

## The pleasure of the bottomless: postmodernism, chaos and paradigm shifts

A response to Di Marks-Maran *Nurse Education Today* (1999) 19(1): 3–11  
Reconstructing nursing: evidence, artistry and the curriculum

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In her paper *Reconstructing Nursing: Evidence, Artistry and the Curriculum*, Marks-Maran (1999) attempted to outline a new postmodern paradigm for nursing. Whilst I fully support this timely discussion of new insights into nursing theory and practice, Marks-Maran unfortunately presents a very idiosyncratic version of postmodernism which is both simplistic and, at times; inaccurate. My main concern, however, is with her assertion that postmodernism offers a new paradigm for nursing, since she misses the fundamental point that postmodernism is not a critique or replacement for the modernist paradigm, but a challenge to the very notion of paradigms. Rather than attempting to replace the modernist paradigm of nursing, then, postmodernism offers what Spivak called 'the pleasure of the bottomless' in which the perceived certainties of science are decentred and the authority by which all knowledge claims are made is questioned.

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### Introduction

This paper is written in response to an earlier publication in *Nurse Education Today* by Di Marks-Maran (1999) on a new postmodern paradigm for nursing. It is refreshing and heartening to see some acknowledgement of postmodernist thought finally finding its way into the UK academic nursing press, and Marks-Maran must be doubly congratulated for also having the courage to stand up in front of a largely antipathetic audience at the 1998 *Nurse Education Tomorrow* conference and deliver a version of this paper. But my pleasure at seeing postmodernism finally getting on to the agenda is somewhat tempered by my concern at the way that it has been (mis)represented in Marks-Maran's paper.

In writing about any topic for an academic audience, we might expect at least some passing reference to the key thinkers who have shaped that discipline. This is particularly true for a subject such as postmodernism, which will be comparatively new to most nurses, and in which the writer can make few assumptions about background understanding. It is perhaps surprising, then, that Marks-Maran makes no reference to Lyotard and his seminal work *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard 1984), to Derrida's key texts from the late 1960s, to Foucault's extensive body of writing, to Deleuze,

to Baudrillard or even to more recent English-speaking writers such as Richard Rorty or Walter Truett Anderson. Instead, we are presented with a rather curious and very idiosyncratic version of postmodernism which, apart from being at best misleading and at worst inaccurate, does not do justice to the complexity of postmodernist thought nor to the spirit of postmodernist writing. Let us, then, examine just what Marks-Maran's version of postmodernism looks like.

### Postmodernism and paradigm shifts

Marks-Maran's basic thesis is that postmodernism represents a fundamental paradigm shift in all disciplines, including nursing, from a modernism underpinned by positivist science to a postmodernism underpinned by chaos theory. I will begin by examining her notion that a paradigm shift is underway, that 'within all disciplines, professions and other areas of human endeavour there is evidence of a new way of thinking about the world and what is happening' (p. 3). This thesis belies a lack of familiarity with the key modernist and postmodernist texts, which is revealed in a number of fundamental errors. Firstly, as Nyatanga and Johnson (1999) rightly point out in their accompanying commentary to her paper,

Marks-Maran falls into the same trap as Kuhn of employing the term 'paradigm' inconsistently and also by attempting to apply it far more widely and loosely than Kuhn ever intended. For example, she tells us that 'in nursing, at any one time, there is a paradigm shift constantly taking place' (p 5), whereas for Kuhn, of course, the whole point is that paradigm shifts are *sudden* reactions to a build-up of unsolved puzzles. In a similar vein, she adds that 'it is this ideological and/or economic shift which heralds any paradigm shift' (p 5), whereas, according to Kuhn, the supporters of the old paradigm usually muster ideology and economics *against* the new paradigm, and it is the paradigm shift which heralds the new ideology and economy. When Marks-Maran writes about paradigms and paradigm shifts, then, she is referring to something rather broader than the usual scientific and philosophic understanding of the term.

Secondly, her notion of the hero-scientist, bravely 'stepping out' (her favourite metaphor) of the dominant paradigm to establish something new, runs counter to much postmodernist thought. Foucault (1974), for example, argued that paradigms (or what he referred to as *epistemes*) do not shift because certain eminent people decide to 'step out', but rather the archive of knowledge which underpins those *epistemes* causes people to think in certain ways. Thus, Galileo did not initiate a paradigm shift by declaring the sun to be at the centre of the solar system; rather, the growth of the intellectual archive of knowledge caused Galileo to 'discover' the heliocentric system (indeed, Copernicus had made the same discovery almost seventy years earlier, but was clearly ahead of his time, since it went largely unnoticed). Foucault's theory explains why key scientific discoveries are often made at more or less the same time by several people working independently, and suggests that if Galileo had not 'stepped out', someone else would have done so soon afterwards. According to Foucault, scientist-heroes such as Hawking do not shape history; rather, they are fortunate to be in the right (intellectual) place at the right time and are thus shaped by it. They are *of* their time rather than ahead of it. Marks-Maran might not agree with this thesis, but in a paper devoted almost entirely to the concept of 'stepping out' of the

existing paradigm to initiate a new one, it is very surprising that she did not at least acknowledge it.

Thirdly, and most importantly, by labelling postmodernism as the paradigm which is replacing modernism, Marks-Maran falls into the absolutely fundamental trap of tarring postmodernism with the same brush as modernism. Few postmodernist writers, if any, would wish to see postmodernism labelled as a paradigm, but to understand why this should be, we must first understand what postmodernism sets out to achieve, something which Marks-Maran does not even touch upon.

For Marks-Maran, postmodernism is the paradigm that is coming to replace modernism. Readings (1991) disparagingly summed up this view by pointing out that 'to say that postmodernism simply comes after the modern in diachronic succession is to say that it is the most recent modernism'. Rather than claiming to represent a shift to yet another in a long line of paradigms (which, at least on Marks-Maran's use of the term, correspond roughly to what postmodernists refer to as grand narratives), postmodernism sets itself up in opposition to *all* grand narratives, all overarching dominant world views of the very type that Marks-Maran is claiming for it. As Lyotard (1984) wrote, 'simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards grand narratives'. Rather than attempting to critique or replace the modernist paradigm, postmodernism attempts to critique the *very notion* of paradigms. Clearly then, Marks Maran's assertion that 'the label which has been used to explain the paradigm shift ... is the shift from modernism to postmodernism' (p 4) is not only misguided and misleading, but is itself a prime example of modernist thought.

Furthermore, many postmodernists would disagree with Marks-Maran's basic tenet that the shift from modernism to postmodernism is taking place because 'the laws, principles, beliefs and ways of working within modernism are no longer able to answer the questions that are being posed' (p 4). Lyotard, for example, was opposed to modernism not because it failed to answer the important scientific questions of the day, but because of the moral atrocities which had been committed under a grand narrative which, like all

grand narratives, saw itself as the only answer to those questions. Thus:

I would argue that the project of modernity ... has not been forsaken or forgotten but destroyed, 'liquidated'. There are several modes of destruction, several names which are symbols for them. 'Auschwitz' can be taken as a paradigmatic name for the tragic 'incompletion' of modernity. (Lyotard 1992, p 30)

For Lyotard, the modernist doctrine of positivism is not ineffective or unable to cope with the (post)modern world; indeed, it works only too well. The problem is that *all* dominant paradigms or grand narratives assume an epistemological superiority over other less powerful 'little narratives', and can therefore be employed to justify all manner of questionable activities. Indeed, most governments recognize the importance of 'buying off' the grand narrative of science for their own ends, such that 'scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power' (Lyotard 1984).

### Postmodernism and philosophy

Marks-Maran runs into yet more difficulty when she attempts to place postmodernism within a wider philosophical framework. Thus, for Marks-Maran, Habermas was the philosopher who 'really "stepped out" of the paradigm of positivism' (p 4) by proposing a 'second science' of interpretivism. This is a curious statement, since Habermas's anti-positivist (or perhaps 'post-positivist' is a better term) writing dates from the 1960s, over 40 years after Weber proposed just such an interpretivist paradigm, and a century after Dilthey first suggested the method of *verstehen* as the distinguishing feature of the human sciences. Furthermore, it is rather ironic that Marks-Maran singles out Habermas as the hero of interpretivist science, since he is well-known (some might say notorious) for his anti-postmodernist sentiments, notably his claim that the postmodernists are 'young conservatives' who are out to get rid of the uncompleted project of modernity. Thus 'instead of giving up modernity and its project as a lost cause, we should learn from the mistakes of those extravagant programs [of postmodernism] which have tried to negate modernity' (Habermas 1981). It is also

important to note that Habermas was not opposed to positivism per se, but only to its application in the human sciences. Habermas was, if nothing else, a modernist and vehement supporter of the 'Enlightenment narrative' which the postmodernists were attempting to overthrow.

Marks-Maran gets into a similar tangle over notions of dualism. For her, the 'dualist representation of seemingly opposites is a product of positivism', and hence something to be opposed, despite the fact that the dualist representation of opposites has a far longer history than positivism (for example, the struggle between good and evil in the Old Testament), and cannot, therefore, be a product of it. However, she confuses this general usage of the term 'dualism' as a description of opposing entities or forces with its philosophical cousin Cartesian Dualism, which relates specifically to the mind/body problem. Furthermore, in attempting to refute dualism, she merely sets up her own version of it. Thus, the behaviourists are labelled as dualists (bad!), whereas, of course, in denying the existence of a non-physical mind, they are actually monists (and hence good!). Similarly, in what must be Marks-Maran's most misinformed statement, Descartes, who gave his name to Cartesian dualism, 'ignored the spiritual aspects of the mind' (p 8). Clearly, she has not read his *Discourse on the Method*, nor his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (subtitled: 'Wherein are demonstrated the Existence of God and the Distinction of Soul from Body'), in which the existence of the physical world is dependant not just on the existence of the mind, but of a spiritual God. Indeed, the entire thesis of Cartesian dualism rests on the distinction between the base substance of matter and the spiritual substance of 'a mind, a soul, an intellect, a reason' (Descartes 1970).

### Postmodernism and chaos theory

This brings us to Marks-Maran's central thesis, that 'chaos theory is a product of postmodernism' (p 6). However, her grasp of chaos theory is tenuous and never fully elaborated. We are told that chaos theory 'is concerned with questions of order and disorder in nature' (p 7), that it has something to do with the 'butterfly effect', and that 'it is chaos theory that represents the real paradigm shift in postmodernism across all

disciplines' (p 7). This latter statement would certainly be news to postmodern architects, postmodern literary critics, postmodern cultural theorists and postmodern feminists, to name but a few, for whom chaos theory is largely irrelevant. Furthermore, she continues, chaos theory is more effective in fields such as meteorology because 'mathematical equations are linear and the weather does not behave in a linear fashion' (p 6). This misunderstanding of basic mathematics plays right into the hands of critics of postmodernism such as Sokal and Bricmont, who point out that:

It is frequently claimed that so-called postmodern science – and particularly chaos theory – justifies and supports this new 'nonlinear thought'. But this assertion rests simply on the confusion between the three meanings of the word 'linear'. (Sokal & Bricmont 1998, pp. 133–134)

In particular, it rests on a misunderstanding about linear equations and a confusion between linear equations and linear thought. Marks-Maran is simply wrong in her assertion that mathematical equations are linear, whereas chaos theory is somehow non-linear. Firstly, chaos theory is a branch of mathematics, so that the equations used by chaos theorists are themselves mathematical (and hence, by her own definition, linear) equations. And secondly, as Sokal and Bricmont point out:

In actual fact, Newton's 'linear thought' uses equations that are perfectly *nonlinear*; this is why many examples in chaos theory come from Newtonian mechanics, so that the study of chaos represents in fact a *renaissance* of Newtonian mechanics as a subject for cutting-edge research. Likewise, quantum mechanics is often cited as the quintessential example of a 'postmodern science', but the fundamental equation of quantum mechanics – Schrödinger's equation – is absolutely *linear*. (Sokal & Bricmont 1998, pp. 134–135)

Furthermore, her confusion leads to the spectacular double tautology that 'one of the concepts of linear thought is that opposites are described in linear fashion as being in opposition with (sic) each other' (p 7). What exactly does this sentence tell us, apart from the fact that linear thought describes things in a linear fashion, and

that opposites are in opposition to each other? And has not her own linear thought (whatever that might mean) led her to set up linear and non-linear thought, positivism and interpretivism, and modernism and postmodernism as opposites in opposition to each other?

## Postmodernism and nursing

By the time that Marks-Maran gets to the practical applications of postmodernism, the case is already lost, which is a great shame, since I do believe that postmodern thought has a great deal to offer nurses and educationalists. However, answers to the key questions posed by nursing will almost certainly not be found in chaos theory, and although Marks-Maran points out that 'the real world of nursing is chaotic' (p 8) she is unable to tell us how chaos theory can be employed as an alternative to the nursing process. The problem is that what is being described by Marks-Maran is not postmodernism as I know it, and it bears little resemblance to anything I have read by the major writers in the field. Indeed, the only postmodernist writer whom she cites is the feminist Patti Lather, and then only in passing.

What postmodernism has to offer to nursing is not the replacement of the nursing process with chaos theory, but (to name only a few possibilities) Lyotard's work on narratives to empower practitioners and patients, Foucault's writing on knowledge and power to examine nursing politics and epistemology, Derrida's deconstruction and Foucault's discourse analysis to explore taken-for-granted nursing constructs, Lyotard's notion of the *differend* to resolve ideological disputes, and Rorty's ironism to support principled positions. Then there is the enormous body of postmodern feminist thought (e.g. Flax, Lovibond, Nicholson, Lather, Butler, and so on, as well as French feminists such as Irigaray and Kristeva) which has much to tell us about the nature of research, practice and praxis, not to mention Barthes and Derrida on the art and science of writing.

## (In)conclusion: the pleasure of the bottomless

For the postmodernist, there are no neat conclusions, and we must not fall into the trap of

thinking that this diverse range of approaches constitutes some form of coherent postmodernist paradigm. Marks-Maran has made a number of basic errors about postmodern philosophy, but by far the most serious and fundamental is her claim that postmodernism is the paradigm which is coming to replace modernism, and that certain individuals are 'stepping out' of modernism and into postmodernism. I have attempted to demonstrate that postmodernism is not itself a paradigm but rather a critique of the possibility of a paradigm (or what postmodernists would call a grand narrative); it is an attitude of incredulity towards *all* grand narratives. As Derrida (1974) argued, we live in a 'decentred universe', in which all paradigms are free-floating, and when the postmodernist steps out of the modernist paradigm, she does not have the safety net of an alternative paradigm to break her fall, nor would she want one. Her aim, as Spivak (1974) puts it, is to experience 'the pleasure of the bottomless' in her 'fall into the abyss of deconstruction'.

Marks-Maran introduced her paper with the observation that 'it is human nature to feel comfortable with that which is known and which is predictable' (p 3), a statement which disregards totally the fact that postmodern thought explicitly rejects the notion of a fixed and predictable human nature together with all premises based on the existence of one. But more importantly, I would argue that she herself has opted for the comfort and predictability of yet another paradigm shift (which might well be

post-positivist, but is in no sense postmodern), and in doing so, has denied herself the 'pleasure of the bottomless' which postmodernism promises.

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