Nothing in common but their first names: the case of Foucault and White

Deborah Anna Luepnitz*

Functionalism and cybernetics – both inherently conservative – have so long bedevilled family therapy that the recent interest on the part of some therapists in French post-structural theory strikes me as welcome. Unfortunately, Dr Madigan’s article does not succeed in its stated aim of showing correspondences between the ideas of Michel Foucault and the work of Michael White. I would like to point out some errors in the article, and then offer some suggestions as to how one might go about using Foucault’s work in the field of family therapy.

Stephen Madigan describes Foucault as someone who is against turning ‘people (subjects) into things (objects)’ (p. 266). It follows, according to Dr Madigan, that the family therapy of Michael White ‘maps naturally [sic] onto Foucault’s ideas’ (p. 266) because White ‘acts to liberate persons from dominant knowledge and power practices’ (p. 277).

Perhaps it is not superfluous to begin by saying that the careful deployment of metaphor and metonymy means everything to post-structural theorists such as Foucault. Language, for them, is not just the ‘packaging’ of ideas as it is for most family therapists. One cannot help but wonder, therefore, if a person who implies that one set of ideas could map ‘naturally’ onto another has been reading French post-structuralism or the I Ching. In fact, this question nettled me as early as the first page where the author referred to White as a ‘Master’ therapist, without so much as a deconstructing footnote. (The fact that he calls White a ‘non-expert therapist’ later in the article only compounds the problem; Foucault would never agree to the definition of a therapist as a ‘non-expert’.) My first point is this: ‘mastery’ and

* Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic, Two Children’s Center, 34th Street and Civic Center Boulevard, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA.
'nature' are key themes for Confucius. *Foucault's entire project is written against them.*

My second point concerns the term 'subject'. To return to the statements quoted above, it is essential to point out that Foucault's notion of the subject cannot be reduced to the word 'person', as per Dr Madigan's casual substitution. The Foucauldian definition of the subject disallows any notion, however well intended, of 'liberation'. The Foucauldian subject might, if anything, be known for its resistance to liberation. Foucault would agree more than disagree with Louis Althusser's gloomy pun, 'To be a subject is to be a subject'.

Foucauldian explanation – and post-structural explanation in general – is negative. By this I mean that its project is to criticize and deconstruct – not to advance solutions or new therapies. A Foucauldian analysis of White's work would demonstrate how that work, although apparently benign, is none the less part of those 'technologies of the self' through which, Foucault claimed, the modern state rules. There is, simply, no 'outside' to this reality of the constitution of subjectivity. Foucault might see some technologies as more oppressive than others, but nowhere would he propose 'liberation' from them. In his use of the word 'liberation', Stephen Madigan introduces now the language of liberal humanism, which does not map – naturally or otherwise – onto the anti-humanistic criticism of Michel Foucault.

As for the technique of 'externalizing the problem', it is true that both Foucault and White have criticized the medicalization of experience – but family therapists from the beginning have boasted of their non-medical reframing of problems. The difference between 'encopresis' and 'Sneaky Poo' is less earth-shaking than it seems to Dr Madigan. A convinced Foucauldian reading this case would see a set of power/knowledge systems at work, including: the nuclear family, the helping institution, and the culture's discursive practices – just as coercive as any other part of the system – around dirt. One can only imagine Foucault cringing at the earnest and cheerful intention of Mr White – or any therapist – trying to help a family 'beat' a symptom. (A similar point is made by Vincent Fish (in press), in a rigorous critique of White.)

Some critics, including some feminists and Marxists, have found Foucault too pessimistic, too occupied with analysis and disparaging of planned change. (See, for example, a paper by Isaac Balbus (1987), 'Disciplining women: Michel Foucault and the power of feminist discourse'.)
Using Foucault in family therapy

Whether or not one is bothered by the Foucauldian indifference to attempts at reform and remedy, one could make compelling and politically challenging use of Foucault in family therapy. I will outline a few hypothetical projects to illustrate my point. Note that these would be works of criticism, involving research that is more archival than empirical.

(1) Foucault was interested in marginalized or 'subjugated' knowledges, i.e. those bodies of information that become effaced by dominant cultural practices.

*Project 1:* Research the ways in which the writings and methods of nineteenth-century social workers and community activists were subjugated in order to generate family therapy's current creation myth, according to which the field was conceived by brave white male psychiatrists in the 1950s.

- To what extent is the therapy we do now a replication of those practices?
- What was lost?
- Where are the moments in precisely which texts in which we can locate the erasure of the earlier work?

(N.B. I have discussed this creation myth (Luepnitz, 1988) and Lois Braverman has done some fascinating work on this question (Braverman, 1986) but no-one has done a full investigation of it, nor used the Foucauldian methodology.)

(2) In *Discipline and Punish* (1979), Foucault described an apparatus called the 'Pantopticon' – a device described by Jeremy Bentham as a means of controlling citizens through observation or through the threat of constant observation.

*Project 2:* How could his analysis inform a critique of the one-way mirror in family therapy?

(3) Foucault was interested in how technologies of the self create 'docile bodies' willing to submit to experts.

*Project 3:* Show how this applies to the practice of informed consent in family therapy.

- How well informed are families whose tapes are used in front of huge audiences?
- What can be understood about the differences that exist between allegedly verbatim transcripts from videotapes, and the videotapes themselves?
- What are the implications of those changes for the power/knowledge system of family therapy?
I must add that the project of reading Foucault itself should not be taken lightly. Anyone who has done so can attest that his style is uncharitable and his ideas yield but grudgingly to the reader. This is even more the case for those who have not read Freud and the French structuralists, with whom Foucault is in constant, if not explicit, dialogue.

A Foucauldian ‘impact’ on family therapy would not have to do with practising different techniques, nor would it mean necessarily the end of practice. The point would be to understand ourselves differently as practitioners.

The article in question does something else, I’m afraid. It attempts to authorize one clinician’s work by dropping a few poorly understood terms from an erudite French philosopher. Nothing could be more anti-Foucauldian.

References


Fish, V. (in press) Post-structuralism in family therapy: interrogating the narrative/conversational mode. Journal of Marital and Family Therapy.


Foucault's famous essay, "What Is An Author?" explores the author and the complex relationship between author, text, and reader. This essay is the text of a lecture presented. But the consequences of their discovery of it have not been sufficiently examined, nor has its import been accurately measured. A certain number of notions that are intended to replace the privileged position of the author actually seem to preserve that privilege and suppress the real meaning of his disappearance. The author's name is a proper name, and therefore it raises the problems common to all proper names. (Here I refer to Searle's analyses, among others.) Obviously, one cannot turn a proper name into a pure and simple reference. Mehrabian has researched people's instinctive reactions to hundreds of first names. It's striking how many positive associations some names carry, and how negative the connotations of others turn out to be - particularly when it comes to linking names with "success", which Mehrabian takes to include ambition, intelligence, confidence and other such valuable workplace attributes. So what kind of name does it take to reach the top of the tree career-wise? The name on the other half was Lauren - seen as much more white and middle class. In one study Lauren got five times more call-backs than Lashanda, says Satran, but in another study, the rate was similar for both names. "I've seen similarly conflicting studies," Satran adds. The First 3 Chapters of main body of work are reproduced here. The use of concepts of discontinuity, rupture, threshold, limit, series, and transformation present all historical analysis not only with questions of procedure, but with theoretical problems. It is these problems that will be studied here (the questions of procedure will be examined in later empirical studies - if the opportunity, the desire, and the courage to undertake them do not desert me). These theoretical problems too will be examined only in a particular field: in those disciplines - so unsure of their frontiers, and so va