

Postmodernism comes alive in Taipei 2008: Reflections in a workshop with Harlene Anderson

Chao, Wentao, Ph.D.

Assistant professor, National Taipei University of Education

Family therapist

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A firsthand experience of postmodernism

Many of us have been through a process of encountering postmodernism in graduate study, involving reading, speculating, confusing, discussing, and arguing the ideas with others. When I went to this workshop by Harlene Anderson, organized by “Teacher Chang” foundation in Taipei, I thought I would be content to see a master and got my book signed. Turn out it was a personal re-experience of postmodernism, in which many ideas became tangible.

A master with amiability and serenity

With her international reputation, Harlene surprised me with her amiability when she walked into the audiences greeting every morning before the class began. You soon observed a quality of serenity in her, in the way she lectured, walked, took photos with participants, and especially in her interview with clients. Experienced therapists know that calmness reflects experience for a clinician. Many experienced therapists in Taipei told me that they appreciated Harlene’s composed and deliberate presentation.

Within her amiability, Harlene is no doubt a solid therapist. She invited a Taiwan couple to conduct a live interview on the first day, in which we had a chance to see what “collaborative conversational” approach was like. On the second day she invited two participants from the floor to have an alternate interview at the same time, to demonstrate the “process” she had been talking about. “What if they had different agendas of concern!” I asked Harlene afterwards. She smilingly replied it happened before. It was to highlight the process, instead of the content, she explained.

What is the “process”?

If we see traditional psychotherapy in terms of three segments: a client presents a problem/issue, the therapist assesses/diagnoses, and tries to intervene for change. The “therapy” Harlene presented was more of a “conversation”, in which therapist didn’t seem to make much effort on assessment and intervention any longer, that is, while listening to clients, therapist no longer worried “What diagnostic category does his

problem fit into?”, “Where should I intervene?”, and “What do I say, what do I do next?” Instead, Harlene gently opened up a “different conversation”, in which people began listening to each other’s differences, reflecting on their own situation, to activate a process of inner conversation and reflection, and extended this conversation in their life naturally. That’s probably why Harlene said “conversation doesn’t stop, it pauses!”

Conversation that gets stuck usually is more like a monologue: repeating one’s own narrative, having a hard time hearing other’s. Here came a tender therapist inviting, facilitating a conversation among people that was tranquil, transparent, mutually respectful and influential. This atmosphere of conversation seemed to spread itself soon to different scenes of client’s life before they noticed. There was a participant in the workshop shared that she had a long, spontaneous talk with her husband after seeing Harlene’s demonstrative interview, and she even gave her mother-in-law a massage. Maybe because collaborative approach consciously tries to make psychotherapy an ordinary, everyday conversation, it easily goes on outside the interview room, with others or within oneself.

A therapist with depth

Harlene spoke little in her interview. The conversation was composed mainly of clients’ lively talk and her serene listening, occasionally with concise response to elicit further expression of the client. The way of Harlene’s interview struck me that, “listening” is so fundamental for psychotherapist, nevertheless Harlene’s listening conveyed a clear quality of depth, a kind of depth that was way beyond what I can offer in an interview. The depth of her listening was revealed in her clients’ feedback of being deeply understood and receiving to-the-point new perspective, sheerly from Harlene’s short response after unhurried listening. When psychotherapy gets sticky, the anxiety to get unstuck can be overwhelming for the therapist, usually making the therapist propose more suggestion and attempt more intervention. Thus it was intriguing to see Harlene didn’t talk much and did very little in the process, whereas her clients were often getting more and more spontaneous and talkative along the way, as if their inner agency was somehow nurtured and so blooming in front of us. Harlene’s minimalist language style reminded me the art of “reserving space” in traditional Chinese painting: by giving enough space on the canvas the focus is nevertheless highlighted. It also occurred to me the figure of gong-fu masters in those Chinese martial art novels. These masters don’t practice fancy sweaty strike and kick any longer, yet their succinct moves always convey remarkable impact on people in the scene. To me Harlene’s work demonstrated, how an experienced therapist gave

space in an interview, and how to facilitate a conversation with depth.

Harlene's work also reminded me the work of my supervisor, Dr. Lee Waiyung. There seems to be common grounds among experienced therapists. That is, providing a process in which one can begin to listen to and reflect on oneself, through seemingly casual conversation. If we look at the difference of style, Waiyung is versatile in unfolding subtle emotions, long-term grudges, and accustomed interactive patterns in a family, activating family members to reflect on their situation for change. Harlene on the other hand is a master in engaging people into a process of tranquil, collaborative conversation, in which deep reflection and new perspective naturally emerge. Moreover, the good conversation extends itself into everyday life, like a pleasant ripple keeps reaching far.

Postmodernism comes alive

I am aware that there are solid philosophies upholding the seemingly ordinary conversation in collaborative conversational approach, and I know it is not easy to elaborate these philosophies in short terms, because they are embedded in a large historical context of philosophies for decades if not centuries. When Harlene was explaining the philosophical stance of her work, I felt privileged to hear a seasoned practitioner, who had been contemplating these postmodern ideas for years in clinical contexts, now presenting these ideas in a terse yet impressive way. I noticed I had goose bumps when I tried to note down every word she said at the moment, as if postmodernism was coming alive in the room.