental conditions, however, social influence prevailed on some but not all of the participants, and it was impossible to predict who would yield to this influence and who would not. Asch and Milgram taught how to learn from uncertainty.

Good science is rational in that it is future oriented. It seems to me that it is the postmodern rhetoric of sense making that is historically frozen. There are many ways to make sense, but what good is it when no predictions follow? Gergen (2001) alluded to the pursuit of cultural goals through qualitative research, but he did not explore how these goals may be reached by methods that limit themselves to making sense of what has already occurred (Dawes, 1991). It would be a shame to demote science to just another narrative. Scientific psychology can serve the public interest. It shows, for example, how to improve decision making (Swets, Dawes, & Monahan, 2000) and how to identify fruitless professional practices (Lilienfeld, Wood,

& Garb, 2001). If science could not do that, people might as well believe in levitation or communication with the dead. After all, these are good stories.

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Correspondence concerning this comment should be addressed to Joachim I. Krueger, Box 1853, Department of Psychology, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912. E-mail: joachim_krueger@brown.edu