

CHAPTER ONE

WHERE DO THE IDEAS BEHIND 'TOOLS FOR HARD CONVERSATIONS' COME FROM?

A post-structural stance is about questioning and wondering; it is not about having answers, nor understanding everything. It is a viewpoint that is a protest against normative ways of thinking, focused on appreciating people, families, and couples as experts in their own lives, intent on co-creating alternative ways of being and living (Dickerson, 2014).

Post-structuralism—it's a big word for a reason! It captures a shift in thinking in the 1960s that has had seismic effects on many areas of academia, culture and therapeutic practice. You might be familiar with models like Solution-Focused Therapy, Narrative Practice, Strengths Based Practice and Appreciative Inquiry. These approaches and others all have one thing in common - they are underpinned by post-structuralism. In this book we refer to post-structuralism in terms of human service work specifically, not the other areas it has also had an impact, like architecture, technology and art. As Dickerson (2014) further clarifies, post-structuralism is:

a philosophical movement that was a shift from a modernist to a postmodernist influence on architecture, painting, literature, music, politics, physical and biological sciences, and which began to infiltrate the field of psychology in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

As the post-modern story developed, the plot suggested that the enlightenment meta-narratives of science and logic

had failed to culminate in the hoped-for freedom and self-realisation for all. Consequently, they came under a great deal of scrutiny towards the end of the 20th century (Batha, 2006).

In order to understand post-structuralism better, it is helpful to first have some understanding of its predecessor: structuralism. Structuralism is essentially a reductive approach to human behaviour that aims to find universal truths that are common to all humans; in other words, it valiantly aims to create 'normality'. A structuralist approach is focused on the idea that the universe and everything in it can be studied according to laws, norms and structures, and that people and their experiences can be defined and categorised in the same way as other physical objects. In particular, structuralism focuses on the importance of systems as a way of structuring our thoughts and behaviours, and that to know the true essence of someone we must peel away their many layers to get to the core of who they are and what they are about. It is only then that a professional human service worker can start to influence their client's behaviours and intervene with real and lasting change.

Post-structuralism developed in France in the 1960s from the work of Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, Deleuze and Baudrillard. Post-structuralism provides a critique of the humanist subject as rational, autonomous and self-transparent; a theoretical understanding of language and culture as linguistic and symbolic systems; and a belief in unconscious processes and in hidden structures or socio-historical forces that order and govern our behaviour. Post-structuralism's innovations involve the reintroduction and renewed interest in history, especially the 'becoming' of the subject, where genealogical narratives replace questions of ontology or essence (Besley & Edwards, 2005).

Post-structuralism is more interested in what makes us all different and unique, and focuses on the effects that

language, culture and discourse can have in structuring our thoughts and actions. If we use a football metaphor as an example, a structuralist approach would be interested in the positions of the players and the rules of the game that enable the game to be played in a certain way. A post-structuralist approach, however, would be more interested in the discretionary moves that each player makes and their thought processes behind the moves.

Structuralism emphasises constancy and stability and believes that once discovered, a person's identity can be assumed and taken for granted, and that it is relatively unchanging over time. Post-structuralism emphasises change and flow through time and believes that identity is a continual, ongoing, moment-by-moment developing project. To use the football metaphor again, a post-structuralist sees it as a given that there are rules, designated positions and plans in the game, but believes that if attention is primarily given to these, and not to the unique skills, resources and abilities of individual players, then we will miss the most powerful essence of each individual, and the team as a whole.

It is important to note that structuralism and post-structuralism are not binary opposites, as you might assume. Post-structuralism can and does work within a structuralist context and believes that without it there may very well be chaos. Of course on many important levels it is critical to have structures and rules in our society. Imagine how we would all be impacted if we didn't have clear laws in place to define what's safe for everyone on the roads? Or if we didn't have structures in place to provide basic services for people like schools and health care? So post-structuralism acknowledges the need for such structures, but attempts to take the conversation further. These rules and structures are just a starting point, the basic bottom lines, and when we let that take all the attention in difficult conversations we can miss a lot of what makes people unique and special. The post-structuralist approach developed as a response to this risk, but not a rejection of it.

In the psychological models proposed to explain human experience, an assumed universalism often seems to hide the particularities of issues such as ethnicity, class and gender. An emphasis on normativity, disorder and diagnosis can be at odds with an appreciation of the unique and the different (Batha, 2006).

In the human services field, a structuralist approach to a problem focuses on the worker assessing, diagnosing and treating the person so that they can function in a 'normal way', where 'normal' is determined by the culture that both the worker and the client are living in. However, expectations of what 'normal' means are very different according to the many cultures around the world. The post-structuralist approach is more interested in identifying who the person wants to be and where the person wants to get to in their lives, and the unique skills, strategies and resources they have that can help them to get there.

Here's another analogy: the education system in Australia has a 'zero tolerance to bullying' policy. If a child presents to a structuralist therapist with a bullying issue, their behaviour would already have been assessed in the school environment and they would be coming to the therapist with a label attached, i.e. 'bully'. The therapist would focus on how they can change this unacceptable behaviour so that the child can fit within the 'normal' school culture where bullying is clearly not allowed.

A post-structuralist therapist would be more interested in what Michael White (2003) called the '*absent but implicit*' in the bullying behaviour. They would be interested in hearing *alternate stories* within the experience, rather than only focusing on the bullying story, with the intention of seeking to uncover implicit hopes, beliefs and preferred identities that are important to the person, which might be leveraged upon as a way to change behaviour.

Here's an example [* indicates a fictitious name]:

Max*, a nine-year-old boy, has been referred to you by his parents at the insistence of the school Guidance Officer because he has been exhibiting bullying behaviours at his primary school.

If you were to take a structuralist approach to working with Max, the focus might be on assisting him with ways to 'fit' into a socially acceptable norm and offering psycho-educational strategies for how to avoid hitting when he is feeling angry. If you were to take a post-structuralist approach, your focus would be on asking about the effects of 'the anger' on all those involved, and starting with the assumption that the 'hitting' of another student is only one effect that is at play. Other effects might be: getting teachers involved, getting sent home from school, having students avoiding him, having to come and see a counselor, etc. This line of questioning would give Max an opportunity to evaluate these effects on himself and others and determine whether they were okay or not, and why. Hence, in this way you would be eliciting an alternate story and inviting Max to take a position on the problem's effects (White, 2005), such as: "it's not okay for students to avoid me because I want to have friends" (we will go into much greater detail on the steps in this process in following chapters).

This would lead to a very different conversation about his absent but implicit hopes of making friends, and maintaining friendships, and can then be explored in more detail in the context of 'the anger':

- What does he think 'the anger' is trying to tell him?
- How can 'the anger' serve as a reminder of what's important to him?
- How would he like to be responding when 'the anger' is present?