



## **BOREDOM AND THE ILLUSIONS OF POSTMODERN PSYCHOTHERAPIES**

**Dan Pătroc \***

*University of Oradea, Romania*

**Andra Perțe \*\***

*University of Oradea, Romania*

### *Abstract*

*In the last decades several new kinds of understanding and practicing psychotherapy have been labeled by their proponents and supporters as “postmodern”. The present paper tries to show that none of these can place themselves legitimately under the umbrella of postmodernism since none of them go all the way in breaking up the psychological tradition of modernity. Even more, we try to show that the roots of the frantic search for new names and new methods in psychology is nothing more than the effect of the enormous popularity gained by this field of study in the last century and, hence, of the boredom it got to generate for most of those involved in it.*

Keywords: boredom, postmodernism, collaborative, narrative

Based purely on a speculation, we could state that today’s culture (psychology is, of course, a part of culture) shows a remarkably oxymoronic boredom and, at the same time, impatience. Obviously, we don’t claim to be the first ones to discover a general state of boredom which governs contemporary life; *au contraire*, boredom tends to be one of the fetishes of social philosophy in the last decades, or even further, starting from the middle

---

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to:

\* Ph.D., University of Oradea, Faculty of Socio-Humanistic Sciences, The Philosophy Department, St. Universitatii, no. 3, Oradea, Bihor, Romania. E-mail: [dan\\_patroc@yahoo.com](mailto:dan_patroc@yahoo.com)

\*\* University of Oradea, Faculty of Socio-Humanistic Sciences, The Science of Education Department, St. Universitatii, no. 3, Oradea, Bihor, Romania. E-mail: [andraperte@yahoo.com](mailto:andraperte@yahoo.com)

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (to some extent, one could find Pascal as the first thinker to question the matter of boredom in his *Pensées*: “there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remain to him only the mark and empty place which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present” – Pascal, 2008, p. 94). A fact of common knowledge today: the epitome of approaches towards boredom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century culture is represented by Baudelaire in his well-known *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The prefatory poem, *Au Lecteur*, describes the core of Baudelaire’s deep concern with the conditions of modern life and his later theorization of the *blaisé* and of the *flâneur* as the central figures of modern life. „I speak of Boredom which with ready tears dreams of hangings as it puffs its pipe. Reader, you know this squeamish monster well, hypocrite reader, my alias, my twin!” writes Baudelaire (1983, p. 6) in the above mentioned poem. By the middle of the last century, boredom has gained the interest of several authors, both in a philosophical approach as well as a psychological or sociological one, although most of them start from the premise that boredom is an insufficiently approached phenomenon [a symptomatic example: in 1932 Bertrand Russell notes that “boredom as a factor in human behavior has received, in my opinion, far less attention than it deserves” (p. 52)]. As recent historians of boredom in Western civilization show (see Goodstein, 2005, Svendsen, 2005 or Dalle Pezze & Salzani, 2009), by the 1950’s boredom was acknowledged as a subject of academic interest, not only for literature and philosophy but for the emergent field of academic psychology (Otto Fenichel’s essay *The Psychology of Boredom* – 1935 – is mostly cited in this regard).

Despite this long introduction, the present paper does not aim directly at the phenomenon of boredom (although it has a major appeal for us); instead, our purpose is to use the concept of boredom as some sort of stage entrance for a meditation on the condition of postmodern psychology. It doesn’t take a special gift of perception to see that my contentions are somewhat derogatory towards postmodern psychology if the premise of such a study is boredom. The idea itself is not entirely original, but inspired by some remarks made by Rollo May in an interview conducted by Kirk Schneider, John Galvin and Ilene Serlin at his retreat home in Holderness, New Hampshire in the summer of 1987 and published later by the three interviewers in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (vol. 49, no. 4, 2009, pp. 419-434) under the title “Rollo May on Existential Psychotherapy”. Answering a question on “the present and future

direction of psychotherapy”, May asserts that psychotherapy is facing a profound crisis along with the loss of “the teaching of the fathers (Freud and Jung and Rank and Adler)” (p. 419). Today’s therapy, thinks May [of course, he was referring to the state of affairs at the end of the 80’s, but we strongly believe that there is no reason to think otherwise in our days], becomes more and more a system of gimmicks in which “people have special ways of doing their own therapy, they learn what particular buttons to push, they’re taught various techniques so that they can cure this isolated symptom or that”. This leads, according to May, “to a general boredom and the reason there’s so many new systems in psychotherapy that spring up is that people are bored. Therapists are bored and they have to find some new gimmick in order to make it amusing at least to them” (p. 420).

There is no wonder that May invokes boredom so directly as being the source of “bad” psychotherapy; after all, the core of May’s beliefs and practice is a deeply existentialist one and who contextualized boredom better than the existentialists? Kierkegaard, as the first referential existentialist, in his “Either/Or” takes as a premise the principle that “all men are boring” (2001, p. 59) and that boredom is the root of all evil. In the same line of thought, Heidegger – an influential thinker for most of the existentialist philosophers – devoted a great deal of attention to the problem of boredom in his seminal lecture “The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics”, even though for him boredom (at least one form of boredom) can be used as a mean to get in the touch with the Dasein’s authenticity (thus, to some extent, boredom has a revelatory function). Starting from Kierkegaard and Heidegger, almost every existentialist would admit boredom (sometimes as opposed to anxiety, other times as connected with it) as a defining symptom of the human condition. Bringing up the subject of boredom as an explanation for the lack of substance in the recent forms of therapy seems, therefore, to suit exactly the continental existentialism promoted by May (let us not forget the fact that May, along with Henri Ellenberger, introduced European existentialism to American psychologists in 1958 through their “Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology”).

But, again, our purpose here is not to create a portrait of “authentic therapy vs. mechanical therapy” by using such a philosophical acceptance of the concept of boredom. We don’t need to resort to Dasein or to existentialist theories of the Being to conclude that, indeed, there might be something wrong

with the state of affairs in contemporary forms of therapy. Let us take, for example, the vision proposed by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi on boredom in *Finding Flow* (1990); here, boredom is viewed as one of the eight possible states of mind possible through the conjecture of the skill level with the challenge level. In Csíkszentmihályi's view, boredom is reached when a medium level of skills meets a low level of challenge, being replaced either by arousal when the level of the challenge grows or by apathy and relaxation (when the level of skills decreases, respectively increases). Although our quest for happiness should make us search for the state of flow (when high skills meet high challenges), our lives ("a typical day") – asserts Csíkszentmihályi – are filled with boredom and anxiety (low levels of skills against high challenges).

From this point of view, the professional life of most therapists (especially those practicing what Rollo May called "the gimmick oriented approach") could, indeed, be characterized by boredom since their skill level cannot meet, most of the times, high challenges. Due to the fact that the majority of existing therapy lines have come to have very specific guides and methodologies, a therapist is usually placed in the position to apply a simple set of rules and patterns which, despite a certain amount of particularity in every patient/client, seem to be capable of "repairing" (at least for the moment) most of the common problems (be it family issues, non-clinical anxiety, faulty relationships etc.). Metaphorically speaking, therapy has become a sort of mechanical reflex, impersonal and alienated; this has nothing to do with experiencing empathy or sympathy towards the client, since empathy itself has now become a requisite and is being taught since the first years of every psychology student. Obviously, mechanical reflexes in the line of work lead to boredom (be it conscious or not); in the words of Erich Fromm, "most [manual] work is boring because of its monotony and repetitiveness; much white-collar work is boring because its bureaucratic character, which leaves little responsibility and initiative to the individual" (1973, p. 87). Fromm's analysis reaches the conclusion that in order to compensate the unavoidable boredom of contemporary [professional] life, individuals seek constantly changing stimuli. Hence the ever increasing level of consumerism or thrill seeking in today's Western societies. In respect to psychology (psychotherapy, to be more precise), the same high levels of consumerism can be noticed, both in therapists (many of whom are continuously seeking for that "new therapy" which could fix

clients even better than the current one) as well as in what we could call “professional clients”, the clients who are accustomed to the basic philosophies behind the therapy, or people non-initiated in psychology who are the main target of the self-help books invading this market every year.

Thus we reach the main goal of this paper: a closer look at the philosophical and epistemological premises of the self-declared genres of postmodern therapies. First of all, when trying to dissect this subject, one must keep in mind two fundamental issues:

- a. Postmodernism is different than postmodernity, hence the difference between the adjectives (adverbs) postmodern or postmodernist. For some authors (the most influent in this regard being Ihab Hassan), postmodernism tends to be different from postmodernity not only in its extension (while postmodernity is name for an entire age, following that of modernity, postmodernism is an intellectual state of mind, referring strictly to specific movements in sciences, arts, literature or philosophy), but also in its tension (which means that postmodernism is not a part of postmodernity but, contrary, a last stage in the development of cultural modernity);
- b. Even though some people associate postmodernism with a very commercial like slogan (“everything goes”) this movement has a relatively well delimited sphere of meanings. The plethora of postmodernism related theories, although many times contradicting each other, start from a commonly shared point of view (the relation with the epistemology of modernity) and are as rigorously conducted as it is possible for humanistic theories.

Unfortunately, the use of postmodernism as a concept was not limited to those fields in which it was still possible to delimit it precisely from its predecessors. If architecture (the home base for postmodernism related debates in the 60’s), literature, film or philosophy were areas in which postmodernism was a legitimate concept in relation with the history of those fields, in other areas (like the case of psychology, as we shall see below) postmodernism was used rather imprecisely, without much concern for the debate around its meanings. As Dick Hebdige puts it, “when it becomes possible for people to describe as postmodern the décor of a room, the design of a building, the layout of a page in a fashion magazine, [...] a new phase in commodity fetishism, the decline of the University [...] then it’s clear that we are in the presence of a buzzword” (Hebdige, 1986, pp. 78). It is not the place here to digress about

some “correct definition of postmodernism” as opposed to “faulty definitions”: the subject itself is an independent field of research for many authors. There are even some people (most notably Raoul Eshelman, Alan Kirby or Mikhail Epstein) who think that postmodernism is dead and was replaced by some new form of cultural presence who bears, for now, the not so inspired name of post-postmodernism. Let us just stick to the fact that postmodernism is seen as a radical break with the modern tradition or, in the words of Thomas Kuhn, as a shift of paradigm. Now, what matters most for our subject of interest in this paper is the question if the existence of such a shift of paradigm can be proven or even mentioned as a possibility.

First of all, we think (and we feel that such a belief goes beyond reasonable doubt) that psychology, in its core, is fundamentally modern endeavor. What we mean here by modern does not refer to a certain age in history but rather to those specific points of view in the epistemology of the Enlightenment, axioms which can be found at the roots of every academic field of study existing today. More precisely, in the case of psychology, the fundamental beliefs which makes it possible is that people’s behavior can be observed in an objective manner (at least with some degree of objectivity, depending on the zeitgeist of each era), that the precise source of every component of our behavior can be found (this means that an explanation – the truth – can be found for every aspect of our behavior) and, further, that the observer has the power to manipulate in various degrees the afore mentioned source, thus changing something in the behavior of a particular person. To avoid any kind of confusion: this premises stand for every moment in the history or proto-history of psychology and the recurrent use of “behavior” in the lines above is a simple convention of language. “Behavior” here means any kind of human thought, emotion, physical gesture and so on and it has no importance whether those who devoted their attention to these matters were behaviorists, psychoanalysts or metaphysicians. At any time in history, the capacity to observe, to interpret (to decipher) the observations and to draw systematic and logical conclusions from here (also to pass the conclusions on to other people) was held as sacred for any kind of psychology related task.

How do the proponents of postmodernist therapies describe the “postmodernism” of their approaches? Well, some of them try to relate to the recent history of psychology (the last fifty years) in order to show that an old model was replaced by some radical new one. Lois Shawver (2006), for

instance, finds the roots of the discontentment in the Boulder model of the therapist as a scientist-practitioner. Without insisting too much on the history and circumstances around such a definition, let us just say that back in 1949 when this model was established, its architects thought that it was possible (and desirable) to train clinical psychologists as both scientists and practitioners (Freedheim, 2003, p. 36). Shawver (2006, pp. 82-105) asserts that the Boulder model was proven to be wrong, although it is still the dominant model in the vast majority of university graduate schools for training clinical psychologists. A main argument for promoting a new vision on therapy (referred at by Shawver as “postmodern”) consists in the fact that “researchers are generally not clinicians and clinicians generally view the research being done as either irrelevant or trivial”. Postmodern forms of therapy are defined by Shawver as those practiced by the “eclectic therapists”, which means those therapists “with a broad training who use this training improvisationally as they tailor their process to work with particular clients at particular times in the therapy process” (p. 99). Still, besides the eclectic character, the author doesn’t quite convince us that the forms of therapy mentioned by him are really worthy of being indexed under the sign of postmodernism. The only plausible argument brought by Shawver consists in the fact that “therapy was born in the spirit of modernism [my note: as a symptom of the confusion existent among non-specialists who, still, use terms like postmodern or postmodernism, there is a tendency of assimilating “modernism” with modernity, an idea obviously wrong since modernism is only a literary and artistic movement strictly delimited in time and has got little to do with the main philosophy of modernity and Enlightenment] specifically the spirit of a discipline longing to be a science before it was one [...] Therapy became postmodern because we envisioned it as much more modern than we could make it” (pp. 100-101). It is a bit strange to notice that all this effort to portrait postmodern therapy as being radically different from its modern phase ends with the conclusion that the main effect of the “postmodernization” was the emancipation of the therapists. The strangeness comes, of course, from the fact that – in its core – Enlightenment aimed exactly at this. Besides, there seems to be nothing changed with the concept of therapy (as described by me some pages ago) except the fact that now, at least for Shawver, you can use any kind of therapy you like.

Somehow in the same line of thought, Adam Blatner (1997) describes eight implications of postmodernism in psychotherapy, as it follows:

- make creativity a core value
- construction of a "personal mythology"
- transpersonal perspective as grounding
- a pluralistic model of psyche
- multicultural awareness
- eclecticism in treatment
- metacognition – thinking about thinking
- skill-building for mental flexibility

Of course, every single one of these aspects is backed by some arguments extracted from authors associated with postmodernism (Nietzsche, Anderson and, in some part, Vaihinger), but – without insisting too much on the these specific arguments – the main flaw of this approach is to consider that slight differences in the practice of a science (like “multicultural awareness” or “creativity as a core value”) make solid grounds for an entirely new paradigm. In my opinion, since modernity and postmodernity are presumed to be as different as Antiquity and modernity are, it would take a dramatic change in the core of a subject (psychotherapy in our case) to be able to situate it in an entirely new era.

There is some consensus about the “official start point” of the postmodern vision on therapy; most authors consider that this moment was represented by a conference held in 1989 in Aarhus, Denmark, where an international group of psychologists discussed the effects of the postmodern culture on psychology (somehow ironically, and like a symptom for the late and unnatural import of this concept in psychology, by the end of the 1980s the world of literature questions the end and the aftermaths of postmodernism - Raymond Federman, for instance, asserts that the end of postmodernism can be symbolically found in the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 1989, when Samuel Beckett, the last postmodern writer in his opinion, dies – 1993, p. 105). Steiner Kvale (1992), one of the hosts of the conference, later edited a volume which contained most of the conference presentations and some essays written later specifically on this theme. As a personal note, we can state that from the multitude of postmodernism related approaches, this volume is one the most articulated and non-biased, showing at the same time a remarkably good



understanding of the concepts involved in the debate; the papers included there are not satisfied with the simple conclusion that, if everything is postmodern these days (please remember, the 1990s), then psychology must be postmodern too, but instead they question psychology's real possibilities of being considered postmodern taking into account the fact that psychology was founded as a science and its main concerns are rooted in the fact that man is the center of the universe (again, without drawing too much attention in the present paper on this fact, we must admit that there is a great amount of confusion in this respect in the debates around postmodernism: many authors assert that "the man in the center of the universe" vision is at the core of modernity, while others suggest that, contrary, only postmodernity manages to make the human being the main center of interest, postmodernism being in this approach equivalent with a "new humanism").

Among the multitude of less or more convincing discourses on postmodern therapy, two main directions raise out: collaborative therapy and narrative therapy whose proponents and supporters strongly believe that these are indeed the epitome of postmodernism in psychology. What makes both therapies similar (if we are to be sarcastic we could say that they are similar to the point of almost confusing one with the other) is the fact that they see the therapist not as an objective and impersonal observer of the patient/client, but instead as a collaborator, an equal to the patient/client (although we use "patient" too, it is obvious that these therapies are avoiding such a term since "the problem is the problem, not the person"). There is a second assumption, more deep than the first one, which ties these two therapies (and their derivate forms) together: the idea that sense is being constructed by every man rather than being imposed from other sources. Although it is often believed (usually by people working outside the field of philosophy) that constructivism is a feature brought by postmodernism (the liberalization of the truth, the epistemological perspective etc.) there is actually a long tradition of constructivist approaches in history, sometimes on the lines opened by Descartes' solipsism, other times going even further back to Protagoras via Plato or the Pyrrhonist skeptics. If too afraid to go that far back, we could always use the example of the existentialist movement or, even more close to psychology, the logotherapy of Viktor Frankl, all of these being theories in which man is seen as a constructor of meanings (and hence stories) rather than a mere receiver. So, in the question of constructing meanings it is really hard to

say that postmodern therapies bring something new. To bring even more doubts on the “postmodernity” of the narrative therapy (we should add that narrative therapy seems to be more popular than the more obscure collaborative therapy), we should add that there is a general opinion according to narrative therapy was born before being associated with postmodern philosophical theories. Donald Polkinghorne (2004), for example, clearly states that “narrative therapy theory has come to have such a close relationship with postmodern philosophy that some narrative therapists have called it *postmodern therapy*”. In other words, the connections between postmodernism and narrative therapy have been elaborated post-factum, therefore we cannot speak of an intrinsic causality between the postmodern line of thought and this kind of therapy. Further back, Vincent Fish pointed out as early as 1993 (narrative therapy as an institution finds its beginnings according to some authors in 1990 when Australian Michael White and David Epston, of New Zealand, published in the United States their seminal book “Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends”) that narrative therapists have chosen just some particular aspects from the postmodern philosophy, aspects which permit them to create a view in which the therapist is isolated from any social, economic, historical or institutional context. Briefly said, White and Epston (and Kvale, according to his own confessions) are heavily influenced by Lyotard’s account on meta-narratives and their position that people need to get rid of the self-imposed narratives (cultural, ethnical, sexual narratives) and to make their own personal stories is very much similar to Lyotard’s point of view on knowledge in the postmodern society. Of course, there are serious objections against this kind of therapy in itself (besides the lack of empirical proof pointed out at times there is the fact – a more serious doubt in our opinion – that the therapist is plausible to bring his/her own biases and subjectivities into the therapy), but these objections are not our aim at the moment. Let us just be satisfied with saying that, as said before, there seem to be little relevance of this kind of therapy for postmodernism. If indeed, language and subjective perspective become central, still these reasons do not seem sufficient so as to claim the existence of a radically new paradigm in psychology. Bear in mind, once again, that changes in method (no matter how spectacular they appear at a certain moment) did not change the *idea* behind the therapeutic act.

The case of collaborative therapy is even simpler from this point of view: Goolishian and Anderson, the “inventors” of this kind of therapy, suggest

that the postmodernism of their approach lies in the centrality of language and discourse which characterize it. Once again, collecting bits of information from more or less postmodern philosophers (Wittgenstein is of great help for the authors and the question of Wittgenstein's postmodernity is not as clear as they would like to think), Goolishian and, especially, Anderson claim to correct some of the flaws in narrative therapy by proposing another approach which would "challenge the modern paradigm". Postmodernism seems, once again, mis- or partially understood and used rather due to the fascination it surrounds it; in the own words of Harlene Anderson (1996, p. xviii) "I choose the umbrella word *postmodern* owing to the freedom and possibilities that assumptions with it allow". There is, to some point, a certain degree of unconscious hypocrisy in this attitude: the therapist gives up all claims of knowledge (the principle of not-knowing lies at the core of this approach) and suggests that (only) the client has the power and the capacity to emancipate him/herself from the oppressive constructs imposed on to him/her. At the same time, though, such a therapist still claims to be a therapist, still tries to elaborate a model of this kind of therapy (with guidelines, principles and everything else) and, more important, still holds a privileged relation with the client, while this client remain a *client* (that is someone who pays for the expertise of a specialist). If this kind of therapy would be honest until the end, it would lead to the dissolution of the institution of therapy itself and the total emancipation from the field of science and professionalism; instead it is just another voice in the mass of contemporary approaches, one of those voice we suspected (as said in the beginning) to be born out of boredom and dissatisfaction.

Instead of a conclusion, we would like to stress out that our objections are not aimed specifically towards postmodernism (in general) or the so-called "postmodern therapies". Instead, what bothers us (and should bother every professional working in the field of psychology or every intellectual concerned with psychology related issues) are the unfounded claims of radical novelty raised by some of the contemporary approaches. At a time when none of the classic therapies (be it cognitive therapies, behavioral or psychoanalytical) were proven as being wrong (can a therapy be proved as good or flawed?) some people found themselves compelled to find novelties where there was still room left for deepening the existing methods. In some way, psychology was and is the victim of its own success; it is increasingly hard to discern "real" psychologists from "claimed psychologists" when psychology (in its various

forms) is to be found in literally every corner of our lives. As the comprehensive analysis of Steven Ward (2002) shows it, the prevalence of psychology in everyday life and the increasing number of schools teaching more or less orthodox ways of “doing” psychology has made it impossible to distinguish truth from false in this area; postmodern therapies seem to be exactly on this line of confusion. In our way of seeing things, a truly postmodern therapy would mean the end of therapy and of psychology itself. We are not saying that this is necessarily a tragedy or a bad thing per se, but – at least for the moment – none of the self-claimed postmodern therapies have done anything else than correcting an already existent model. It is simply not enough to state that a therapy argues against Descartes’ model of mind and body to make it postmodern; while Descartes is for many the founding father of Modernity, his view on the mind-body problem has been almost totally rejected by what we call “modern psychology” even from its beginnings. If we are to find a rupture with the modern model, it is not here where we must look.

### References

- Baudelaire, C. (1983). *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Jaffrey: David R. Godine Publishers.
- Blatner, A. (1997). The Implications of Postmodernism for Psychotherapy. *Individual Psychology*, 53(4), 476-482.
- Csikszentmihályi, M. (1990). *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Dalle Pezze, B., & Salzani, C. (2009). *Essays on Boredom and Modernity*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Federman, R. (1993). *Critifictions: Postmodern Essays*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Fish, V. (1993). “Poststructuralism in Family Therapy. Interrogating the Narrative/Conversational Mode”. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 19(3), 221-232.
- Freedheim, D. K. (2003). *Handbook of Psychology: History of Psychology* (vol. 1). New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.
- Fromm, E. (1973). *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

- Goodstein, E. S. (2005). *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hebdige, D. (1986). Postmodernism and “the other side”. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10(2), 78-97.
- Kierkegaard, S. (2001). *The Kierkegaard Reader*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Kvale, S. (1992). *Psychology and postmodernism*. London: Sage.
- Pascal, B. (2008). *Pensées*. Teddington: The Echo Library.
- Polkinghorne, D. (2004). “Narrative Therapy and Postmodernism”. In L. Angus and J. McLeod (eds.). *The Handbook of Narrative and Psychotherapy: practice, theory and research*. London: Sage.
- Russell, B. (1932). *The Conquest of Happiness*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Shawver, L. (2006). *Nostalgic Postmodernism. Postmodern Therapy*. Oakland: Paralogic Press.
- Svendsen, L. F. H. (2005). *A Philosophy of Boredom*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Ward, S. C. (2002). *Modernizing the Mind: Psychological Knowledge and the Remaking of Society*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.

Received January 5, 2011

Revision received January 11, 2011

Accepted January 24, 2011