The Postmodern Life: A Psychological Perspective

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So, what is postmodernism? It seems to me that rather than seeing humanity as an ocean of individuals, postmodernists think of humans as "social constructs." We do not exist or think independently of the community with which we identify, so we can't have independent or autonomous access to reality. All of our thinking is contextual. Rather than conceiving the mind as a mirror of nature, postmodernists argue that we view reality through the lens of culture.

Walter Anderson postulated; post-modem progress requires a continuing, ongoing "stepping out" of old reality constructs to engage in the social construction of reality. I contend it is theoretical what necessitates social and individual self-progress yet; the effect of this paradigm shift has yet to be fully unveiled.

The post-modem world is shaped by pluralism, democracy, religious freedom, consumerism, mobility, and increasing access to news and entertainment. Residents of this post-modem world are able to see that there are many beliefs, multiple realities, and an exhilarating but daunting profusion of worldviews - a society that has lost its faith in absolute truth and in which people have to choose what to believe

The Post-Modern Family

Thirty years ago, the number of patients with serious mental health problems seeking care in general hospital emergency departments has increased exponentially, with special clinical challenges. At the same time began the emergence of the post-modem family. Three important characteristics were noted by social historians of family dynamics: adolescent indifference to the family's identity; instability in the lives of couples, accompanied by rapidly increasing divorce rates; and destruction of the "nest" notion of nuclear family life with the liberation of women. At that time, there was little change in patterns of child socialization. The dramatic shift from mothers caring for young children in the home to the use of paid providers occurred soon after in the developed world, reflecting mothers' increasing workplace participation.

Postmodernism, by no means simple to define, particularly when describing the family construct. Postmodern life tends towards elaboration, eclecticism, enhancement, and inclusiveness; it dismisses the existence of an absolute reality and is deeply distrustful of the concept of human progress. If we define the current ongoing effort to remake contemporary family life as the post-modem family, such a definition carries with it overtones from the definition of postmodern art and literature. In these fields the term post-modem signals the end of a familiar pattern of activity and emergence of new areas of endeavor whose activities are unclear and whose meanings and implications are not yet well understood. Thus, the post-modern family is characterized by uncertainty, insecurity, and doubt.

Full consensus on the definition of the emerging post-modern family structure has not been reached, despite recognition of the need for better understanding of the variety of human families in the post-modem period and insight into how large-scale social patterns affect personal and domestic relationships

While single parent, surrogate mother, and gay and lesbian families, and other variants of the post-modem family may be viewed as the negative results of the trends described above, or as breakdown products, they also reflect the following:

1. Disillusionment with the optimistic assumptions of human progress and with the universality and the regularity of the laws of science; hence, lack of faith in the previously established order.

2. The uncoupling of economic forces underlying social conformity, such as the need for women to marry advantageously to survive financially and to transmit their class status to the next generation, or the need to bear children in wedlock for them to inherit family land or other property that would be their source of livelihood.

3. The influence of the electronic media, which both reflect and legitimize family diversity.

In addition, electronic communications and other media also foster anonymous intimacy through radio talk shows, advice columns, electronic mail, computer bulletin boards, and commercially provided advisory/counseling and other personal services available in the United States through area code 900. This relatively anonymous and instant intimacy in turn becomes a new basis for anonymous face-to-face social support for our children today.

On-site day care, personal computers, electronic communications that permit work at home, and the lack of a defined working day for the higher occupational classes increasingly blur the boundaries between the workplace and the home. This interpenetration of home, work, and global media coverage creates the permeability of the post-modem family. The media gather the post-modern family around the campfire of the global village, bringing the outside world into the living room and the bedroom.

The family of today is emerging into the saturated family, whose members feel their lives scattering in intensified busyness. In addition to absorbing exposure to myriad values, attitudes, opinions, lifestyles, and personalities, family members have become embedded in a multiplicity of relationships. The technologies of social saturation (e.g. the car, telephone, television, and jet plane) have created family turmoil and a sense of fragmentation, chaos, and discontinuity.

The home, no longer a refuge of harmony, serenity, and understanding, may become the site of confrontation between people of different ages and genders, who have personal ideologies and social affiliations that are as diversely suspended as exotic species in a tropical rain forest.

Human potential organizations, such as Landmark Education, ease this clatter overload by holding workshops in which participants learn to perceive their personal past history to be as mechanical and meaningless as television images. The human potential movements redefine personal identity in terms of the individual's choice of commitment to future goals.

The Post-Modern Child

With childcare shared between family and day care, new problems have arisen. While some children thrive on dual socialization, others languish, unable to adjust to either environment or to the demands of daily transition from one environment to the other. The young child may be unable to form the necessary communication link between the two environments.

Responsibilities may not be divided clearly between home and day-care center; as a result, neither may provide some crucial aspects of child rearing. For example, in the United States, neither the day-care center nor working parents may perceive themselves in charge of helping the child to develop the capacity to exercise self-control nor of teaching the child basic social demeanor, such as table manners, greeting rituals, relating of daily events, and interview skills required for social orientation and exploration.

In the United States, concerns have been expressed about children raised in impoverished single- parent households by young mothers who are still children themselves. There also are problems with post-modem children of middle-class families as permeable families "hurry" their children to take on the physical, social, and psychological trappings of adulthood before they are prepared to deal with them. Permeable families tend to thrust children and teenagers forward to deal with realities of the outside world at ever-earlier ages, perceiving them as competent to deal with the steady diet of overt violence, sexuality, substance abuse, and environmental degradation that they view on television.

Such abuses in the United States and Europe often translate into worse abuses in poor neighborhoods of large third world cities, where unsupervised children of all ages are lured, together with adults, into watching sexually explicit "adult videos". Countries such as the United States, as well as places in the developing world that have departed most widely from institutional family values, appear to be particularly vulnerable to such abuses in the post-modem era

Although parents remain very concerned about their children in the postmodern world, perceptions of parenting have changed. In the modem era, parenting was intuitive and child-health professionals guided parents by teaching them the general norms of development. The focus of parent education was development of the whole child. In contrast, parenting in the post- modern world is perceived as a learned technique with specific strategies for dealing with particular issues. The target has shifted from the whole child to developing the child's positive sense of self-esteem. In the modern era, parents made the effort to fit advice to the particular needs of the child; post-modern techniques may be easier for parents—but the child may be deprived of customized treatment. Moreover, the focus on the whole child should not be lost.

Certainly, the nuclear family was not perfect. The revolution that led to post-modern life corrected old imbalances in society through perseverance of parental and gender role distinctions. Yet these radical social changes may have created new imbalances by increasing demands on children and adolescents as illustrated in the following tables.

Table One: Similarities Between Post-Modern and Pre-Modern Families

Modern	PreModern and PostModern
Sharp Distinction Between Home and Workplace	Workplace and Home Are Often The Same
Romantic Love	Contractual/Consensual Love
Idealization Of Mother As Only Legitimate Caretakes	Shared Parenting/Working Mother
Protected Late-Maturing Child	Early Social Maturation in Full View of Adult Activities

Modern	PreModern and PostModern
Child-Centered Parent Focused On The Needs Of The Child	Parent-Centered Parent Looks to Child Life Style Goals, Social Gratification
Individual Identity Uniquely Defined By Personal Narrative And Value Judgments	Identity Fluidly Defined by Social Context
Stormy Adolescence To Establish Autonomy And Separate Identify From Parents	More Peaceful Adolescence With Less Need to Establish Separate Residence

Table Two: Differences Between Post-Modern and Pre-Modern Families

Pre-Modern	Post-Modern
Largest and Most Dependent on Kinship Ties	Smallest, Least Dependent on Kin
Most of Life Enacted on the Immediate Physical Plane	Most of Life Enacted on the Electronically Removed or Symbolic Plane
As illustrated by: Manual Labor	As Illustrated By: Brain Work
Direct Social Encounters	Electronically Mediated or Symbolic Encounters
Physical Conflicts	Symbolic Conflicts

Pre-Modern	Post-Modern
Small Number of Stable Physical and Social Contexts	Very Large Number of Shifting Physical, Symbolic and social Contexts
Low Requirements for Information Storage Processing Skills	Very High Requirements for Abstract Information Storage and Abstract Processing
Compulsory Participation in All Aspects of Communal Life, Lack of Privacy and Personal Choice	Optional Participation in Most Aspects of Communal Life, High Levels of Privacy and Choice
Functional Identity Limited to Small Number of Predetermined Social Roles	Identity Shifts With Many Discontinuous Obligatory and Optional Social Roles
Authority Figures and Sex Roles Determining What is Right and Wrong; Literal, Fundamental Beliefs	Pluralistic, Relativistic Values, Non-Literal Symbolic Intrpretations of Most Claims to Truth

Child-rearing advice that repeats the earlier ideological positions of the modem US family, with its high emphasis on autonomy, personal gratification, and self-expression, is called into question. From infancy onward, certain postmodern child-care routines that influence individuation and altruism may draw upon pre-modern adaptations directly, just as the postmodern pattern of sustained breast-feeding reverts to early pre-modern practices. Some contribute to life-long learning, using methods appropriate to newly discovered infant learning processes and capacities. The literature points to the need for consumer values inherent in the "good life" of the modern family to shift radically for the protection of the family itself.

Ability to adapt is a major characteristic of well-functioning families during rapid social change. While flexibility may be an inborn trait, families can be assisted to adapt through social policies and programmers that facilitate change through the provision of resources and education. Equally important is an authoritative reinterpretation of traditional values to meet the needs of emerging lifestyles. This calls for new definitions of progress that reverse the negative aspects of the post modernity

The inherent instability of the family, and the social framework which supports it, impart by the postmodern deconstructions of epistemological certainty, has left its rational mark upon the psychotherapeutic enterprise as surely as it has upon social theory.

The Post-Modern Self

Social saturation has disrupted traditional ways of understanding oneself. As one is increasingly faced with new relationships and their attendant demands for new behavior, for new "ways of being," a steadfast sense of just who one is is shaken, particularly as formerly confirming cues from face-to -face relationships increasingly give way to impersonal and relatively short lived forms of contact. Here, individuals find themselves, with much discomfort, "playing roles to achieve social gains"

The self engages in a release from the constraints of singular identity, which permit one to actually enjoy the varieties of self-experience available now. At this juncture the implied sense of discomfort and superficiality associated with these facades are abandoned in favor of an optimism affiliated with the vast possibilities now at hand. Indeed, once the compunction to

discover a "true and enduring self' is abandoned "life becomes a candy store for one's developing appetites"

Over time, however, the accumulation of such manipulations of the self erodes the modernist confidence in an intrinsic -an essential- self, conceding psychic field to what is termed the stage of the "parody personality." So it is that in a postmodern world, it is both possible to play all roles, and feel all emotions at the same time that one understands that all roles and all emotions are themselves in perpetual jeopardy of being annulled and that all things can be made present and presently overthrown by a change in perspective.

In this way, while all others can be made fully coincident with the self, the self itself is no longer discernible, for as it becomes all others it simply cannot be its own particular self. As the things one feels and thinks can be (re) defined as other, then so has self become other. And as a container of "otherness" the self becomes a kind of totality in which all things may be present. And, finally, if all things are present then the idea of the absent is foreclosed (the singular self is no longer perceived), and psychic space implodes. In a paradox of the postmodern, the fully present self is absent. Thus, we may say that because the self is fully saturated, the fully saturated self becomes no self at all.

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