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# Post-Modern Dental Studies

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## POST-MODERN DENTAL STUDIES

Lawyers and dentists have much in common. When you need to see either one, the need is often urgent—yet most people would prefer never to have any contact with either profession. Both are readily associated in the popular mind with pain or discomfort; neither enjoys the high esteem of the medical profession. Although this much is commonplace, other parallels between the two professions are less widely known. In particular, few people are aware of the striking similarity between twentieth century legal thought and the evolution of dental scholarship. Yet both have had strikingly similar histories as they have responded to changes in American society, politics, and social thought. Perhaps this is so poorly known simply because so few people are expert in both law and dentistry (putting aside the occasional malpractice-prone orthodontist.) The following account of modern dental thought (reprinted from A. Arkin & P. Falk, *An Intellectual History of Modern Dentistry* (1990)) is intended to give the reader an understanding of the exciting intellectual development of dentistry in the post-modern age.

Much of modern dental scholarship is a reaction against Dental Formalism. This school of thought held that dentists should work solely from dental charts in textbooks, rather than examining the patient's mouth. This sometimes resulted in peculiar mishaps, such as placing a filling on the wrong tooth, or even between teeth or on the gums. Nevertheless, many dentists adhered closely to the teachings of the First Restatement of Tooth Placement and other formalist writings.

By the 1920's, discontent with Dental Formalism was widespread. This discontent culminated in the Dental Realism movement. Citing the erratic placement of many fillings by formalist dentists, the Realists concluded that filling placement was largely ideological or possibly dictated by the contents of the dentist's breakfast. Although the Realists were considered cynical by many traditionalists, they had a major impact on later dental scholars.

In the 1950's, partly in response to the Dental Realists, a new synthesis emerged, the Dental Process movement, which argued that the important question was not where the filling was placed but whether placement should be decided by dentists, dental hygienists, patients, or legislators. Often, Dental Process theorists advocated balancing teeth to determine which one should be filled. This turned out to be impractical, however, unless the teeth were first extracted so they could be weighed. Many patients objected to this sophisticated procedure. Nevertheless, this "modern synthesis" remained in the ascendance until around 1970. Even today, it has its

advocates at many institutions, particularly among older faculty members.

The first real challenge to the Dental Process theorists was posed by the "Dentistry and Economics" (D & E) movement. This offshoot of the Chicago School of Economics got its start one semester when Milton Friedman was asked to co-teach a course in dental office accounting. The D & E scholars argued that the natural placement of teeth in the mouth was necessarily optimal, so that orthodontic intervention was undesirable except in cases of accidental injury. Indeed, a few extremists argued that cavities were also "economically efficient" and should not be filled. They believed that the naturally occurring equilibrium could not be improved by dental intervention. The D & E scholars were appointed to high positions in the National Institute of Health during the Reagan Administration, since their hands-off dentistry was consistent with the Administration's interest in cutting health-care costs. As dental school faculties lost most of their D & E scholars to the federal government, the importance of the D & E movement in the academic world declined.

The D & E movement was soon challenged on the Left by the Critical Dental Scholars, whose biggest stronghold has been the Harvard Dentistry School. Several schools of thought exist within CDS. Some CDS scholars believe that tooth placement is wholly indeterminate, so a dentist might as well drill in any tooth, or indeed in an ear or eye. Others believe that deconstructing a patient's expressions of pain is more useful than filling the cavity. Those who came of age in the 1960's regard drilling as inimical to the dentist-patient relationship. Another group believes that all of the attention given by dentists and dental scholars to the patient's cavities is only a means of disguising the real issue, which is the power struggle between dentists and dental hygienists. Some CDS scholars favored trashing, but many patients objected to having this procedure performed on their mouths, and it lost its popularity. The one thing that all CDS scholars agree on is their rejection of "liberal dentistry."

The CDS movement became notorious as a result of a notorious power struggle at the Harvard Dental School between the traditionalists and the CDS members of the faculty. At several faculty meetings, matters degenerated to the point that faculty members hurled their retainers and dentures at each other. Although some of the alumni were concerned, the Dean of the Dental School assured them that the school had never been such an intellectually exciting place.

Although the most prominent of the new movements in dental analysis, CDS is not the only innovative approach to dentistry. For example, some feminist dentists argue that a post-patriarchal society would have no need for novocaine. More radical feminists argue that incisors are only necessary in a sexist society, because they are used only for aggressive masculine biting of foods. The influence of these feminist thinkers on dental education has just begun.

Members of the "Dentistry and Literature" movement, on the other hand, argue that dentists should stop studying teeth and instead should try to learn from the discussions of dentistry in literature. This has proved somewhat more difficult than they initially anticipated, since dentistry has not been a popular subject with novelists. Other members of this movement have focused on the significance of the dentist-patient dialogue as the key to the healing process, and have questioned whether the dialogue is not impeded by having the dentist's hands in the patient's mouth. They advise that the dentist avoid this interference with dialogic dentistry.

Still another group, the "Dental Empiricists," believe that dentists should collect as many teeth as possible for statistical analysis. Based on a massive empirical study of thousands of teeth, they have already found that the average tooth is less than an inch long. Another empirically oriented group, "The Dentistry and Society Movement," prefers to focus on how dentistry molds our entire society.

A few rather pedestrian dentists (mostly practitioners with nothing better to do) actually still investigate methods of fixing teeth, but few of them are found at prestigious dental schools these days. Some of these "mainstream" dentists pathetically cling to the old "balancing tests" of the Dental Process theorists, although patients are no more willing today than they were thirty years ago to have their teeth extracted for weighing.

Never has dental scholarship had the same intellectual vitality and diversity it has today. Never before has dentistry been so much in the forefront of the revolutionary social thought of an epoch. Indeed, this is the first time at which dentistry could truly claim to be at the core of the intellectual activity of its time. The future for dental scholars looks bright indeed.

Fortunately for the rest of us, fluoridation has greatly reduced the need for dentists.

D.A.F.