

**Postmodern thought and individual experience: An interpretative
phenomenological analysis**

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree of diploma in any University, and, to the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published except where due reference is made. I give permission for the digital version of this thesis to be made available on the web, via the University of Adelaide's digital thesis repository, the Library Search, and through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the School to restrict access for a period of time.

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Abstract

Emerging predominately in the late 1970s through to the early 90s, postmodern thought encompasses a radical questioning of previous cultural and belief structures. This has led to criticisms of these ideas as nihilistic and detrimental to individuals' identity and values, alongside claims of increased freedom and possibility. Given these criticisms and possibilities, the present study consisted of a qualitative investigation into the influence of postmodernism on the self, beliefs, and values. Seven participants participated in semi-structured interviews, which were analysed through an experience-based approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Four themes and 15 subthemes were identified in response to postmodernism: 'ambivalence'; 'uncertainty'; 'responses to uncertainty'; and 'self as an exception'. These findings were both consistent and inconsistent with criticisms of postmodernism, as participants expressed a sense of postmodernism as destabilising, however, the need for action and stability frequently led participants to respond with the strengthening of their beliefs, or an unwillingness to refute them. The experiences and responses of participants to postmodernism challenge the view that postmodern thinking has a negative influence upon individuals and their beliefs, although further research is needed. Based on the present study and its limitations, it is suggested that future research utilise both qualitative and quantitative methods in more targeted samples to investigate the relationship between postmodernism and conceptions of beliefs and values.

(Words, 217)

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Background

Throughout the late 20th century, a shift within academia and broader culture emerged under the term of ‘postmodernism’ (Ovadia, 2003). Postmodernism has since been criticised as both endorsing a disintegration of culture, and promoting possibility and change (Kvale, 1992). Despite the controversy and criticism surrounding postmodernism, expressed in both academia and broader culture, and calls for the operationalisation of postmodern claims, research in the area has been limited (Allan & Turner, 2000; Susen, 2015). This chapter provides an overview of postmodernism, its relation to psychology and influence on individuals, postmodernism and contemporary culture, and the present study.

1.2 Postmodernism

Postmodernism suffers a lack of definition, frequently being considered a “fuzzy concept” (Susen, 2015, p. 278), which encompasses a variety of thinkers and approaches. However, discussions on postmodernism have tended to cluster around certain themes, including tension between objective and subjective knowledge, the prevalence and ubiquity of power within society, and the prevalence of narratives in explaining and presenting events and truths (Kvale, 1992; Susen, 2015). Coming into strong influence in the 1970s and 80s, postmodernism has largely faded from the centre stage it once occupied; however, its influence in academia continues to pervade, particularly in disciplines such as Anthropology, Literature, Social Work, Social Sciences, and the Humanities, which undertook enormous paradigm shifts as a result of postmodernist thought (Greenfield, 2000; Kvale, 1992; Parker, 1998; Preda, 2015; Susen, 2015). The present thesis will be working with postmodern thought as conceptualised

within the literature of these disciplines, with the understanding that any decisive definition of postmodernism is controversial.

Postmodernism emerged in response to modernism, which viewed truth as underlying all global systems, and accessible by objective measurement and research (Eisenberg, 1998; Susen, 2015). Modernism proposed the world as understandable by empirical investigation, and humanity as progressing toward the truth, particularly through scientific avenues. This view also advocated moral absolutes, and the existence of truth independent of humanity and society. By contrast, postmodernism promotes a spirit of questioning and suspicion, where truth does not exist in an abstract sense, but rather through a series of often contradictory narratives constructed by people or groups, frequently for the purpose of power and dominance (Eisenberg, 1998; Lyotard, 1993). The grand quest for a singular truth which characterised modernism moves to a postmodern series of constructions whose reality exists in language and its use to create knowledge and supposed fact (Eisenberg, 1998; Kvale, 1992). Where modernism looked to build theories based on data and facts, postmodernism advocates a method of deconstruction; pulling apart realities to explain how they are created (Kvale, 1992; Parker, 1998; Susen, 2015). The modern singular truth becomes a multiplicity of perspectives or subjective “truths”, and it is perhaps fitting to this that postmodernity is difficult to explain in any concrete sense; unlike modernism it does not consist of one cohesive school of thought with internal variations, but rather of a collection of perspectives (Andrews, Watson, Chen, & Morris, 2017; Kvale, 1992; Whitsitt, 2010). This approach has seen critics frequently accuse postmodernism of being relativistic and nihilistic; and has perhaps prevented it gaining much influence in the sciences, despite its popularity in the humanities (Kvale, 1992; Lyotard, 1993; Parker, 1998; Susen, 2015).

Postmodernism has also been associated with the replacement of metaphysical frameworks, which rely to some extent on a degree of belief in objective or hierarchical truth,

with an awareness of truth as constructed and thereby biased; a self-awareness Lyotard (1993) suggested to emerge in an increasing sense of irony. As objective truth is replaced by subjective narratives presenting a perspective of truth as it appears, or is wished to appear, by different groups or individuals, so too is the truth of an individual's narrative replaced with an understanding that their truth is also subjective, shaped by their own culture, surrounds, and consciousness. This self-awareness is purported to be expressed through a sense of irony, in which a statement both is and is not truth. In place of belief is a sense of unreality, and life as a perpetual performance, frequently imbued with cynical humour. This sense of life as performance, in combination with the increase of technology and social media, which places an emphasis on life as it is presented, has often seen the reality of postmodernism termed hyperreality; a sense of a reality of symbols, images, and creations more real than the surrounding physical world (Susen, 2015). This ongoing sense of unreality, along with an increased awareness of the socially constructed nature of the self and its speech, also leads to a frequent association of postmodernism with a sense of irony about personal existence, and the world more generally (Lyotard, 1993; Susen, 2015).

Where modernism valued truth and knowledge as progression, postmodernism instead views them as oppressive creations to be cautious of (Eisenberg, 1998). Previous foundations of Western culture, such as religious and scientific meta-narratives, exist as social and linguistic constructions, not as absolute truths (Andrews et al., 2017; Eisenberg, 1998; Kvale, 1992). Questions of privilege on the grounds of identity and place within social hierarchies frequently occupy postmodern discourses, as well as a neo-pragmatic approach, which suggests the meaning of language to be found directly in its use, and not in any higher sense (Baird, 1996; Kvale, 1992). The rejection of absolute truth leaves a focus on the now, aesthetics, and the practically manageable. While these perspectives are frequently taken to portray postmodernism in a negative light, an increase in self-awareness has been proposed as a

positive trait of postmodernism, which decreases the need to be right or to diminish the views of others (Susen, 2015). Additionally, some proponents of postmodernism argue the philosophy allows for new possibilities, for continuous recreation, and increased awareness of life's immediacy (Kvale, 1992; Parker, 1998).

1.3 Postmodernism and Psychology

Poised between the humanities and the sciences, psychology has not avoided the influence of postmodernism (Kvale, 1992). While the effect of postmodernism is perhaps not so pronounced here as in other fields, it has nonetheless been a topic of discussion, particularly in the area of discursive psychology and discourse analysis, which has a largely postmodern basis (Preda, 2015), and in conceptions of the self (Greenfield, 2000; Parker, 1998). As Lester (2012) notes, contemporary views of the self within psychology are debated; with the modern conception of a 'true' or 'grand' self, which looks to integrate different aspects of the person into a cohesive whole favoured by some, and a postmodern multiplicity-based view of the self, or the self as an actor, taking up different roles in different situations, favoured by others. Where modernism in psychology viewed the self as a construct existing outside of context, which could be measured through underlying or latent variables to form a cohesive structure, postmodern views of the self instead advocate a socially constructed being, whose existence is set in context and in language and carries no meaning outside of the narratives in which it takes part. Narrative theory (McTighe, 2018) and Dialogical Self Theory (Meijl, 2012) demonstrate a postmodern view of the self, as the individual exists as a component of the narratives they tell and utilise; creating their identities through different roles and scenarios, or through interaction with social and cultural discourses which dictate their identities (Frie, 2011; Gergen, 1994; Hertler, Krauss, & Ward, 2017; Meijl, 2012).

The deconstruction of metaphysical frameworks and value systems has also caused psychology to address the way it conducts science and presents its results (Kvale, 1992; Lyotard, 1993). While this has led some to suggest psychology should abandon the search for values (Kvale, 1992), others suggest incorporating postmodern thought into psychology can allow for the discipline to incorporate social and political change, through generating theories that improve the world (Brinkmann, 2005; Gergen, 1994; Kvale, 1992).

1.4 A question of influence

Postmodernist approaches have been theorised to carry a number of ramifications, including an increase in irony, perspective-taking, emphasis on context-bound truths as opposed to over-arching meta-narratives, such as those found in religion or science, and even at times, nihilism and relativism (Andrews et al., 2017; Ferraro, Guarnaccia, Lacolino, & Giannone, 2016; Lyotard, 1993; Parker, 1998). However, within psychology, the major focus appears to lie in the realms of self and meaning, with postmodernism being antithetical to the idea of a true or grand self, as previously focussed on in personality psychology, and again, antithetical to the idea of truth or meta-narrative (Kvale, 1992; Lyotard, 1993). This fragmented self is in a way analogous to the fragmented and heterogenous nature of culture expressed in sociology as a postmodern society (Preda, 2015), and experiences a similar tension between criticisms suggesting this as a positive chance for more flexible identities and self-creation, and those suggesting it to be destabilising (Kvale, 1992; Susen, 2015).

However, while postmodernity in psychology, and indeed, in other disciplines of the humanities, has been discussed in detail, and postmodern frameworks have been applied throughout various studies of identity and self-conception, relatively little work seems to have investigated whether this postmodern view of self and identity has been integrated by individuals into their personal experience (Ovadia, 2003). Thus far, postmodernist theory and

its derivatives appear to have been applied in a top-down fashion, as a deconstruction of others' experiences and information, without any corresponding research into whether individuals view their own identities as multiplicities, and the extent to which exposure to postmodern thinking, and use of postmodern analysis, has led to changes in their beliefs about themselves, their values, and belief frameworks (Ovadia, 2003). This is not to say such matters have not been debated in the literature, indeed as Susen (2015) indicates, postmodernism has been debated with heat on both sides, some viewing it as enlightened, leading to an expanding sense of possibility and individual freedom to recreate the self, others considering it destructive and corrupting, leading to a distrust in culture and moral objectivity. However, in practice it remains relatively unstudied (Allan & Turner, 2000; Ovadia, 2003).

1.4.1 Postmodernism and the Self

The postmodern focus on the here and now, and on surface and socially constructed reality as opposed to underlying truths, leads to a fluid and multiple conception of self, rather than a grand self which underlies an individual's actions. This notion of the self as multiple and socially situated rather than existing with an underlying sense of truth or core personality has been much speculated in psychology and other branches of the humanities (Vollmer, 2000). Operationalisation of this theory is uncommon, and has generally looked at the individual response to the postmodern world, rather than its philosophy specifically (Dunn & Castro, 2012; Hirsch, 2014). Dunn and Castro (2012) and Hirsch (2014) suggest self-pluralism increases within postmodern societies; however, this sense of the self as multiple is also attributed to stress, and reduced time to reflect and thus integrate various aspects of the personality within the individual's self-conception (Hirsch, 2014).

Postmodern thought's emphasis on the socially embedded context of identity also precludes a sense of ironic self-awareness, as the individual realises they are a creation in the

present moment, built up in socially constructed ways or else shaped by governing power and societal structures into certain roles (Cousineau, 2017; Frie, 2011). The postmodern focus on narrative also becomes relevant in identity as the way individuals maintain a sense of continuity despite their ever-changing nature (Ferraro et al., 2016; Frie, 2011; Hertler et al., 2017). By use of narratives drawn from their past experiences and memories, individuals maintain a sense of themselves as continuous, despite the ever-changing nature of their interactions and environments. However, this narrative is not to be confused with a true self; rather it is a story in which the individual goes through continuous changes, which reflect not a greater truth, but truths of that particular moment and context (Frie, 2011). In a postmodern sense, asking questions of a permanent self-concept is almost ludicrous, as the enduring self does not, in a sense, exist (Tricarico, 2016). The individual is argued to be largely a social concept, shaped by social demands, and relevant only in such contexts (Cousineau, 2017; Frie, 2011). Group identity thus becomes more salient, and the simultaneous eradication of the individual is accompanied by the knowledge of the individual's boundaries, their inability to know anything but through their personal perspectives and limitations (Tricarico, 2016). Susen (2015) proposes this self-awareness to be both empowering and paralysing; both presenting the individual with the possibility of agency, and simultaneously removing a sense of certain knowledge.

While it is unlikely for individuals to practically apply the full extent of postmodernist conceptions of identity to their lives, it nevertheless bears the question of how this form of thinking influences individuals' perceptions of themselves and their experience.

1.4.2 Values, Beliefs, and Meta-narratives

As previously discussed, postmodern thought tends toward a relativistic framework in which meta-narratives are social constructions and not true in any objective sense (Andrews et

al., 2017). This relativistic slant has tended to lead to criticisms of postmodernism as amoral, in viewing all values as equal, or as socially constructed and therefore devoid of objective truth (Parker, 1998; Susen, 2015). Kvale (1992) suggests values may still have differing worth even if they are all viewed as social constructions, although it is questionable whether this awareness may alter individual's evaluations of their personal values. As such, exposure to postmodern thought has been suggested to cause a decrease in belief in meta-narratives, and a re-evaluating of personal values (Lyotard, 1993; Susen, 2015). However, more positively, this might also lead to a greater appreciation of the views and values of others. In relation to this prediction, a quantitative study by Ovadia (2003) using data from the University of Michigan Monitoring the Future project found individuals to demonstrate an increased importance for most values, and a decrease in the perceived importance of meaning; consistent with postmodern predictions. The large sample size, between 14, 826 and 18, 924 students each year, suggests robust results; however, this study evaluated the values of North American students between 1976 and 1996, and is unlikely to be demonstrative of current value perception.

1.5 Postmodernism and Broader Culture

In discussing postmodernism, it is important to recognise that these ideas do not occur in a vacuum. As Susen (2015) and Hirsch (2014) note, postmodernism is intimately connected to globalisation and technological advancement, which exacerbate not only the salience of notions of pluralism and hyperreality, but also the subsequent paradoxes, such as that between individualism and standardisation; as individuals are granted ever more opportunities for self-expression and personalisation within an increasing predominance of standardised brands, organisations, and systems. To this extent, any support of the criticisms of postmodernism is difficult to delineate as a direct influence of postmodernism and not the surrounding environment; though this criticism could be made equally of modernism and does not preclude the impossibility of its study (Susen, 2015).

Outside of its debate in academia, concerns over postmodernism have also been raised in popular culture, by authors such as David Foster Wallace on the misuse of irony (Foster Wallace, 1993), and more recently by Professor Jordan Peterson, on its relationship with neo-Marxism and identity politics (Peterson, 2017). Given these concerns regarding the influence of postmodernism, a structured exploration would be beneficial to academic literature, and bringing research to such discussions.

1.6 This Project

Given much of the speculated influence of postmodernist thought has been on conceptualisations of identity, and identity is central to much of human experience, this project explored whether participants' conceptualisation of their identities changed through introduction to postmodern understandings of self- and personhood. Additionally, considering the postmodern tendency to advocate tolerance and views of relativism, and the concern raised in the literature of its opposition to metaphysical frameworks of belief, this study also explored whether participants believed themselves to have changed or been challenged in relation to their beliefs and values, and how this affected their individual experience.

Given the relatively exploratory nature of the research, and the complexity of the topics involved, a qualitative approach utilising interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was adopted for the study, centred around the question 'what influence, if any, has postmodernism had upon individual experience of the self, beliefs, and values?'

Chapter 2

Methodology

2.1 Introduction

Following the previous chapter's overview of postmodernism, its relation to psychology, and the aims of this project, this chapter will focus on the methodology for this study on postmodern thought as it relates to the self, beliefs, and values; namely interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Included is the rationale for the methodological approach; the theoretical framework of IPA; and the methods used in collecting and analysing the data.

2.2 Rationale for Qualitative Methods and IPA

Within psychology, quantitative methodology has frequently been upheld as a more rigorous method of gathering evidence than its qualitative counterparts (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). However, while quantitative methods are well suited to evaluation of treatments and understanding of cognitive processes, they are less equipped to provide an in-depth understanding of experience; an area of research more suited to qualitative methodology (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Qualitative methods are also of great use in the initial phases of research into a topic, as they provide a broad understanding of an issue or topic, which can give direction for future research (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). As the relation of postmodernism to individual experience has undergone limited research, and postmodernism itself is a complex topic, qualitative methodology was well suited to the present study, providing an exploratory, in-depth approach.

Given the focus on the individual in this research, IPA was selected to provide in-depth insight into individual psychological experience (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA enables an explorative approach, and in-depth investigation of individual experience including its psychological aspects.

2.3 IPA Theoretical Framework

IPA has its basis in phenomenology, and incorporates approaches of embodied experience, bracketing, and hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2009). IPA approaches research with a view of humans as “sense-making creatures” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3), who attempt to understand and interpret their experiences. This experience is grounded in a physical reality, with which people interact and derive meaning from, through embodied experience and their pre-conceptions. IPA seeks to understand this process within a small group of relatively homogenous participants, drawing on the unique depth of their individual reflections to interpret the essence of an experience more generally. This makes IPA useful for a range of psychological research; encompassing experiences of illness, sexuality, and psychological distress alongside those of life stages, such as motherhood (Charlick, Fielder, Pincombe, & McKellar, 2017; Smith et al., 2009).

IPA involves a double interpretation, as the researcher interprets the participants’ interpretation of their experience. Accordingly, the researcher must be aware of their own biases and pre-conceptions, so as to understand, bracket, and adjust them in the context of the research (Smith et al., 2009). This requires approaching the data with an open and inquisitive mind, understanding that, while the researcher’s conclusions are not more true than the participants’, they can offer insights which exceed and overlap the claims of participants (Smith et al., 2009). Accordingly, IPA utilises the hermeneutic circle, whereby the researcher continually moves between the participants’ interpretation, their analysis while bracketing assumptions, and their own interpretation which, inevitably, draws upon prior experience and understanding. The conceptual framework of IPA is therefore one of critical realism, being based in an objective reality, but aware of the role of subjective perception.

2.4 Sampling and Participants

2.4.1 Sampling Process

Prior to sampling, the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee approved the study (██████████), which was conducted in accordance with NHMRC guidelines. In keeping with IPA guidelines, attempts were made to keep the sample relatively homogeneous, however, given the constraints of the study, the sample was more heterogeneous than would be ideal (Smith et al., 2009). This is discussed further in section 4.3. The eligibility criteria for this study required participants to be over the age of 18, proficient in English, and to have gained some familiarity with postmodernism within a past or current university course. The inclusion of the university criteria provided a more focussed understanding of postmodernism, important given the difficulties associated with its definition.

Participants were recruited through heads of schools in the humanities, who were willing to endorse the study through flyers and emails distributed among students in second year or higher courses with postmodern content. Participants could then contact the researcher to participate, following which snowball sampling was also used. Participant recruitment was conducted without any direct contact between the researcher and participants before the participant expressed interest in the study; with the exception of the pilot interview, which was conducted through personal contact with a willing participant.

Copies of the participant information sheet, consent form, recruitment flyer, and email endorsement can be found in appendices A through C.

2.4.2 Participants

The total sample consisted of seven participants; three of whom were male, and four female. Participants were aged between 21 and 73 ($M = 35$, $SD = 18.79$); and were graduates

or current university students. Degrees and majors recruited from included Psychology, Education, Social Work, English, and Philosophy (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Degree	Graduate	Interview Length
█	23	Social Work	Yes	33:45
█	42	Education (Masters)	Yes, CS*	1:08:28
█	39	Psychology (Masters)	Yes, CS	1:01:58
█	73	Philosophy	Yes, CS	1:03:00
█	21	Psychology	No	44:54
█	25	Arts (Philosophy)	No	1:03:17
█	22	Arts (Philosophy and English)	No	15:26

Note. *CS refers to currently studying. █

2.5 Data collection

2.5.1 Interviews

Data was collected in semi-structured interviews ($M = 50.11$, $SD = 19.64$ minutes), using an interview guide. Interviews were conducted one-on-one on the university premises, or at a location requested by the participant. Interviews were recorded using a mobile phone and transcribed verbatim.

2.5.2 Interview Guide

As the interviews were semi-structured, the interview schedule was used as a guide, and questions frequently followed the conversation and direction of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Questions were separated into four sections, the first consisting of questions about participants' experience in their university courses and understanding of postmodernism. Following the suggestions of (Braun & Clarke, 2013), this section consisted of more general questions to set the participants at ease and aid in building rapport. The remaining sections consisted of experiences of self, values, and beliefs. Questions were open ended and moved from general to more specific areas, as guided by previous theory.

The schedule was tested using a pilot interview, which was undertaken with a friend familiar with postmodernism, recruited by request and without coercion. The pilot interview subsequently became case one. Following the pilot interview, the wording and substance of some questions were altered based on the responses and suggestions of the participant (e.g., changing 'human progress' to 'idea of progress'). The full schedule can be found in Appendix D.

2.5.3 Transcription

Within IPA, transcription is concerned primarily with the semantic content and language-use of the participant; though other aspects of the interaction, such as gestures, laughter, and pauses are often included in transcription, they are marked by a descriptor in brackets, such as [*pause*], rather than coded in exact detail (Smith et al., 2009). To protect participant confidentiality and anonymity, participant names were replaced with pseudonyms during the process of transcription and potentially identifying information was changed so far as possible without compromising the integrity of the data.

2.6 Rigour and Reflexivity

Given concerns over the quality and validity of qualitative research due to their reliance on subjective perception, considerations of rigour and reflexivity were central to the research process, as discussed Tracy's (2010) criteria of excellence for qualitative research. Smith et al. (2009) refer to rigour as "the thoroughness of the study" (p. 181), encompassing the quality and applicability of the sample, interviews, and analysis. Regarding analysis, this means an in-depth engagement with the data in a thorough and systematic manner; in this study, cases were analysed using consistent processes, and themes cross-checked with a supervising researcher to ensure analysis formed a coherent path derived from data, and thus had face validity (Tracy, 2010). While IPA does not draw upon outside theory in the analysis process, in keeping with Tracy's (2010) principle that rigorous analysis requires an ability to discern nuance and complexity often provided by theory, the researcher also worked to read relevant literature and theory which, though bracketed in the process of analysis, enabled a more complex understanding of occurrences in the data.

IPA is also concerned with bracketing, or separating out one's personal experience, and being open-minded in regard to participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This requires a sense of self-reflexivity, as bracketing out personal experiences and assumptions firstly involves their recognition. This reflexivity is important to IPA and qualitative research more generally, in maintaining the trustworthiness of findings, and ensuring they are not a reflection of the researcher's views (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Tracy, 2010). In IPA, this also influences the interview stage; as such, interviews were conducted with an open approach to participant experience, and an on-going awareness of the possible difference between their experience and views, and those of the researcher, and ways the interference of this difference could be mitigated (Smith et al., 2009). Accordingly, it is noted that the researcher has studied

postmodern theory in relation to anthropology and psychology, providing a potentially different view on postmodern ideas to those held by the participants.

Reflexivity was also addressed through maintenance of an audit trail, containing notes on the analytic process, generation of themes, and relevant thoughts and perspectives. This also accounted for time differences between interviews, transcription, and analysis, to understand how views may have developed throughout the research (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Tracy, 2010). The audit trail was also used to record reflections on interviews and analysis processes, considering which subsequent adjustments could be made and biases addressed.

2.7 Data Analysis

The present study followed comprehensive guides for IPA as set out in both Braun and Clarke (2013) and Smith et al. (2009). Following data collection, analysis was undertaken one transcript (termed a case) at a time. Initially, this involved familiarisation with the data, through repeated reading of the transcript, and listening to the audio recording. Within this phase, initial impressions and assumptions were recorded by the researcher in an audit trail, to bracket or reduce their influence in the next phase of analysis.

Following familiarisation, exploratory notes were made on the participant's comments, including: descriptions, focussing on semantic content; conceptual comments, considering broader ideas and interrelations, associations, and metaphors; and linguistic comments, concerned with the specific use of language.

Emergent themes for the case were then generated through coding the exploratory notes and relevant transcript sections. Codes were based in the language of the participant and looked to capture important aspects of the transcript and notes concisely. In this study, exploratory notes were made to the right of the transcript, while emergent themes were written to the left,

as suggested in Smith et al. (2009). A selection of coded transcript can be found in appendix E.

Following initial coding, emergent themes were analysed and developed to find interrelations between themes. As IPA involves analysing the whole of the participant's experience through discrete parts, which are drawn together again, this process involved separating the themes from their chronological order. In this study, this was done by writing the themes on separate pieces of card which were arranged and grouped according to the principles of abstraction, in which themes are coalesced around a common concept; subsumption, which follows a similar process using a pre-existing emergent theme; polarization, which analyses oppositional relationships within the data; function, which focuses on the themes as they are used by the participant to achieve certain ends; and contextualisation, which addresses the themes in light of their temporal and cultural context (Smith et al., 2009). Within this study, themes were also connected by way of thematic mind-maps as shown in appendix F, to develop an understanding of their unique interplay in the participant's experience.

Following this process, the focus of the analysis was moved to the next case. While IPA acknowledges previous findings will influence analysis of the next case, previous ideas were bracketed as far as possible, allowing new themes to emerge and each case to be analysed according to the unique experience of each participant.

Having established superordinate themes for each case, analysis then moved to looking for patterns across cases. Connections were sought between themes and superordinate themes, as well as instances of individual nuance and variance within those commonalities. This involved identifying the most ubiquitous and pertinent themes, along with themes which provided insight into other cases. At this stage, some themes were renamed, resulting in a

collation of super-ordinate themes, consistent with IPA terminology (Smith et al., 2009). Relevant sections of the transcripts were also compiled to provide an overview of the theme for each participant.

The final stage of IPA involves deepening interpretation, reviewing sections of each case in relation to the analysis as a whole and vice versa. This stage also involves a more deliberate moving between an empathetic hermeneutic stance, which seeks to understand the participant as they understand or wish to understand their experience, and a questioning hermeneutic stance, which questions and critically analyses the commentary of the participants. Having undergone this process through re-arranging themes and referring to discrete cases and transcript sections in relation to the super-ordinate themes, a master table of themes was then compiled with transcript extracts that best represented the theme for each participant. These super-ordinate themes and subsequent subthemes are presented within the next chapter.

Results

3.1 Introduction

Having previously discussed postmodernism and IPA methodology, which explores the ways individuals interpret and make their experiences meaningful, this section will present the findings of this study. Through this analytic process, four super-ordinate themes and 15 subthemes were identified in participants' accounts of the influence of postmodern thought on themselves, their values, and beliefs.

3.2 Super-ordinate Themes

Throughout the interviews, participants varied in their attitude toward, and understanding of, postmodernism and its influence on them. All participants expressed the view of postmodernism as extreme. However, some also viewed it as useful and applicable in their own lives, while others considered it disconnected or antithetical regarding their own views.

The themes identified were 'ambivalence', 'uncertainty', 'responding to uncertainty', and the 'self as an exception'. Collectively, these themes explain participants' experiences of postmodern thought. This began with a re-evaluation of different beliefs, ideas, and values, which created a sense of ambivalence as postmodern ideas challenged or conflicted with pre-existing thoughts or frameworks. Following this ambivalence was a sense of uncertainty, which was seen as needing a response or resolution. This was ultimately achieved through making the self an exception (see Figure 1).

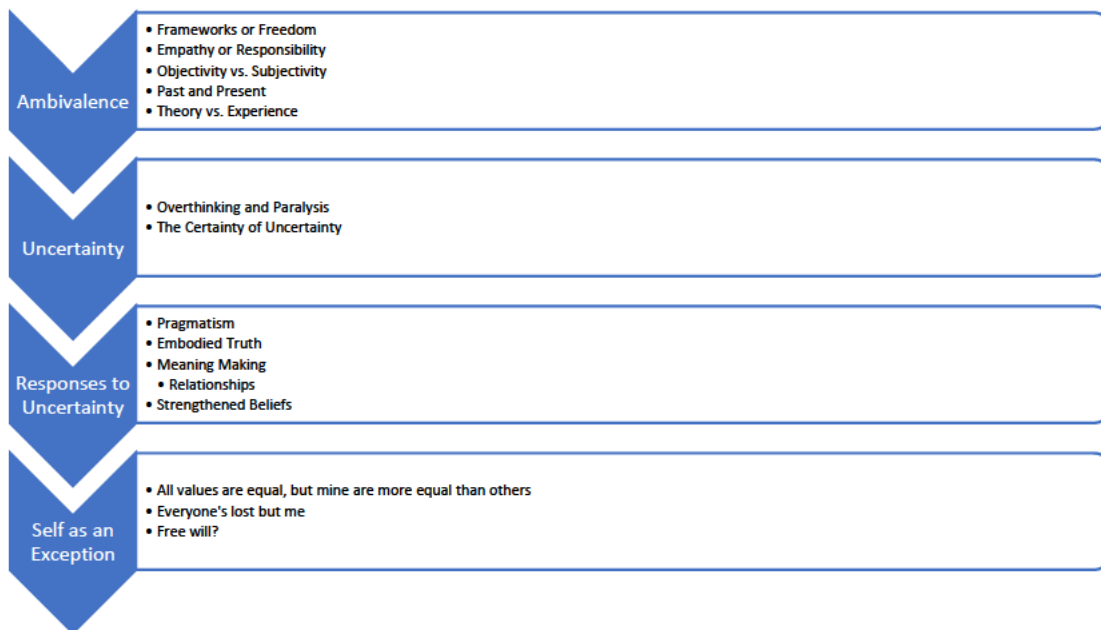


Figure 1. Representation of the super-ordinate and subthemes.

The following sections comprise a description of the themes and subthemes.

3.3 Ambivalence

The first super-ordinate theme identified was ambivalence, referring to conflicting or contradictory emotions or desires. This ambivalence was expressed by participants primarily in regard to five areas; ‘frameworks or freedom’, ‘empathy or responsibility’, ‘objectivity vs. subjectivity’, ‘past and present’, and ‘theory vs. reality’. Participants did not make clear whether this ambivalence was caused by postmodern ideas or merely exacerbated by them, but this ambivalence seemed to comprise a large section of their experience around postmodern ideas. Ambivalence also related to postmodernism itself, as many saw it as having a positive influence, despite its extreme nature:

I really think that for postmodernism there, a lot of good came out of it. I just think that it maybe has gone a little bit too far and where do we go from here? Coz if it's postmodernism there is actually no end point. (██████████)

3.3.1 Frameworks or Freedom

This subtheme related to the tension between the need for some form of determinative structure or categorisation system, and the realisation that any such system was socially constructed, flawed, or had unclear boundaries. This theme became particularly pertinent where beliefs were concerned, as the need for a “solid foundation” () was challenged by the need to recognise the role of experience in constructing that foundation, and the understanding of others’ frameworks. Additionally, this also raised an ambivalence between a need for structure and stability, and a need for creativity, empathy, and individual expression:

How do you hold those sort of assertive lines when it's like, you suddenly have empathy for everyone and can justify everyone's issues and behaviours and actions? ()

The blurred lines aren't ah you know, they're very blurred and you can't ever really know anything with absolute certainty and I can understand the sentiment behind that, I guess the points in which I ah reject it is that, is when it goes a bit too far I feel like it's gone, too far with its conception of truth, it's gone too far with its conception of good and bad ()

The tension between the need for frameworks and the realisation that they may not be as solid as initially believed was also expressed in participants’ speech, with many of the participants correcting themselves or attempting to account for nuances when invoking distinctive categories to discuss an idea or issue. In relation to this, it was also recognised that frameworks required adaption, and were not “one size fits all” (). As exemplified in Bethany’s excerpt below, this was also considered obvious:

Yeah, but that can't work all the time obviously. ()

3.3.2 *Empathy or Responsibility*

Participants also expressed ambivalence and tension between the need for empathy, understanding, and respect of others' views and values, particularly when considering the influence of experience, and the need for responsibility:

I still think people should still be responsible for their [pause] own actions and things, I guess [pause] But [pause] it is knowing that when people aren't responsible for their actions that maybe they didn't grow up with those values, or, that, somewhere along the course of their life, um, something happened to make them not care about taking responsibility or, um, [pause], yeah. So I think my personal values [laughs], is all very much, no you should take responsibility, you have control over what actions you take etc. etc. but I know [pause] I guess from what I've learned from uni, that [pause] I guess in terms of also, like, fight and flight, that people just react (██████████)

I don't like to think that I am [pause] I I can't be blamed for my actions, I do think responsibility is legitimate and you know, happy to take responsibility that's that's also um, that's also fair. So I guess you're left in a crossroad you know, if you think of it purely from a theoretical and um epistemological perspective it just it's it's it just for me at least it seems there is no inherent me, but if you take it outside of that and put it into the realms of reality and having to take responsibility for your actions I mean yeah, I guess I would have to say that, it is my fault and stuff like that. (██████████)

As discussed in ██████████ excerpt, this ambivalence also encompassed a tension between the understanding of the self and identity as the result of experiences and biology, and the self as a distinct being having agency beyond their circumstances. This sense of responsibility was also frequently tied to notions of safety, and to later themes of the self as an exception, as

participants frequently expressed themselves as being more forgiving of others and attributing their behaviour to exterior causes; while they were responsible for their own actions.

3.3.3 *Objectivity vs. Subjectivity*

Participants also expressed ambivalence between a sense of objective and subjective truth. They recognised the role of experience, biology, and parenting in shaping their views and truths, but also believed in objective truth, and found disbelief in it an insurmountable instinct:

T: Maybe it's just, I'm just a product of the university I've attended I don't know so maybe, I don't know my views are just constructed, by the views of my professors, I've just inherited it from them in the same way...

I: Do you believe that or-?

T: No I don't, coz o-I- obviously I think I'm smarter than everyone else and I'm right and they're all wrong. (██████████

Everyone might have their own different views and things and what not, but [pause] um [pause] and that's yeah influenced by their [pause] experiences and I guess what th- what they believe spiritually or scientifically or whatever, um [pause] but I do believe that there's still one truth. There's just a lot of different opinions about that truth.

(██████████

3.3.4 *Past and Present*

This subtheme comprised a tension between a view of the present as progressive and positive, while simultaneously uncertain, negative, and entitled. The past was similarly viewed as bland, backward, and stifling, but also as holding certainty and morality. While ambivalences on this topic were expressed throughout different stages of the interview, they

seemed to centre around a criticism of both the past and present as expressed by one participant as the past being blind, while the postmodern present was a fantasy world:

If you're compl- like, sold out for idealism, your head's in the sand, [laughs] but, no, what is it? You're- oh, I can't remember what the quote is, brilliant quote. And then, um if you're all for postmodernism you- you're a dreamer, you know, living in the fantasy world. (████████)

3.3.5 *Theory vs. Experience*

The final subtheme was expressed as an ambivalence between what participants or others believed, and what was acted out. Almost all participants recognised an inability to live out their beliefs, or a dissonance between the theory they learnt at university and the lived-out reality. Essentially, rationality, while valued, was seen as separate from reality:

... have all these like, cool ideas and stuff and they've just, just never implemented in your actual life. And it's like, do you actually believe that stuff then? Which, probably not. I think I'm sure I have lots, I say I have lots of philosophical beliefs that I'm sure I don't live out in my life. (████████)

So I guess there is this separation between the theory and the reality and, again, I don't think I've resolved that issue either. (████████)

Across interviews, ambivalence was expressed in relation to ideas in postmodern thought; including the need for guidelines and foundations, and the recognition of the role of experience and culture in shaping them; the need for understanding and empathy, and the need for responsibility; the need for objective truth and the recognition of pervasive subjectivity; views of the past and present as backward yet moral and certain, or progressive yet uncertain and prone to entitlement; and between beliefs and theory, and the reality of real world action.

Cumulatively, these sources of ambivalence contributed to the second overarching theme; that of uncertainty.

3.4 Uncertainty

Uncertainty emerged as a response to postmodern thought and the different areas of ambivalence it generated. This uncertainty was overtly stated by participants or expressed through repeated phrases such as “I don’t know”, hesitations, or re-assessing of previous statements and ideas expressed. While this uncertainty was expressed in regard to issues above, this theme focuses on uncertainty itself, rather than its areas of focus, and thus encompasses the subthemes of ‘overthinking and paralysis’, and ‘the certainty of uncertainty’.

3.4.1 *Overthinking and Paralysis*

Overthinking was associated with increased uncertainty and eventual paralysis, particularly in a relative postmodern context, where a sense of objective right or wrong did not exist. Participant’s expressed concern at this, seeing extreme uncertainty as preventing action or judgement:

So it’s just this impossible [pause] impossible loop. Like, yeah. You’re just kinda stuck. And that’s why, when I just step back like ‘whatever, I can’t be bothered with any of this’ (██████)

3.4.2 *The Certainty of Uncertainty*

Uncertainty was also recognised as a certainty. Again, this was expressed both overtly and covertly, in recognition of the limits of one’s own knowledge. Participants’ awareness of their own limits led to the recognition that they could not be entirely certain of things they thought they knew, or that crises would be inevitable. This uncertainty was also considered

obvious. However, participants did not necessarily view uncertainty as a negative, though it became so when it prevented action:

I don't necessarily see this doubt or this inherent uncertainty as a negative, you know, I think it's important to maintain a realistic perspective you know, to to, turn a blind eye to doubts I feel like is not the right way to go about it but nonethel- you know, the other extreme is to focus purely and solely on these doubts I don't necessarily think that's right either you know, just to recognise that your beliefs do have inherent doubt I feel like, that's just, [sighs] why wouldn't you do that? You know. It's an important thing to do. (██████████)

Overall, uncertainty was expressed as an outcome of, or response to, postmodern ideas; as the ambivalence felt around different topics left participants with a sense of unresolved conflict and frequently the view of objective truth as unknowable, making action and judgements difficult. However, participants recognised a need for both action and judgement, leading to the next overarching theme, responses to uncertainty.

3.5 Responses to Uncertainty

The recognition that the uncertainty generated by postmodern thought led to paralysis and indecision, both of which were considered unsustainable, led to a need to respond to uncertainty. In doing so, participants' experiences related to four subthemes: 'pragmatism'; 'embodied truth'; 'meaning making', which sub-composed relationships; and 'strengthened beliefs'.

3.5.1 Pragmatism

Pragmatism emerged in conversation as a response to uncertainty and inaction. Participants recognised action as a necessity, and therefore made judgements and used categories, frameworks, values, and theories despite the uncertainty they may have felt towards them. This sense of pragmatism also emerged in the use of belief frameworks and even

postmodernism itself as a way to understand and operate in the world with a clear sense of guidance:

I'm sceptical about it, but I'm just gonna assume it because like, what else are you going to do? (██████ on objective morality)

3.5.2 Embodied Truth

Across the interviews participants also expressed a sense of truth as subjectively known. While they would express their truth as objective and rational initially, often discussion around postmodernism led to the rejection of subjective truth on the notion that it was unbelievable, and unable to be acted out. The feeling of truth and objectivity as something that existed was insurmountable, leading to an acceptance and acting out of their own truth:

I tend to go by my gut but also recognise that my gut has been influenced by the theories and so on I've been exposed to. Yeah. (██████)

I still feel like there are definitely elements of objectivity um, the specifics ah how I arrive at this you know, it's unclear to me um but nonetheless it just it just feels as though, you know, I've just got that inherent instinctive feeling that to say that there is some objectivity (██████)

3.5.3 Meaning Making

Though expressed differently by participants, meaning making was a consistent theme across interviews and frequently discussed as a necessary part of human experience. While some participants were in favour of making or creating meaning, others viewed it as a biological and cultural artefact, and others still as a response to a lack of a wider metaphysical belief system, such as religion. This meaning presented as a reconciliation of the ambivalence

and uncertainty generated by subjectivity and rational nihilism, and the sense of objective truth as existent or necessary:

I think life is probably meaningless but probably like try to create our own meanings all the time because otherwise you'd just be sad. (██████████

It's kind of like that whole, everyone's looking for meaning in their life [pause] but they don't know where to start looking or where to go so they crate- create their own meaning and that's when you come up with all these different realities coz everyone's just kind of like, well this is the meaning of life, this is the meaning of life, this is the meaning of my life, and [pause] there you go, I'm gonna have pink hair for the rest of my life (██████████

3.5.3.1 Relationships

While relationships as a primary source of meaning did not present across every case, it was strongly emphasised by three of the participants (██████████ ██████████ and ██████████ and alluded to by other participants. This focus on relationship was seen to trump other issues and discussions, and to focus on the equality and proper way to treat others.

But my own thoughts on the purpose of life, I think, actually I think I explained this a bit to her, but I don't remember the exact words I used, I think it's being there for others that you're going through life with and forming relationships and um, yeah, experiencing happiness in your life (██████████

Relationships are so, so so fundamental (██████████

My [pause] role, the thing that I guess thrive in is actually being close to people um [pause] and, having that relationship, building that relationship and from that, everything else comes together. (██████████

The core of core values is to is is that we're all precisely [pause] equal and none of us are entitled to give anybody else a hard time ([REDACTED]

3.5.4 Strengthened Beliefs

Many of the participants also expressed a positive impact of postmodernism upon their personal beliefs, as it caused them to question their own beliefs and so come to understand and incorporate them more thoroughly into their experience. Within this, the view of postmodernism as extreme was also considered as strengthening their own beliefs, leading them to move away from a postmodern or relativist framework. As in [REDACTED] excerpt, this also relates to the theme of the 'Self as an Exception' as discussed below.

I think if it's, okay, if postmodernist philosophy has shaped me it's to like, run in the other direction I think ([REDACTED]

I think, in some ways, it's made my values stronger, and like, [pause] in terms of believing that there's one truth and what not, because I'm kind of over here like... I've got it, like I'm not asking all these questions and wondering who I am or and whatever. ([REDACTED]

Overall, the need for action, decisiveness, and meaning led participants to find ways of responding to and resolving the uncertainty raised by postmodern ideas. This was frequently achieved through a pragmatic mindset grounded in a sense of truth as something felt and experienced as 'real'. This frequently led to a strengthening of one's own beliefs, and the formation of the self as an exception to surrounding others, as elaborated on in the next super-ordinate theme.

3.6 Self as an Exception

In resolving the ambivalence and uncertainty generated by postmodern thought, many participants made themselves in some way exempt from their views of other people. This was

expressed in relation to their embodied sense of truth and values, their own processes of meaning making, and their sense of personal autonomy and responsibility, particularly the way this affected their assessment of their actions and choices. Within this making of the self as an exception were three subthemes; ‘all values are equal, but mine are more equal than others’; ‘everyone’s lost but me’; and ‘free will?’.

3.6.1 All values are equal, but mine are more equal than others

While participants were often dubious of a relative sense of morality or values, they were accepting of differences in values as a result of experience and influence. However, they referred to their own values as truer to themselves at least.

Certainly I do believe that my values are equal to other people’s um [pause] saying that though it’s hard, like if someone valued something that I interpreted to be evil, [pause] I suppose there’s something with values there’s, values are equal but to me there’s some values that are wrong. ([REDACTED]

3.6.2 Everyone’s Lost but Me

Similar to the sense of postmodernism as strengthening one’s own beliefs by comparison, this related to the sense that others, viewed through a postmodern lens or viewed as having a postmodern ideology, were lost or misguided, while the participants themselves had some sense of truth or understanding others lacked. This was not pertinent across all the cases but occurred in the majority.

So I have that security. Whereas other people are quite lost ([REDACTED]

But I guess in a more real sense I do value the sense of being real and being authentic.

Perhaps more than other people would? I don’t know if I can make that claim. ([REDACTED]

For me, that that, because I believe there is something from afterwards, and you know. Or what about an agnostic who sits on the fence and doesn't know quite [pause] what they believe, you know? How does that guide their morality, you know? That must be a really hard thing to not have something to go back to and go well [pause] this is, what I believe, they're making it up all the time as they go ([REDACTED]

3.6.3 Free Will?

Another aspect to making the self an exception was to see the self as in some way fundamental, or existing as more than a product of their environment. This related to the ambivalence theme, insofar as such a view of identity was recognised as a logical conclusion and cited as a source of empathy when understanding the behaviour of others, yet participants found this difficult or unacceptable to take regarding themselves. In this, free will was discussed by some participants; in trying to comprehend themselves as having agency beyond external influences. In many ways, this related to the empathy or responsibility ambivalence, which was partially resolved by viewing the self as an exception, having agency and responsibility, while being understanding toward others on the basis of their experience or biology.

No, b- see this is the thing like, I'm sort of, I apply these views to like everyone but myself, so if I do something wrong I'm like, 'oh man, I really shouldn't have done that, it's my fault I'm so bad' and stuff, but I'm more willing to let other people off the hook

([REDACTED]

Similarly, participants also expressed a sense of agency and self-creation; though responsive to the environment around them, they were responsible for choosing what they did with that environment or experience.

...and everything else is ah, [pause] my experiences. Umm [pause], but the negative experiences don't make me who I am, and the positive experiences don't make me who I am. I think it's what I choose to do with those said experiences. ([REDACTED]

Throughout the process of reconciling the ambivalence and uncertainty arising in response to postmodern thought, participants expressed a formation of the self as an exception to their own beliefs or to their perception of others; recognising themselves as having agency and responsibility beyond their experience, and having some form of truth which was obscured to others or those working within alternative belief frameworks.

3.7 Summary

In relation to the research question, this analysis suggests the experience of encountering postmodern thought to be one of destabilisation leading to a renewed integration of previously held frameworks, beliefs, and values. Where postmodern ideas were incorporated into these frameworks, they appear to have increased the understanding of the role of experience and culture in shaping structures and behaviour. However, in this sample this understanding was overridden by the need for action, decision, and responsibility, and a sense of truth or values as real to the individual.

Discussion

4.1 Overview

This study investigated the influence of postmodern thought on individual experiences of the self, beliefs, and values. Through use of IPA methodology, four super-ordinate themes and 15 subthemes were identified: ‘ambivalence’, ‘uncertainty’, ‘responses to uncertainty’, and ‘self as an exception’. Collectively, these themes were in keeping with criticisms of postmodernism as destabilising, and as creating possibility and awareness. However, they also presented a strengthening of beliefs, values, and the self in response to this uncertainty.

The initial theme of ambivalence, defined as simultaneous positive and negative evaluations of one attitude object (Schneider & Schwarz, 2017), was consistent with aspects of Susen’s (2015) predictions of postmodernism as causing ambivalence through tension between opposing ideas and beliefs. Ambivalence has also been suggested as an increasing response to the vast information available in contemporary times (Frenk va Harreveld, Nohlen, & Schneider, 2015), and as a potentially more competent response to complex situations, which lack clear answers (Pillaud, Cavazza, & Butera, 2018). This reflects participants’ experience of ambivalence, particularly in relation to the subtheme of frameworks or freedom; as they recognised tension between the need for guidelines to interpret and interact with information, and the simultaneous recognition that any guidelines were inconsistent and insufficient to explain all situations. This tension also reflected a tension between associations, with those relating to frameworks being of something true, applicable, and explanative of situations, events, and individuals. However, when presented with postmodern ideas frameworks were instead associated with subjectivity and potentially arbitrary guidelines, creating semantic incongruity; which Gebauer, Maio, and Pakizeh (2013) found to lead to greater feelings of ambivalence than evaluative incongruity. While not all individuals accepted the postmodern

claim of frameworks as constructed and untrue, they recognised the limitations of their frameworks and the sense of ambivalence that arose in response.

This uncertainty regarding frameworks was consistent with criticisms of postmodernism as causing scepticism toward beliefs (Lyotard, 1993), though it was also seen to enable increased individuality and freedom, consistent with postmodernism as creating possibility (Gergen, 1994). However, ambivalence has been noted as a paralysing and uncomfortable position, and as such participants, as in past literature, usually resolved, ignored, or acted to reduce these tensions (DeMarree, Briñol, & Petty, 2015; Hogg, 2000; Noguti & Bokeyar, 2014).

Uncertainty has been suggested as a natural outcome of ambivalence, as tension creates uncertainty about how to act or respond (Frenk van Harreveld & Pligt, 2009), and was likewise seen as needing a response, consistent with previous studies (DeMarree et al., 2015; Hogg, 2000; Noguti & Bokeyar, 2014). These responses reflected suggestions of postmodernism as leading to a more pragmatic focus on the applicable and immediately manageable (Kvale, 1992). While participants recognised flaws in their frameworks, the necessity of action and response often led to a continued use of them, justified by pragmatism. However, they also recognised frameworks were not always applicable. Consistent with Reich and Wheeler (2016), in which ambivalence worked to relieve uncertainty through emotional hedging, this left an ongoing sense of ambivalence which mitigated the otherwise uncertain space left by discarding frameworks.

In relation to beliefs and values, participants also justified frameworks with reference to felt or embodied truth. Though values were recognised as extending from experiences and culture, this sense of truth was nevertheless persuasive and unable to be discarded. Given the previous study by Ovadia (2003), which found an increased equality of values, this may suggest

responses to postmodernism lead to a rational evaluation of values as equal, but an instinctive feeling of one's own values as more true.

Similarly, while participants varied in the extent to which they accepted or denied objective meaning, they recognised meaning as necessary, frequently with reference to instinct or feeling. This importance of meaning is reflective of the seminal work by Frankl (1963), in which he discusses 'will to meaning' as a fundamental human drive; and suggests the postmodern scepticism of meta-narratives insufficient to overcome this need for meaning. Interestingly, while participants were more aware of exterior influences in shaping their meaning and values, this instinctive sense of truth and meaning seemed to belie the speculations of irony and disconnection proposed by Lyotard (1993), instead strengthening beliefs.

Similarly, in considering the self participants recognised their inconstancy, and reflected a view akin to the multiple selves proposed by Gergen (1994). However, they nevertheless returned to a unified sense of self. This unifying of multiple aspects of self reflected the pool of self-schemas in self-concept theory, enabling a multiple sense of self to exist within a unified concept (Noguti & Bokeyar, 2014). As Hogg (2000) suggested uncertainty can be reduced through strengthening the self-concept, this may also reflect a further response to the instability following postmodernism. Hogg (2000) suggested this strengthening to occur through self-categorisation with an exterior group, or through reinforcing the sense of individual identity; both of which were prevalent in participants' responses.

Participants' responses also reflected processes discussed in self-categorisation and self-identity theory, strengthening individual or in-group identities through comparison to out-groups (Trepte & Loy, 2017), who were seen as having values and beliefs less true, or less functional, than those of the participants. The notion of others as lost, more unaware, or more

easily influenced, was often mentioned in conjunction to this, and postmodern ideas were frequently employed in understanding others. Regarding free will, this sense of the self as an exception who existed at least partially separate from the influence of their environment and culture was particularly pertinent in resolving ambivalence between responsibility and empathy. A cohesive and free-willed being was considered necessary for responsibility, which many participants found difficult to deny for themselves, though they were more willing to absolve others. This creation of the self as an exception could therefore lead to increased empathy and understanding for the perceived lost other and their beliefs; or to a sense of the self as more aware and well-situated than others. Frequently, participants expressed both attitudes simultaneously.

While the themes above relate experiences of postmodernism to be destabilising followed by reintegration and a renewed sense of stability, it is noted that many participants still incorporated postmodern principles to some extent. This process reflected those of accommodation and assimilation (Piaget, 1977), as participants adjusted their pre-existing frameworks and schemas to incorporate postmodern ideas, or incorporated postmodernism into their pre-existing belief systems. Consistent with Moskaliuk and Matschke (2018), which of these processes were used appeared to be related to the extent to which aspects of postmodernism aligned with their prior beliefs or social groups. When postmodern principles or outcomes could be aligned with current belief systems, participants assimilated the principles into their prior beliefs, as demonstrated by the remark ‘Jesus was actually quite postmodern’ (Karen).

Overall, the process of encountering postmodernism as identified in the analysis of this study was reminiscent of the destabilisation suggested by previous criticisms (Gergen, 1994; Susen, 2015), and reflected the potential for both their negative and positive aspects. However, the need for solidity and action led to a renewed sense of stability through reinforcement of the

self, comparison to others, and reference to a sense of truth which, though undermined by postmodern thought, was considered undeniable by participants. Encountering postmodernism was therefore seen as a positive experience for many participants, leading to a strengthening of their own beliefs, and an increased sense of awareness, particularly through applying postmodern principles to others. While this may seem positive regarding the criticisms levelled at postmodernism, such as nihilism and amorality (Kvale, 1992; Susen, 2015), it is also important to note, as discussed further below, the limitations of this sample and methodology in making claims of the widespread influence of postmodern ideas.

4.2 Strengths

A difficulty of studying postmodernism in a sociological or personal context has been methodology; as many methods are drawn from a theoretical underpinning which either utilises postmodern principles, or stands in opposition to them (Susen, 2015). Within this study, IPA enabled an analysis neither opposed to, nor utilising postmodernism, and provided an in-depth, individualised, and experiential focus (Smith et al., 2009).

Furthermore, qualitative methodology was useful in studying postmodernism as its strong interrelations with other aspects of society, such as technology, make it difficult to parse out in quantitative research. Qualitative methodology enabled a focus solely on aspects of the self, beliefs, and values, which participants found to be influenced by postmodern thought directly.

As an evidence-based investigation into the influence of postmodernism on the self, this study also provides a meaningful contribution to the literature. While being a qualitative study, the results are not generalisable, they may still be transferable to the experience of others (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Nevertheless, given the limited research into criticisms of the

influence postmodernism has on individuals, this study provides an important response, and avenues for further research.

4.3 Limitations

Due to difficulties in sampling and timelines, the sample was more heterogeneous than recommended in an IPA study, which may have limited analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Across the cases, participants varied significantly in their understandings of, and responses to, postmodernism. This may have been related to age, courses undertaken at university, and individual belief systems. While this pushed the study and analysis in considering underlying similarities, it may have reduced the depth of analysis.

Postmodernism's lack of definition was another limitation; as contradictory aspects could simultaneously be considered postmodern. Similarly, postmodernism may articulate aspects of existence prior to itself, and, given its ties to globalisation and technology (Susen, 2015), the suggestion that certain experiences result from postmodernism may be misguided. While use of IPA methodology may reduce this entanglement, it results in an analysis two steps divorced from claims to an unobstructed view of events or experiences (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). While this reliance on individual perception is perhaps suited to the topic; the analysis may be limited by the researcher's capacity, as IPA is heavily reliant on their interpretative capacity (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008).

4.4 Implications

While as a qualitative study these findings are not generalisable, given the ubiquity of postmodernism they are relevant to many groups, and imply postmodernism may lead to increased understanding and strengthened beliefs, but also uncertainty, instability, and increased ambivalence around discussions of values and morality. This suggests the possibility of a more empathetic understanding of others and their behaviour, as well as an increased scope

of possibility. However, the return to subjective and experiential based feelings of truth and values, schemas, and social comparison, even where they are counteracted by rationality, suggests individuals to be resilient to postmodern ideas which do not already align with their beliefs, and which run contrary to pre-existing cognitive structures and processes. This suggests some aspects of thought and information processing to be resilient to logical or rational argument, or of greater importance to individuals.

4.5 Future Research

Future qualitative studies using more focussed samples would be beneficial to provide greater depth and understanding of postmodernism's influence on different populations. The inclusion of different cultural populations would also be beneficial to understand the influence of cultural conceptions in responses to postmodernism. In studying postmodernism qualitatively, phenomenology may offer a useful method, as reasoned in 2.2 and 4.3.

Quantitative studies into the relationship between postmodernism, ambivalence, and uncertainty would be useful in understanding the spread and magnitude of the relationships suggested by this study. Additionally, further research into the criticisms levelled at postmodernism, such as nihilism and self-fragmentation, would be useful contributions to the literature, and give further context to understandings of postmodern experience.

Given the implication of cognitive resilience to postmodern ideas, research into responses to ideas which contradict cognitive structures and functions, such as schemas, may also be beneficial to understanding responses to postmodernism. Furthermore, research into the use of innate knowledge or embodied truth to dissuade postmodern ideas would be useful to understand the resistance to them.

4.6 Conclusion

The results of this study suggest postmodernism to have a destabilising effect on individuals, and, consistent with past criticisms, to doubt or question their beliefs and frameworks (Kvale, 1992). However, while participants initially responded with ambivalence and uncertainty, the need for action and stability led to a renewed integration of the self and beliefs. Rather than turning to nihilism and relativism, or a more multiple view of the self, participants instead incorporated or dismissed postmodern ideas in accordance with their prior beliefs, which they justified through a sense of embodied truth, and a need for meaning and guidelines. While the limitations of this study prevent general claims, it does suggest instincts regarding morality and meaning, regardless of their source, exert a stronger influence than postmodern ideas which may deny them.

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PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

PROJECT TITLE: Ideas and experience: The influence of postmodern thought on identity and practical living.

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL NUMBER [REDACTED]

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr Candice Oster

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Natasha van Antwerpen

STUDENT'S DEGREE: Bachelor of psychological science (hons)

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in the research project described below.

What is the project about?

This research project is about the influence of academic ideas of identity, self, meaning, and experience on the practical ways students approach their own lives and sense of self. The project is intended to understand the influences of doctrines of thought, in particular postmodern thought, on individual psychology including values, beliefs, and sense of self, and in doing so understand the practical ramifications of philosophical thought in the humanities and social sciences.

Who is undertaking the project?

This project is being conducted by Natasha van Antwerpen. This research will form the basis for the degree of honours in psychological science at the University of Adelaide under the supervision of Dr Candice Oster.

Why am I being invited to participate?

You are being invited as you are or have been a student in a humanities, social sciences, or psychology course or degree which exposed you to postmodern views and theories about identity and the self.

What am I being invited to do?

You are being invited to participate in a one-on-one interview discussing your experience and understanding of yourself and your way of conducting yourself in the world as it has been influenced by the ideas you have been exposed to in the course of your university studies. This interview will take place in the Hughes building at the University of Adelaide and will be audio-taped.

How much time will my involvement in the project take?

Choosing to participate will involve a once-off interview between 30 minutes and an hour.

Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?

There is some risk of emotional distress due to the topics discussed. In the event that this occurs, every effort will be made to mitigate the emotional distress, and free counselling services will be available.

What are the potential benefits of the research project?

The research may result in a better understanding of the practical influence of university ideology on personal experience, and ways to address this within course work.

The research may also help participants to better understand their experience at university.

Can I withdraw from the project?

Participation in this project is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw your data from the study at any time until the submission of the thesis on 2 October 2018.

What will happen to my information?

Confidentiality and privacy: Pseudonyms will be used for the purposes of anonymity, and personal or potentially identifiable information will be removed. While all efforts will be made to remove any information that might identify you, as the sample size is small, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. However, the upmost care will be taken to ensure that no personally identifying details are revealed.

Storage: Transcripts and audio recordings will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet at the University of Adelaide for a minimum of 5 years. They will be accessible only by the researchers, and the heads of the Adelaide University psychology school.

Publishing: Information provided in interviews will be reported and publicised in an Honours' thesis. This will include quotes and summary data; however all excerpts will be anonymised.

At the conclusion of the study, you will be offered access to a transcript of your interview and a summary of the results.

Your information will only be used as described in this participant information sheet and it will only be disclosed according to the consent provided, except as required by law.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?

Questions can be directed to either Natasha van Antwerpen, Dr Deborah Turnbull, or Dr Candice Oster.

Professor Deborah Turnbull:

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Dr Candice Oster:

[REDACTED]

Natasha van Antwerpen (student researcher):

[REDACTED]

What if I have a complaint or any concerns?

The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Adelaide (approval number H-2018-18/46). This research project will be conducted according to the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). If you have questions or problems associated with the practical aspects of your participation in the project, or wish to raise a concern or complaint about the project, then you should consult the Principal Investigator. If you wish to speak with an independent person regarding concerns or a complaint, the University's policy on research involving human participants, or your rights as a participant, please contact the Human Research Ethics Committee's Secretariat on:

Phone: +61 8 8313 6028

Email: hrec@adelaide.edu.au

Post: Level 4, Rundle Mall Plaza, 50 Rundle Mall, ADELAIDE SA 5000

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

If I want to participate, what do I do?

If you would like to participate, an interview time can be scheduled with Natasha van Antwerpen by emailing a1686380@student.adelaide.edu.au.

Counselling Services

Counselling services are available from the University of Adelaide without charge. Appointments can be made by phone at 8313 5663 or email at counsellingcentre@adelaide.edu.au.

Yours sincerely,
Natasha van Antwerpen and Dr Candice Oster

Appendix B: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

1. I have read the attached Information Sheet and agree to take part in the following research project:

Title:	Ideas and experience: The influence of postmodern thought on lived experience.
Ethics Approval Number:	██████████

2. I have had the project, so far as it affects me, and the potential risks and burdens fully explained to my satisfaction by the research worker. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions I may have about the project and my participation. My consent is given freely.
3. I have been given the opportunity to have a member of my family or a friend present while the project was explained to me.
4. Although I understand the purpose of the research project, it has also been explained that my involvement may not be of any benefit to me.
5. I agree to participate in the activities outlined in the participant information sheet.
6. I agree to be audio recorded.
7. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and that this will not affect my study at the University, now or in the future.
8. I have been informed that the information gained in the project may be published in a journal article or thesis.
9. I have been informed that while I will not be named in the published materials, it may not be possible to guarantee my anonymity given the nature of the study and/or small number of participants involved.
10. My information will only be used for the purpose of this research project and it will only be disclosed according to the consent provided, except where disclosure is required by law.
11. I am aware that I should keep a copy of this Consent Form, when completed, and the attached Information Sheet.

Participant to complete:

Name: _____ Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher/Witness to complete:

I have described the nature of the research
to

(print name of participant)

and in my opinion she/he understood the explanation.

Signature: _____ Position: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer and Email Text

Recruitment Flyer

██████████
Invitation to participate in a research project: Ideas and Experience



You are invited to participate in an Honours Psychology research project, looking at the influence of ideas on personal experience.

If you have covered a version of postmodern, post-structuralist, or Foucauldian thought in a humanities subject, or if your university studies have in any way influenced the way you view yourself and your perspectives, it would be great to hear from you.

Participation will involve a once-off interview between 30 and 60 minutes.

██
██
Thank you!

Kind regards,

Natasha

Email Text

Dear _____,

I am contacting you on behalf of an honours student in the psychology program, who is looking to recruit participants for a study on the influence of postmodern ideas within individual experience and psychology. The study involves a once-off interview estimated to be between 30 minutes and an hour; discussing experience related to self-concept, values, and beliefs in relation to postmodern thought, and has been cleared by the Human Research Ethics Committee (H-2018-046).

If you are willing, it would be greatly appreciated if you could forward this email and the attached information sheet to the list of students enrolled in courses within your school which contain postmodern content.

If students would like further information, or to participate, they can contact the student researcher Natasha by email at a1686380@student.adelaide.edu.au.

Thank you!

Appendix D: Interview Schedule

Interview Questions

Course Experience

- Can you tell me about your experience in [course or degree name]?
- Are you able to describe any challenges or changes to your perspective from this course or degree?
 - o Did you find yourself viewing you or others around you differently? How so?
 - o What about the course/degree caused these changes?
 - o Were any of these challenges related to the ideas you encountered in post-modernism?
- Could you give me a basic overview of your understanding of post-modernism?

Self

- Would you be able to describe yourself as a person?
- Would you say this view has changed since beginning your university studies?
 - o Do you think the ideas you've encountered in postmodernism have influenced this view?
- How do you view yourself as you go through different situations and settings?
 - o For example, at a party compared to being at university?
- What do you think of the postmodern view that there are multiple versions of yourself?
 - o Do you consider yourself to be the same person in different contexts?
 - o Do you consider yourself a product of your environment, or of some internal qualities?

Values

- Do you have any values that you consider to be more important than others? If so, what are they and why?
- Could you explain any change to your values after this course, particularly after encountering postmodern ideas?
- What would you say is your primary motivation at the moment? What is it about this that motivates you?
 - o Has this changed since studying at university? How, and why?

PROMPTS

That point you made earlier about XYZ was interesting, would you mind expanding on that?

I'm not sure I understand what you mean by that.

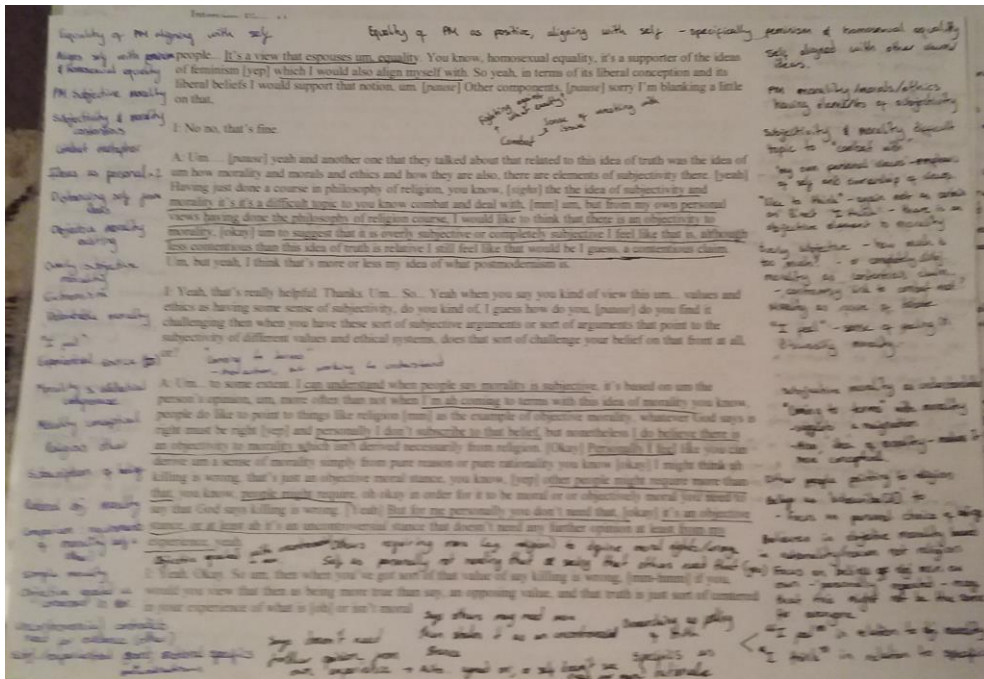
Why was that?

You seem passionate about that issue, can you tell me more?

Metaphysics

- Do you consider your life to have a greater sense of meaning or purpose? If so, in what way? If not, why not?
 - Has this in any way been influenced by your studies?
- Postmodernism has been considered to be logically opposed to “grand” systems of meaning (may need to explain), what do you think of this view? Is it consistent with your beliefs, or has this viewpoint in any way influenced you?
- What are your thoughts on the idea of progress?
 - Do you think they have been influenced in any way by postmodernism?
- How do you view personal responsibility in regard to your actions?
 - Do you tend to view yourself or your environment as responsible for things that happen in your life, or for behaviours in yourself?
 - Do you think this view has changed since your exposure to postmodern thought?
- Did postmodernist thought challenge any of your beliefs? If so, how?

Appendix E: Section of Coded Transcript



Appendix F: Pictures of the Analysis Process

Fig 1. Arrangement of emergent and superordinate themes for each case; depicted here are cases two through six.



Fig 2. Arrangement of super-ordinate themes emerging across the cases; throughout the analysis and write-up these ultimately changed to those discussed in chapter three.

