Jnl Soc. Pol., **26**, 3, 341–350 Printed in the United Kingdom

© 1997 Cambridge University Press

A Postmodern Approach to Structured Dependency Theory

GAIL WILSON*
(Received 2.8.95; Accepted 29.11.95)

ABSTRACT

Structured dependency theory has been useful in shifting thinking about status in old age from a negative concentration on individual characteristics to an emphasis on the structural factors which work against elderly people. However, structural dependency theory is itself capable of reinforcing ageist policy and practice. Postmodernism, as an approach to knowledge, moves us on from the premodern when the church was the ultimate authority, through the modern when scientific logic was the touchstone, to the present when there is no ultimate authority for the way the world is perceived. The revolutionary threat to 'scientific' research and received wisdom is greatest for the white, middle-class, midlife, male academic establishment but offers wide possibilities to those who wish to research new fields in new ways. A postmodern approach to ageing research suggests that it would be helpful to concentrate on four themes: the critique of 'grand theory'; the prioritisation of 'low' culture and understanding, as opposed to elite or 'high' culture; the recognition of diversity; and the value of personal views and emotions. Since postmodern thought excludes structural relations of power it is unlikely to be used in isolation by gerontologists or social policy analysts.

This paper follows wide ranging discussions of postmodernism in the *Journal of Social Policy* (Taylor-Gooby, 1994; Penna and O'Brien, 1996; Fitzpatrick, 1996; Hillyard and Watson, 1996). It takes a more restricted focus and considers the contribution of a postmodern approach to one aspect of social policy as applied to ageing societies. In particular the

* Lecturer in Social Policy and Ageing, Department of Social Policy and Social Administration, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE.

I am indebted to Ros Gill and Fiona Williams for a fuller understanding of some of the concepts used in this paper. They are not responsible for the interpretation. In addition I would like to thank the Nuffield foundation for financing the research which allowed me to talk to older people about their lives and also Nicki Thorogood and anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279497005047 Published online by Cambridge University Press

paper offers a critique of structured dependency theory. Although postmodernist thought has come, in the last twenty years, to influence most areas of human endeavour from philosophy to film, the form it takes varies greatly from discipline to discipline. Others, particularly historians or sociologists, would select different aspects of postmodern thought to fit their own particular preoccupations (see e.g., Featherstone, 1988, 1991; Bauman, 1992a; Smart, 1992). Non-sociologists may find Rosenau (1992) a useful critical introduction (see below).

THEORISING OLD AGE

Later life is undertheorised and structured dependency theory has been a useful step forward (Estes, 1979; Walker, 1980, 1981, 1983; Townsend, 1981, 1986; Phillipson *et al.*, 1982). The thesis has come as a flash of light to a decade and a half of students and professionals trying to make sense of the way our society treats elderly people. The theory offers an explanation of why services for older people are so often disempowering and stigmatising. The basic ingredients of the theory are well known and were first outlined by Estes (1979, pp. 1–30). Her aim was to move theories of ageing away from a purely individualised approach and to take account of structural features in society.

Estes saw ageism (manifesting as separatism), and pluralism, as the key features of the way old age was theorised and older people were treated. In her analysis, ageism is an ideology or set of beliefs which defines older people as different from the rest of society. It follows that special theories are needed to explain this (ideologically constructed) difference. The separately constituted group is seen as deviant from the norm and/or labelled a problem. According to pluralist, or neopluralist (Dunleavy and O'Leary, 1987) theories of society, elderly people can be defined as a separate interest group, but a weak one, which needs special champions to guard over and further its interests. These champions are part of the 'ageing enterprise'. We 'seek out the poor in order to help them . . . The help rendered may be from the purest and most benevolent of motives, yet the very fact of being helped degrades' (Coser, 1963, p. 174, quoted by Estes).

Estes argued that existing theories of ageing were excessively individualised and took very little note of the way that society was structured to exclude older people from important areas. For example, the social institution of retirement excludes older people from the labour force. Further, it is not enough to see poverty in retirement as an individual matter. Estes advanced a conflict, rather than a consensus, theory of society. Hence she argued that social policies in America encouraged poverty in old age as a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279497005047 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mechanism of social control – a demonstration to the young that they must work hard and save wisely or they too would sink into the pit in old age.

The distinctively British contribution to the development of structured dependency theory was a Marxian version of social conflict theory (Walker, 1980; Townsend, 1981; Phillipson, 1982). British authors saw retirement not simply as a mechanism for social control, but also as the way in which capitalism shakes out less productive labour and replaces it with younger workers. Of course the belief that older workers are always, and by definition, less productive has long been disproved (Bromley, 1990) but social beliefs can become social facts. In this model of structured dependency 'older' workers, with the definition of 'older' shifting to meet the needs of employers, become part of capitalism's reserve army of labour.

Structured dependency theory was not applied mechanistically. For example Townsend said: 'There is a stark contrast between the low status in which old people are held publicly and the regard in which they are held privately in their families. In the family age is of secondary importance.' (Townsend, 1981; p. 13). The theory therefore allowed for a view of older people which was not wholly based on age, though the emergence of elder abuse as a policy concern (McCreadie, 1991) casts doubt on family esteem as a universal condition.

Empirical research has questioned some of the other generalisations associated with structured dependency. Johnson (1988) has shown that the age of retirement in the UK has fallen steadily throughout the twentieth century (with minor blips in the trend). Life expectancy and years of disability-free life have both increased. At the same time, pensions rose as a proportion of average pre-retirement income almost as consistently (Johnson, 1988), until the early eighties when the value of the state pension became linked to changes in prices instead of earnings. Despite this increase, pensions in UK remained low, both in absolute terms and in comparison with other European countries (Victor, 1987). It is possible, therefore, to argue that many older people – mainly men, since women's labour force participation has increased in older age groups (Esping-Anderson and Sonnenberger, 1989) have preferred to leave personally unrewarding paid work for the greater autonomy that retirement, even on a reduced income, can bring. However, even if large numbers of people have chosen to retire, rather than having been pushed out of the workforce by capitalist imperatives, this does not invalidate the main thesis of structured dependency theory: that many of the disadvantages of old age are socially created. They are the result of the power structure of society not of the process of ageing by itself, nor, primarily, of the individual characteristics of older people.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279497005047 Published online by Cambridge University Press

SO WHY POSTMODERNISM AND HOW MUCH OF IT?

The main strength of postmodernism is that it offers a different way of theorising knowledge. This can best be understood by considering the ultimate authority in knowledge systems. In premodern thought systems religion or the church represents the ultimate authority. The life of Galileo can be seen as a symbolic example of the transition from premodern to modern. The church, as the guardian of divine authority, was able to assert that the sun was pure and unspotted, even though Galileo had observed spots through his telescope. In other words, faith offered a higher truth than empirical observation in premodern thought. Rationality and scientific method asserted themselves against religion and superstition (as it came to be called), in the following centuries. In the social sciences a rational approach dominated. The aim was to be 'scientific' with natural science as the model. This set of beliefs about organising and validating knowledge has developed greatly and is now labelled modernity.

It has always been clear to most people that some knowledge exists outside rational boundaries. Almost any human activity has a non-rational component. In postmodernism the non-rational becomes more important. Rational theories which are intended to explain world phenomena or significant parts of phenomena (meta-narratives) are seen as logocentric or circular. As Rosenau says with typical postmodern flamboyance,

> Post-modernism challenges global, all-encompassing world views, be they political, religious or social . . . and dismisses them all as logocentric, transcendental totalising meta-narratives that anticipate all questions and provide predetermined answers . . . The post-modern goal is not to formulate an alternative set of assumptions but to register the impossibility of establishing any such underpinning for knowledge, to 'delegitimise all mastercodes'. (Hassan, 1987; p. 169, quoted by Rosenau, 1992, p. 6)

Rosenau provides a helpful glossary of postmodern terms for those who find the language somewhat alien.

It is the new approach to knowledge that is the most fundamental aspect of postmodern thought and the one which causes the most emotion. For extreme postmodernists, time and space are described as constructs and have no validity. Causality then becomes an impossible concept (Rosenau, 1992, p. 171). Similarly in terms of society, postmodernism is a 'universal dismantling of power supported structures' (Bauman, 1992a, p. ix) which privileges mood or experience, 'everyday life', over systems. There are no facts, only texts to be interpreted and reinterpreted or deconstructed, and no distinction between the individual and any sort of objective reality.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279497005047 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Reactions to such ideas range from passionate hostility to equally passionate enthusiasm, but postmodernism is hard to pin down. By definition, a way of thinking that denounces systems cannot be characterised as a system itself. It follows that there are a great many definitions of postmodernism and they often conflict (Rosenau, 1992). It may in any case be increasingly unnecessary to talk about postmodernism as an entity because aspects of the postmodern are creeping into mainstream theorising. Former Marxist scholars appear to find the revolutionary ideas of postmodernism a useful aid to thought (see e.g., Williams, 1992; Lash and Urry, 1994). Others who first opposed postmodernism now incorporate it into modernity (Giddens, 1991) or see it as part of the crisis of modernity turning back onto itself (Hopenhayn, 1993).

In terms of a critique of structured dependency theory the postmodern approach offers four important themes: a critique of grand theory; the prioritisation of 'low' culture and understanding, as opposed to elite or 'high' culture; the recognition of diversity; and the value of personal views and emotions.

GRAND THEORY

The weaknesses of structured dependency theory are not new. Most have been noted in passing by its proponents (see e.g., the quotation from Townsend above). Like Marxism, pluralism and similar social theories it is the product of a certain combination of culture, class and power. These theories have been almost wholly developed by white, middle-class males of preretirement age. Women and non-Western, or ethnic minority scholars have found the mainstream hard to wrench into more meaningful channels. As a consequence, those who wish to support the old order are faced with a range of possible responses. One is to continue in the belief that 'real' or 'scientific' knowledge is value free (or more or less value free). Hence it does not matter who produces it, or how, or under what social conditions of power. Another is that all valuable 'knowledge' is indeed white, middle class and male.

Alternatively, a postmodern approach suggests that grand theory places unacceptable limits on what is conceptually possible. In other words the need to generalise flattens out important variations in whatever phenomenon is being studied. A world of democratic consumerism needs a different approach which can accommodate individual difference. The anonymisation and objectification of people that is implied by the terms 'class', 'labour' and 'capital' relegate individuals to socially constructed categories which have no real meaning. Likewise the concept of 'false consciousness' (often used to explain why people who are

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279497005047 Published online by Cambridge University Press

constituted as exploited by Marxist analysis fail to recognise their objective class position), can be seen as patronising and undemocratic.

POPULAR UNDERSTANDING

The collapse of high culture and grand theory is mirrored by a revaluing of popular culture and the prioritisation of subjective imagination, individual agency and diversity. As noted above, the individual is no longer seen as a rational being (see e.g., Cornwell, 1984 for an understanding of how individuals hold logically conflicting views on life and health). Equally there are no universal truths, only a shifting set of relative understandings or values. As Giddens, who sees modernity as continuing to develop rather than ending in postmodernism, says, 'The point is not that there is no stable social world to know, but that knowledge, of that world contributes to its unstable or mutable nature' (Giddens, 1994, p. 94). Individual experiences are no longer believed to be determined by social constructs such as class, or to be deviant if they fail to be so.

AGEING

The importance given to material consumption and culture in postmodern thought might seem to exclude older people and to mark postmodernism as just another ageist set of interpretations of the world. Such a view could be reinforced by recent work on ageing which sees the body as the site of prolonged youth, via the consumption of healthy lifestyles and the accompanying consumer goods – the rectangularisation of the fitness/beauty curve[1] (Turner, 1989; Featherstone, 1991; Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991; Turner, 1992). Equally, it can be argued that these authors address ageing by marking its retreat, and its diversity by considering class and consumption. Their work is a welcome shift from an 'age as dependency' approach. Even so, in terms of individual experience, there is still a space in the life course between the well-preserved consumer, for whom the body is a site of pleasure, and the final point of death. With anti-wrinkle cream costing more than half a week's state pension, it is a consumption option only for the inflation proofed or newly retired occupational pensioner, but not for the millions on state pension or income support! Being and looking old is inevitable for most. Similarly, theorising death as a matter of survival (Bauman, 1992b) fails to address the reality of many older peoples's lives and can quickly lead to blaming those who do not practise a healthy lifestyle for their own failure to survive.

However, given that elderly service users are now expected to be consumers or customers, a postmodern stance brings useful insights to ways

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279497005047 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of interpreting some aspects of self-representation and daily life in advanced old age, at the same time as exposing much government rhetoric on service user choice as hollow.

RECOGNITION OF DIVERSITY: RELIANCE ON INDIVIDUAL VOICES

The voices of older people have not sounded very loudly in gerontological research. Some have appeared as users of services but more often as silent recipients (see Goldberg and Connelly, 1982 for an early survey). In research on carers, 'the old' may appear as ADL (Activities of Daily Living – failure to perform) scores or some other measure of burden. Feminist scholars have concentrated mainly on the problems of younger women, though there are a growing number of exceptions.

A postmodern stance is one impetus to recognising that older people are often more diverse than most of us in the range of their accumulated life events. They have lived longer and been affected by major life experiences such as war and technological change. The fact that postmodernists have so far been more concerned with theory than with listening to the experiences of others different from themselves, does not preclude this as a research enterprise.

However, letting older people speak presents a problem for structured dependency theory. Once it becomes part of the normal research endeavour to listen to older people and to report in ways that allow their voices to be heard, it will become apparent that very rarely do they see themselves as dependent. Many, even most, are aware that they are not highly valued by society. They too hold ageist beliefs, and usually always have. However, this is not to say that a devaluing of 'the old' in abstract terms leads to a devaluing of self and friends, or to a perception of structured dependency. So, if the great majority of older people do not feel dependent, why thrust dependency upon them by formulating grand theory that says they are?

Further, both the research questions posed and the interpretation of research data are influenced by theory and by unconsciously held beliefs. The researcher or service provider who embraces structured dependency theory is not likely to hear or see the signs that older people do not regard it as relevant to their lives. Take for example the case of older people as consumers of social services. It is well known that few can afford to pay the full cost. However, some older people do buy services even with the limited incomes that they have. These services have been invisible to researchers looking for dependency. In one survey the majority of older people were buying some form of assistance (Wilson, 1994). They paid for window cleaning, help with gardening, hairdressing, home deliveries and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279497005047 Published online by Cambridge University Press

private transport. In other words, they paid for assistance which helped them to maintain their respectability and their links with the rest of the community. They were much less willing (and less able) to buy the services that separate them from the community and that signal dependence. Examples are home help, personal and residential care. In the same way mutual aid in old age may take forms which have never been acknowledged because dependency on younger generations is 'known' to be the norm. See for example Howarth's work on exchange of food among elders (Howarth, 1993).

A NEW STEP IN ANTI-AGEISM

Policy and service delivery are both strongly influenced by grand theory, even if it is implicit rather than explicit (Wilson, 1991). The ageism which informs structured dependency theory can have unfortunate effects on service providers. Adherence to the theory, conscious or unconscious, can reinforce any tendency to see older people as marginal to society or as passive victims of capitalism. Also, a theory that sees service providers as agents of oppression can make it difficult to think positively about service design and delivery. (This is not to deny the importance of critical insight into the controlling aspects of service delivery.)

A postmodern approach, as a way of perceiving knowledge, is either liberating or disturbing, depending on the emotional make-up of the perceiver. Its strength is that it forces researchers get away from 'scientific' paradigms and to question the taken-for-granted – in this case widespread ageist beliefs. In terms of anti-ageism, research or practice which allows for individual agency, diversity and independence, is more likely to result in empowerment for older service users than a model which sees them as passive recipients, or worse, dependants. Empowerment will still be very hard to achieve but even a small move towards it would be better than nothing.

In the postmodern world, even older people may articulate their lives in terms of consumption. They may not become fully fledged postmodern consumers (and on a state pension they cannot), but providers under the NHS and Community Care Act are now meant to compete to produce some of the things that elders want, rather than just those that planners say they need (Cm 849, 1989). Service professionals who take this on board may even manage to purchase for wants as well as needs (see Ware and Goodin, 1990 for a dismissive approach to user wants). This change could help elders to maintain their self-respect in an ageist society where younger age groups have wants and can normally expect to have the capacity to fulfil them.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279497005047 Published online by Cambridge University Press

AND A WORD OF CAUTION

In practical policy terms, postmodernism can be seen to fit all too well with a government that denies the existence of society and prioritises individual expenditure over public welfare. The emphasis on individual consumption can also be mirrored in the shift in social policy from being a matter of planning and providing, to entrepreneurship and the identification of social problems as 'market niches'. Private domiciliary care, for example, was meant to spring up all over the country once money to expand residential care was cut off, but this niche has been slow to boom.

There are theoretical as well as practical weaknesses in the postmodern approach to knowledge. Ageism, as a concept or a system has no place in postmodern thought, but few policy analysts or social gerontologists would wish to deny its existence or to stop using it as part of their theoretical framework. They may see it as one of a number of 'substantive moral issues' as posed by Giddens (1991, p. 227) which are integral to modernity but have no place in postmodern thought. This unwillingness of the postmodernists to conceptualise structured power relations in a traditional way presents problems for all those who work with or study disadvantaged groups. It is not enough to theorise power as diffuse and contradictory, vital though the concept may be for a critical perspective on health and social care (see e.g., Foucault, 1979; Donzelot, 1980 and, for an early application to gerontology, Guillemard, 1980)). Some clearer identification of the structure and mechanisms of power and social control are still needed by most of us. However, now that a postmodern stance (or some other modification of postmodernism) is well on the way to being accepted as an aspect of late modernity, it should be possible for researchers and policy-makers to combine insights from the old (the modern) with the not-so-new (the postmodern), to arrive at individual mixes which suit their time and place.

NOTES

1 Rectangularisation, or the terminal drop thesis, suggests that people in any society will increasingly reach the end of their natural lifespans (assumed to be more or less the same for all members of a society) without being cut off by accident or illness. Life curves become rectangular when virtually everyone born survives to old age and then dies within a short period of time (see Bury, 1988 for a brief account).

REFERENCES

Z. Bauman (1992a), *Intimations of Postmodernity*, Routledge, London.
Z. Bauman (1992b), 'Survival as a social construct', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 9:1, 1–36.
D. B. Bromley (1990), *Behavioural Gerontology*, Wiley, Chichester.
M. Bury (1988), in N. Wells and C. Freer (eds.), *The Ageing Population*, Macmillan, London.
Cm 849 (1989), *Caring for People: Community Care in the Next Decade and Beyond*, HMSO, London.
J. Cornwell (1984), *Hard Earned Lives*, Tavistock, London.
J. Donzelot (1980), *The Policing of Families*, Hutchinson, London.
P. Dunleavy and B. O'Leary (1987), *Theories of the State*, Macmillan Education Ltd, Basingstoke.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279497005047 Published online by Cambridge University Press

G. Esping-Anderson and H. Sonnenberger (1989), *The Demographics of Age in Labour Market Management*, European University Institute, Florence.
C. L. Estes (1979), *The Aging Enterprise*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco.
M. Featherstone (1991), *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, Sage, London.
M. Featherstone (ed.) (1988), *Postmodernism*, Sage, London.
M. Featherstone and M. Hepworth (1991), 'The mask of ageing and the postmodern lifecourse', in M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth and B. S. Turner (eds.), *The Body*, Sage, London.
T. Fitzpatrick (1996), 'Postmodernism, welfare and radical politics', *Journal of Social Policy*, 25:3, 303–20.
M. Foucault (1979), *Discipline and Punish*, Penguin, Harmondsworth.
A. Giddens (1991), *Modernity and Self Identity*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
A. Giddens (1994), 'Institutional reflexivity and modernity', in *The Policy Reader in Social Theory*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
E. M. Goldberg and N. Connelly (1982), *The Effectiveness of Social Care for the Elderly*, Heinemann Educational Books, London.
A.-M. Guillemard (1980), *La Vieillesse et l'Etat*, PUF, Paris.
P. Hillyard and S. Watson (1996), 'Postmodern social policy: a contradiction in terms?', *Journal of Social Policy*, 25:3, 321–46.
M. Hopenhayn (1993), 'Postmodernism and neoliberalism in Latin America', in *The Post Modern Debate in Latin America Special Issue Boundary 2*, 20:3, 93–109. See also N. Lechner 'A disenchantment called postmodernism', 122–39 in the same issue.
G. Howarth (1993), 'Food consumption, social roles and personal identity', in S. Arber and M. Evandrou, *Ageing, Independence and the Life Course*, Jessica Kingsley, London.
P. Johnson (1988), 'The structured dependency of the elderly: a critical note', Centre for Economic Policy Research Discussion Paper No. 202.
S. Lash and J. Urry (1994), *Economies of Signs and Space*, Sage, London.
C. McCreadie (1991), *Elder Abuse: An Exploratory Study*, ACIOG, Kings College London, London.
S. Penna and M. O'Brien (1996), 'Post modernism and social policy: a small step forwards?', *Journal of Social Policy*, 25:1, 39–61.
C. Phillipson (1982), *Capitalism and the Construction of Old Age*, Macmillan, London.
P. M. Rosenau (1992), *Post-modernism and the Social Sciences*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
B. Smart (1992), *Postmodernity*, Routledge, London.
P. Taylor-Gooby (1994), 'Postmodernism and social policy: a great leap backwards', *Journal of Social Policy*, 23: 3, 385–404.
P. Townsend (1981), 'The structured dependency of the elderly: the creation of social policy in the twentieth century', *Ageing and Society*, 1: 1, 5–28.
P. Townsend (1986), 'Ageism and social policy', in C. Phillipson and A. Walker (eds.), *Ageing and Social Policy*, Gower, Aldershot.
B. S. Turner (1989), 'Ageing, status politics and sociological theory', *British Journal of Sociology*, 40: 4, 588–606.
B. S. Turner (1992), *Regulating Bodies*, Routledge, London.
C. Victor (1987), *Old Age in Modern Society*, Croom Helm. London.
A. Walker (1980), 'The social creation of poverty and dependency in old age', *Journal of Social Policy*, 9: 1, 45–75.
A. Walker (1981), 'Towards a political economy of old age', *Ageing and Society*, 1: 1, 73–94.
A. Walker (1983), 'Social policy and elderly people in Great Britain: the construction of dependent social and economic status in old age', in A. Guillemard (ed.), *Old Age and the Welfare State*, Sage, Beverley Hills.
A. Ware and R. E. Goodin (1990), *Needs and Welfare*, Sage, London.
F. Williams (1992), *Social Policy: A Critical Introduction*, Polity, Cambridge.
G. Wilson (1991), 'Models of ageing and their relation to policy formation and service provision', *Policy and Politics*, 19: 1, 37–47.
G. Wilson (1994), 'Assembling their own care packages: payment for care by men and women in advanced old age', *Health and Social Care*, 2: 283–91.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279497005047 Published online by Cambridge University Press