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Postmodernism and Narrative Truth: Philosophical Implications of Interrogation Research

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Abstract. This article continues a series describing research presentations from the 1998 Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association. In the article, a presentation on interrogation research by John C. Yuille of the University of British Columbia, Canada, is explicated for its relevance to postmodernist notions of truth.

Dr. Yuille's presentation was entitled "Statement Analysis and Criminal Interrogators." He described statement analysis as a methodological orientation for seeking information from alleged criminal perpetrators based on (a) criterion-based content analysis of the alleged perpetrator's verbalizations during interrogation and (b) fact pattern analysis--the deduction and induction of hypotheses from all evidence and other information collected during a criminal investigation.

At Issue in most interrogations--save for those geared solely towards punishing an interrogatee or towards an accusatorial endpoint of coercing information compatible with an a priori hypothesis--are weak and strong versions of the truth. The former usually is operationally defined as that which supports or impels a narrative that juridical authorities in the criminal justice system develop and embrace in reaching a decision for acquittal or conviction (and associated penalties). However, the strong version of the truth, premised on logical positivist schools of the philosophy of science, cannot be operationally defined in a satisfactory manner--a paradox since the concept of operational definitions is based on the very same schools of the philosophy of science. The problem is that the strong version of the truth is defined as what really happened--a definition ipso facto predicated on there being something that indeed has really happened (objective reality) and on humans somehow having access to this reality. In an emulation worthy of Sisyphus, seekers of an operational definition of the strong version of truth can only mimic that of the weak version.

Many postmodernists posit that there are at best many competing narrative realities, many competing narrative truths--all socially constructed. There are at least three possible consequences to such positing. (1) Truths are relative, none superior to any other--e.g., radical social constructivism. (2) There is a universal truth--that truths are relative. (3) Truth is not necessarily relativist nor universal but may be situationally relativist or universal or may be approximations of either or both relativism and universalism. At least the first two postmodernist options on truth seem to pose an unsolvable dilemma for criminal justice systems.

Is the above mere sophistry? Perhaps, not. What Yuille has begun to accomplish--largely through the pragmatic pursuit of interrogation research--is to provide psychological data showing that different notions of truth seem to be characterized by different styles of the interrogatee's verbal response. For example, he has engaged in collaborative research efforts supporting the notion that experimentally derived "truthful alibis" and "truthful confessions" can be discriminated from "partial deceptions" and "false alibis" through variables such as the amount of details, degree of coherence, examples of lack of memory, and amount of unnecessary verbal connections. Moreover, he has more recently collaborated to show that "narrative truth" (truths that are sincerely believed by an interrogatee but are actually falsehoods inculcated through experimental procedure) can be discriminated from "truth" (truths

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verified by allegedly credible others) and "falsehood" (truths unverified by the same sources) through variables such as the amount of interrogatee verbal detail. For still other variables, "truth" and "falsehood" are indistinguishable from each other while concurrently discriminated from "narrative truth."

While the parsers of historiography, psychological assessment and interpretation, exegesis, criminology, and hermeneutics might seem to support the radical social constructivist camp, Yuille and others in the interrogation research field are obtaining data supporting the notion of psychological truths discriminating among psychological truths--truths that at times have life and death implications. (See Chessick, R.D. (1995). Poststructural psychoanalysis or wild analysis? *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 23, 47-62; Jackson, B.S. (1996). "Anchored narratives" and the interface of law, psychology, and semiotics. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 1, 17-45; Porter, S., & Yuille, J.C. (1996). The language of deceit: An investigation of the verbal clues in the interrogation context. *Law and Human Behavior*, 20, 443-458; Sarbin, T.R. (1995). A narrative approach to "repressed memories." *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 5, 51-66; Spence, D.P. (1996). Theories of the mind: science or literature? *Psyke & Logos*, 17, 171-188; Yuille, J.C. (1998). Statement analysis and criminal interrogators. In P. Ekman (Chair), *Four national approaches to training interrogators*. Symposium presented at the 1998 Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, CA.) (Keywords: Credibility, Interrogation, Narrative, Postmodernism, Social Construction, Truth.)