



Epistemology of Power: Ontology Matters



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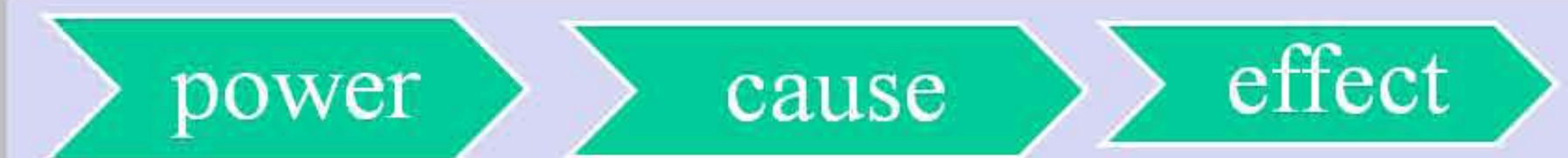
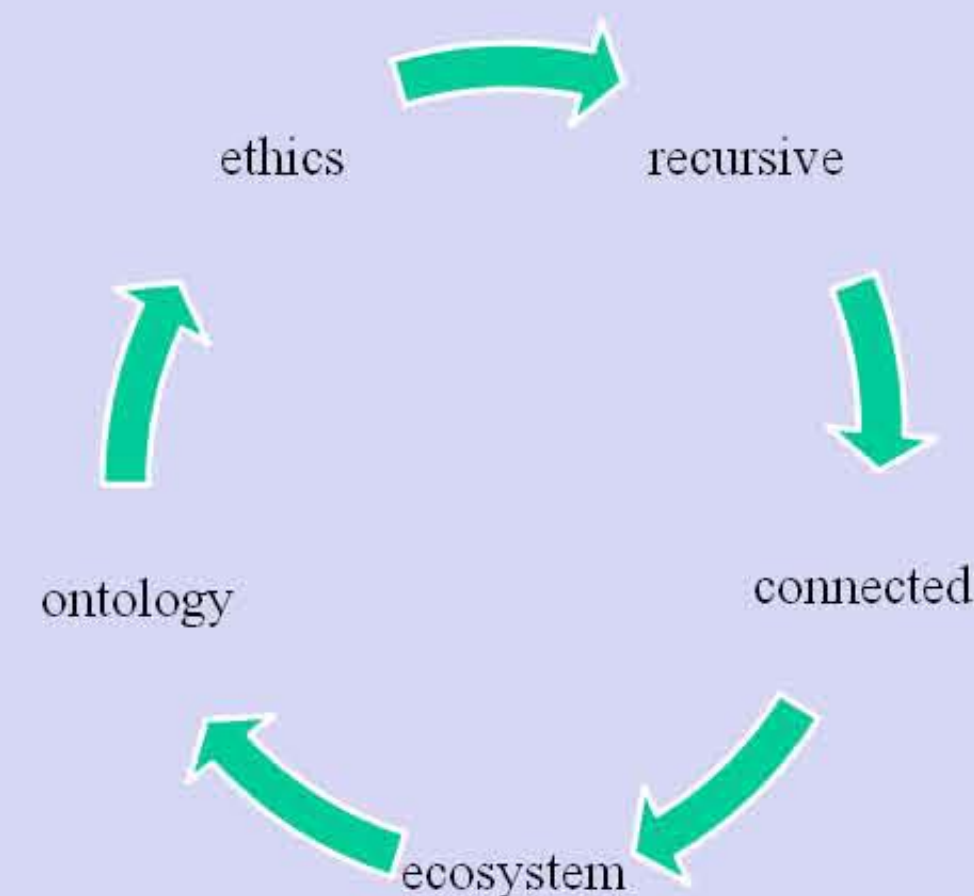
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the implications of an epistemology of power for family therapists. It begins by explicating the complementary relationship between ontology and epistemology. Next, logical typing and levels of abstraction are explicated as a means of understanding how power is reified and confused with power as a metaphor. Given that discussions of power and family violence often become entwined, the paper then moves to the implications of an ecosystemic epistemology in the treatment of violence. An alternative to the metaphor of power is offered. The paper concludes with a discussion of whether family therapists have abandoned a relational view of power in favor of seeking how to most effectively claim and wield power

The Ontological Status of Power

- In the field of Family Therapy, power, especially therapeutic power, is treated as if it were an object or a property within a person, usually the therapist. There is little literature that explores power as a relationship, a way of interacting. What needs to come under study, then, is a way to explain power in relational terms, in a way that does not construe therapists as coercive and clients as powerless.
- One reason that therapists and students may resist entering the dialogue about the ontology and the epistemology of power is the invisible reliance on metaphors of physical force to describe power. The conflation of physical force with notions of subtler powers imposes a false dichotomy; if Power is not real, then people choose to submit to abuse in a relationship.
- David Hume considers belief in causal relationships to be unreasonable. According to Hume, people's beliefs that certain sequences lead to invariable effects are based entirely on custom rather than reason. He posits that since it is possible for present matters of fact to be different or opposite in the future, no power can be said to invariably act upon objects, individuals, or sequences of events. The causal or necessary connection is one that the observer inserts into the sequence or pattern. According to Hume, power is not existent; rather, it is a habitual overlay of significance onto a sequence that is contributed by an observer.



The First Primary Flaw

The notion that power is a discrete and intrinsic characteristic that can be accessed and released upon an external target.

The Second Primary Flaw

The notion that if a minimal exertion of power has practical value, then a greater measure of power is ever more effective and thus, desirable.

If power is ultimately unbridled in its capacity to manipulate, and power is the mechanism through which resistance is overcome, then an expert therapist should always be able to cause a desired therapeutic outcome through incremental exertion of power.

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