

A reply to 'Why nursing has not embraced the clinician-scientist role' by Martha MacKay: nursing science and the postmodern menace

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I read with interest the recent prize-winning post-graduate essay by Martha Mackay on why nursing has not embraced the clinician-scientist role (Mackay, 2009). This is an important issue for nursing, and the paper posed some valid questions about the nature of nursing knowledge and the relationship between theory, research, and practice. Although there is limited scope for Mackay to present a full and thorough examination of all the issues in a journal paper of this length, I was somewhat disappointed in the way that certain lines of inquiry were rapidly shut down or simply not addressed. The primary assumption running throughout her paper appears to be an acceptance that nursing practice and research share an agenda with medicine, and that the clinician-scientist role developed in medicine of a 75–25 split between research and practice/education is the only viable model. The premise, then, is that the medical model of the 'career scientist with portions of time also devoted to clinical practice and education . . . offers a unique perspective from which good nursing science can proceed' (Mackay, 2009, p. 288), and the aim of Mackay's paper was therefore to explore the factors 'that might help to explain the limited uptake within nursing of the clinician-scientist role' (p. 288). This assumption effectively blocks other, perhaps more fundamental questions, such as whether nursing would actually benefit from such a role, and if so, whether other models of the 'clinician-scientist' might be more appropriate. However, to cut a long story short, Mackay's conclusion is that resistance to the uptake of the clinician-scientist role is due to a lack of consensus regarding what kind of science nursing is and a confusion about the relative status of different types of nursing knowledge. Furthermore, it would

appear that 'post-modern thought may be at least partly responsible for the impasse in naming and agreeing upon nursing approach(es) to science and knowledge' (Mackay, 2009, p. 294). The last third of Mackay's paper is therefore devoted to a one-sided and overwhelmingly negative critique of this 'post-modern thought'.

I suppose that I should have seen this coming. Postmodernism has become a *bête noire* in nursing and other disciplines as a cause for the failure of modernism to deliver on its promise. The argument, which is repeated here by Mackay, is that certain 'postmodernist' writers have introduced doubts in the minds of good people about the modernist promise of inexorable progress through science. When the promise is not delivered, rather than question the relevance or efficacy of the scientific method, the blame is located with those who *do* ask questions of science for weakening the resolve of the faithful. Thus, postmodernism has led 'practitioners in general and nurses in clinical practice in particular to mistrust theory and the research enterprise' (Mackay, 2009, p. 294). It is perhaps worth noting that, as well as implicating my own writing in inciting practitioners to mistrust theory and research, Mackay cites a paper by Donna Perry in support of this view. Strangely, there is no mention in Perry's paper of postmodernism or of any writers who might be seen as postmodernists, and while Perry does indeed identify the problem of the mistrust by practitioners of 'academic' nurses, she concludes that while nursing theory contributes to the problem, the solution lies in how 'philosophy might be used to reconcile nursing science, theory and practice into a coherent whole' (Perry, 2004, p. 68).

My main objection to Mackay's paper, then, is not that she has invoked postmodernism as a possible cause for the lack of uptake of the clinician-scientist role in nursing, but rather that she has misrepresented and misunderstood the postmodern project. I will restrict myself here to three points. First, Mackay refers simply to 'post-modernism' without specifying and distinguishing between different schools and disciplines, leading to a number of misrepresentations and overgeneralizations. Second, she picks up uncritically on Kermode and Brown's misunderstanding of Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as 'incredulity towards metanarratives' to the extent that both she and they arrive at some surprising and unsubstantiated charges; e.g. that postmodernism denies patriarchy, thereby contributing to the suppression of women. Third, she relies almost exclusively on secondary and even tertiary references, resulting in the perpetuation, and at times the amplification, of the errors and misreadings of previous critics of postmodernism.

Mackay (2009) refers from the outset to postmodernism as a more or less coherent doctrine or 'trend in thinking', which is both 'a social movement and a philosophy' and which 'has influenced intellectual theorising, the creation of art, and doing science' (p. 292). She might have added that 'postmodern' is used as a descriptor in disciplines as diverse as art, architecture, dance, feminism, philosophy, literature, anthropology, geography, and history, and that many of the writers now recognized as the founders of postmodern thought never considered themselves to be postmodernists and would not wish to be described by others as such. She could perhaps also have pointed out that the term has a plurality of meanings and that it makes little sense to write about 'postmodernism' or 'postmodernists' without qualifying which particular view one is referring to. Here, then, is the first problem with Mackay's critique of postmodernism: she cites no references to any of what might be referred to as the seminal postmodern writers, such as Barthes, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Rorty, and so on, each of whom emphasized different and often contradictory issues and concerns. Thus, while some writers might be guilty of Mackay's charges that postmodernism 'ignores the reality that

capitalism is a force to be reckoned with', that it 'misappropriates the styles of the past', or that it 'offers no alternative to modernism', these criticisms can hardly be levelled collectively at postmodernism in general, nor at any individual writer. Indeed, it makes as little sense to write collectively about the 'post-modernists' as it would attempt to characterize *modernism* by drawing collectively on the work of writers, artists, architects, and philosophers, such as Harold Pinter, Pablo Picasso, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Karl Popper, and presenting it as a coherent body of modernist thought. It makes as little sense to suggest, as Mackay does, that postmodernists claim 'apparent truths are seen as merely a matter of chance, their existence influenced by the perception of their usefulness at a particular time' (p. 292), as it would suggest that all modernists believe that 'everything you can imagine is real' (Picasso), that 'the heart is the chief feature of a functioning mind' (Lloyd Wright), or 'it is impossible to speak in such a way that you cannot be misunderstood' (Popper). Simply to draw from a variety of views and opinions about postmodernism without referring to or distinguishing between the various schools, disciplines, and seminal works is to risk producing a hotchpotch pastiche of the very kind that modernists often attribute to postmodernism.

We might imagine, then, that any definition of postmodernism that attempts to encompass such a broad spectrum of views will be suitably vague. In fact, Mackay chooses simply to paraphrase Kermode and Brown's description of postmodernism as a worldview 'in which there is "a multiplicity of small narratives"' (Mackay, 2009, p. 292). Of course, this description is more or less a statement of the obvious, and even critics of postmodernism are unlikely to deny the existence of 'small narratives', nor of the role that they play in our lives. Unfortunately, in abbreviating and paraphrasing Kermode and Brown's description, Mackay has somewhat missed their point. If we look at their full quote, we can see that the point that Kermode and Brown were actually making is not merely about the *existence* of 'small narratives', but that 'a multiplicity of small narratives have (sic) replaced the grand narratives of the modern age' (Kermode & Brown, 1996, p. 375). This is a clear reference to the work of Lyotard (1984) and his own

definition of postmodernism as ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ (p. xxiv), where a metanarrative (*métaécrit*) is a story that contains its own legitimation, and a ‘small narrative’ (*petit récit*, usually translated as ‘little narrative’) is a story that is validated by social consensus. So, for Lyotard, the stories that scientists tell us about the world appeal internally to the metanarrative of the scientific method for their validity rather than externally to the little narratives of the physical and social world. Thus, when scientists tell us that matter is composed of minutely small subatomic particles that cannot be seen and behave in bizarre, counter-intuitive, and sometimes incomprehensible ways, we do not check these claims against our perceived reality (how could we?); such claims are accepted because they are presented as resulting from the application of the scientific method. In characterizing postmodernism as incredulity towards metanarratives, Lyotard is thus suggesting that, under the ‘postmodern condition’, the taken-for-granted status of science and other metanarratives is placed under scrutiny and is regarded with scepticism.

Kermode and Brown appear to misunderstand (or, at least, to misapply) this injunction to challenge the taken-for-granted status of metanarratives. First, Lyotard’s position of *incredulity* (i.e. of scepticism or unwillingness to believe) is mistaken by them as a stance of rejection. Thus, they claim that postmodernism ‘attempts to *deny* the grand narrative of patriarchy’ (Kermode & Brown, 1996, p. 379, my emphasis), and cite a number of feminist writers to support their case. This confusion between scepticism and denial is compounded by a second misunderstanding of Lyotard’s position and commits a basic logical error by mistaking a challenge to the metanarrative *status* of patriarchy for a challenge to the metanarrative itself. Lyotard would certainly not wish to deny the existence of patriarchy any more than he would wish to deny the existence of science, but rather to challenge its status as a taken-for-granted, self-validating metanarrative. This misreading of Lyotard enables his opponents to completely invert his position from a challenge to the unspoken and taken-for-granted power of the dominant discourse to a denial that there is even a problem. It also enables Kermode and Brown to brand postmodernism rather extravagantly

as ‘an epistemological hoax concocted by white bourgeois patriarchy to divert women and other oppressed groups from participating in the Enlightenment project’ (Kermode & Brown, 1996, p. 380), and for Mackay (2009) to perpetuate this misunderstanding in her claim that postmodernism ‘institutionalizes the marginalization of women’ (p. 293). This is a third-hand account of a misinterpretation of Lyotard’s simple definition of postmodernism, which ignores, e.g. Jacques Derrida’s attack on logocentrism as being phallogentric and patriarchal (see Derrida, 1974), along with the large and scholarly output of writers, such as Helen Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, and Jane Flax, for whom feminist theory is nothing less than ‘a type of postmodern philosophy’ (Flax, 1986). It would not be unreasonable to anticipate that Mackay might acknowledge the existence of the many feminist narratives, which embrace rather than reject postmodern perspectives.

This apparent failure to engage with primary and secondary sources leads Mackay to some curious statements about postmodernism. For example, she cites Kermode & Brown (1996) as the source of her claim that postmodern ideas ‘fail to acknowledge the social determinants of health . . . by encouraging individuals to take responsibility for their own health in the name of empowerment’ (Mackay, 2009, p. 293). While there might be some truth in the charge that *some* strands of postmodern thought play down social factors, it is widely acknowledged that ideas of personal responsibility and empowerment are very much modernist constructs that have, in fact, been widely critiqued by postmodern writers (see, e.g. Foucault’s writing on the technologies of the self and the docile body, and Derrida and others on issues of subjectivity, agency, and the self). Similarly, she cites Walker (1994), via Kermode & Brown (1996), as the source of the view that ‘postmodern thinking’ has been responsible for ‘the belief held by some nurse scholars that knowledge is contextual, limited and contingent – that is, relativistic’ (Mackay, 2009, p. 293). I suppose that we could argue that it depends on what is meant by postmodern thinking, but the notion that scientific knowledge is limited and contingent dates back to the very dawn of the scientific age. Galileo outlined the so-called problem of induction in the 17th century

with his observation that 'I know very well that one single experiment or conclusive proof to the contrary would be enough to batter to the ground . . . a great many probable arguments' (Galilei, 1967). More recently, Karl Popper, hardly an acknowledged postmodernist, added that 'we must regard all laws or theories as hypothetical or conjectural; that is, as guesses' (Popper, 1979, p. 9).

Elsewhere, Mackay accuses postmodernism of 'condemning logical positivism and completely abandoning empiricism', citing Kermode & Brown (1996) as the source for this assertion. Kermode and Brown, in turn, attribute this view to Gortner (1993), who, they claim:

has a wide range of concerns about the impact of many philosophies on nursing, including postmodernism . . . Too many nurses accept philosophy as a dogma. She [Gortner] believes that the critique of positivism and empiricism has been misguided. (Kermode & Brown, 1996, p. 382)

However, if we return to the source of these summaries and paraphrasings, we find that what Gortner actually wrote was:

In the author's view, empiricism has been given short shrift in nursing, because of continued fallacious identification with logical positivism, because of lack of familiarity with primary sources on the perspective, and because of the critiques rendered by hermeneutics, phenomenologists, and critical social theorists. (Gortner, 1993, p. 482)

We can, perhaps, see the damage caused by a failure to address and accurately report primary sources. Mackay's assertion that postmodernism *condemns* logical positivism and *completely abandons* empiricism is a distortion of Kermode and Brown's report of Gortner's claim that nurses accept philosophy (including postmodernism) as dogma, resulting in misguided critiques of positivism and empiricism. Now clearly, a misguided critique of empiricism is not necessarily the same thing as 'completely abandoning empiricism'. The problem is compounded by the fact that Kermode and Brown have themselves been somewhat economical with the truth by distorting Gortner's point to include a critique of postmodernism. For Gortner, empiricism has been given 'short shrift' for a variety of reasons that have nothing to

do with postmodernism: when Gortner does name names, she implicates 'hermeneuticists, phenomenologists and critical theorists'. It is a long way, then, from Mackay's claim that postmodernists have completely abandoned empiricism to Gortner's original point that hermeneuticists, phenomenologists, and critical theorists have given it short shrift. It is particularly ironic that one of the reasons offered by Gortner for the short shrift given to empiricism is a lack of familiarity with primary sources. It would appear that, in the intervening 16 years, this lack of familiarity has been extended to secondary and even tertiary sources. It may be only a matter of time before we see a publication in which the writer rejects postmodernism with the phrase: 'postmodernists condemn logical positivism and completely abandon empiricism' (Mackay, 2009).

Thus, while Mackay chides nurses for 'uncritically subscribing' to postmodern thought, I have argued that she herself has been 'uncritically critical' of the postmodern project, and in doing so, has done both herself and postmodernism a disservice. While postmodernism is (at times unjustly) criticized for lacking academic rigour and adopting an 'anything goes' attitude towards scholarship, that is no excuse for its opponents to approach their critiques of it in a similar fashion.

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