

---

# From the Editor

## A POSTMODERN VIEW OF EVIDENCE

“Evidence” is one of the front-page buzzwords these days, reflected in a plethora of journal articles, conference themes, workshops, and curricular initiatives. The dominant ideology surrounding this trend is, not surprisingly, that of modernism/positivism. This is not all “bad,” but there are huge gaps, confusions, and uncertainties about the “evidence-based practice” movement that are particularly acute in the day-to-day realities of practice. As Lather explains, “It is not that the dreams of modernity are unworthy; it is what they render absent and their conflictual and confusing outcomes that underscore the limits of reason and the obsolescence of modernist categories and institutions.”<sup>1</sup>(p88)

A postmodern perspective insists on exploring multiple meanings and possibilities to more fully comprehend the complex world with which we engage—whether as researchers, practitioners, or consumers. This perspective does not eschew empirics. Instead, postmodern approaches take a skeptical stance, challenging, questioning, and probing all perspectives and methods, including its own.

Lather<sup>1</sup> provides a critical postmodern framework for interpreting and understanding a “text,” or in this case the data or analysis that we accept as “evidence.” She proposes constructing 4 distinct readings of a text, which she calls “tales.”<sup>1</sup>(p128) In the case of “evidence,” the text or data can be research results, theories, ethical reasoning, experiential logs gathered in practice, outcomes of quality assurance projects, or anything that a particular group accepts as “evidence.” The 4 readings that Lather describes are realist, critical, deconstructivist, and reflexive.

A realist tale is the typical empirical interpretation of what we count as evidence. It is the typical empirical description, interpretation, and conclusions that result from systematic scientific method and the theories that emerge from this interpretation.

A critical tale is one that reveals underlying social structures and power dynamics that influence and shape the world that has been

studied or examined. For example, consider the evidence that is typically called forth in a situation concerning how people respond to healthcare advice or directives or prescriptions. The social structures and power dynamics of this type of situation are rarely considered in designing or generating evidence related to this phenomenon (sometimes called “adherence”), but the dynamics are crucial factors influencing how people act and re-act—those who are the “prescribers” or “advice givers” as well as those who receive the prescriptions or advice. A critical reading of the text would explore these dynamics.

A deconstructivist tale is one that reveals blind spots and illusions that undergird the evidence. This tale examines the assumptions that are implicit in the situation under study and how the evidence is shaped by blind spots and illusions. This approach examines possibilities in the situation that are not addressed, even taken to be “unspeakable”.

Finally, a reflexive tale is one that brings the “teller of the tale” back to the center, examining how the personal circumstances, social standing, power position, and underlying worldview of those who generated the evidence, and who have shaped the evidence. This tale examines the personal investments of the researcher in generating this evidence, as well as the motivations of those who accept this particular information as “evidence.”

The articles in this issue of *ANS*, consistent with our tradition of going beyond the traditional margins of inquiry, help point the way to new thinking around the concepts of theory, evidence, and practice. I welcome your comments and responses as readers.

—**Peggy L. Chinn, PhD, RN, FAAN**  
Editor

## REFERENCE

---

1. Lather P. *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy With/in the Postmodern*. New York: Routledge; 1991.